

Horace H. Wilson an August Wilhelm von Schlegel Kalkutta, 10.08.1823

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[1] Calcutta August 10th 1823

Dear Sir,

It must be quite unnecessary to assure you that I have been as much gratified as flattered by the receipt of your letter. The name of Schlegel has long been known to me and long associated with my notions of taste and talent. The estimate formed by such a critic of the genius of Shakespeare with the judgement and animation worthy of the theme attracted my admiration some years ago and the Bard and his commentator have ever since been allied in my recollection. I little anticipated then that similar paths of study should bring us more immediately in contact or that I should ever be honoured with the notice of one whom I was delighted at a distance to admire. With these impressions you may rely upon my readiness to maintain the correspondence with as much regularity as the remoteness of our situations and the accidents [2] of such an intercourse will permit. – The accession of your abilities to the cause of Hindu Literature is an event of which all those who take an interest in it have reason to be proud. It cannot fail to elevate their studies in the estimation of the world and consequently to give an invigorated impulse to their prosecution. There is very much to be done yet. We are in fact only on the confines of a newly discovered country. Exploring harbours and creeks and laying down the bearings of remarkable and conspicuous objects but very little acquainted with the wealth or capabilities of the interior. Whatever these may be the extent is vast and the avenues difficult and the combination of the labourers is absolutely necessary to ultimate success. We shall never make any progress if we stop at every step to dispute about the possible character of what may or may not be finally attained. The road does not want attraction and the man of learning will find many mines, the man of taste many flowers – as he proceeds.

[3] For my own part I have no system and neither seek to enhance nor depreciate the worth of these Studies nor to exaggerate or detract from the antiquity of their origin. „Know them before you damn them“ is the only answer to be made to present detractors. And I will do all I can to bring them acquainted with the subject on which they cannot now in common justice decide. I am quite satisfied that all the attempt hitherto made to modernise Hindu Literature and Science rest upon even a more groundless base than the extravagancies of the Kalpas and Yugas of the Hindus. Has any person read, I may even say, **one** of die eighteen Puranas which are to be brought down to such recent times. I should doubt it and I am quite confident that no Individual has investigated the whole of them. I will not assert that the Puranas are ancient works but I cannot attach any weight to the opinion of an individual who is of himself utterly unacquainted with their contents. Before people cavil they should read. – You will understand from the tenor of these remarks that I have received the 3d [4] number of the Indische Bibliothek and that allude to the opposition you indicate to the notions of very modern dates for Hindu compositions. I shall be very glad to see your further sentiments. I have not yet been able to form any definite opinion on the subject myself beyond a conviction that in the early ages of Christianity the polite Literature of the Hindus mainly flourished. As matter of mere conjecture I should place the Rámáyan before or about Alexanders invasion and the Mahábhárat at no remote period after it. The Puránas were subsequent to the latter and in their present form have a very wide range some portions being much more ancient than others. The hymns of the Vedas are the productions of a period long anterior to the Rámáyana. I trust however we shall be able to speak more confidently on these subjects hereafter. Under the encouragement of this Government I am engaged

in preparing Indexes of the Puranas employing the joint agency of Pundit versed in Sanscrit and Bengalis well acquainted with English. We have thus [5] completed Lists of the Contents of 12 entire Puranas and Lections and portions of the rest. We have also translated nearly the whole of the Ágnéya Purána or Agni Puran. It is rather a rough process but it will be sufficient to convey a general idea of the real character of these works. And will enable a Student to seize at once upon any subject he may wish to examine for himself. For the present the question of publication is not started, our labours remain in Manuscripts but a copy will be sent home to the Court of Directors who will probably allow general access to them. Copies here are to be deposited in the Libraries of the College and the Society and are to be available to any person desirous of consulting them. The superintendence of this work occupies as you may imagine much of my time and with my public duties which are not light leaves me little leisure for other tasks. I do not lose sight of my Hindu Drama however. I am now engaged on the sixth and last of the collection the Vikrama and Urvaśi of Calidása. I am also preparing a [6] Catalogue of the Books of the late Col[onel] Mackenzie, many of which particularly in the Southern Dialect are quite new to Europe. I have charge of his collections. The Translations are numerous and some of them interesting but they are not uniformly valuable having been made quite at random and under no competent superintendence. The colonel had made no use of them himself and has left nothing whatever of his own. A very large portion of the Translation requires also a thorough revisal before they can be made any use of and I am afraid I cannot engage in [such] disagreeable and unthankful a task. The whole will be sent to Europe shortly, having been purchased by the Company. – I am much obliged to you for the pains you have bestowed upon my Dictionary in the Bibliothek. I have run my eye over the criticism and am now trying to read it attentively. It is rather a task for I am a very poor German. I learned the rudiments [7] when a boy, abandoned the study early and only resumed it occasionally of late years when I found it might teach me something in Sanscrit. I admire the language much and the Literature more. In truth the Genius of both is too English not to delight an Englishman. The great drawback is the inexhaustible copiousness of the language. There is no end to new words. If I am not mistaken too you have not yet left off manufacturing them and every author of note coins for himself. It is true they may be analysed by one skilled in the chemistry of the tongue but this science cannot fall to the lot of many foreigners and I at least have not acquired it – but to return to the Dictionary, I am not at all displeased by the fault you point out. „Whoever hopes a perfect work to see hopes what ne’er was, is not and ne’er shall be.“ I am quite conscious of mine. Some of your censures I might perhaps contest, but my motives might be misconstrued and the defence attributed to partiality not principle. [8] I shall therefore make none. Besides these however there are some defects I concur in and these are some absolute blunders. Time and extended study will no doubt furnish the necessary corrections. I am satisfied to have done what you give me credit for and in supplying a present want laid a foundation for future structure of loftier pretensions. I had no idea of making such an unreasonable demand upon your attention when I began but the pleasure of an intercourse with an individual so highly esteemed has beguiled me in to this excess. I have therefore only to beg you will ascribe my tediousness to the right cause and to set it down to the sincerity with which

I am

your most obedient

H. H. Wilson

[9] P S. I must not omit to add what I hope it is unnecessary for me to assure you my readiness to execute any commissions for you in literary matters in this country – any Manuscripts or printed Books desirable on your own account or for any public establishment in the Prussian dominions I shall willingly undertake to procure and forward. We can often procure them in Calcutta at rates much below those of the shops.

I insert a list of the Dramas I have translated. You may perhaps find some interest in the enumeration.
[10]

Namen

Alexander III., Makedonien, König

Mackenzie, Colin

Schlegel, August Wilhelm von

Shakespeare, William

Körperschaften

Asiatic Society (Kalkutta)

Asiatic Society (Kalkutta). Library

East India Company (London)

Sanskrit College (Kalkutta)

Sanskrit College (Kalkutta). Library

Orte

Kalkutta

Werke

Agni-Purāṇa

Mahābhārata

Purāṇa

Rāmāyaṇa

Veda

Wilson, Horace H.: A Dictionary in Sanscrit and English

Wilson, Horace H.: Select Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus

Wilson, Horace H.: The Mackenzie Collection

Wilson, Horace H.: Vikramas und Urwasi

Periodika

Indische Bibliothek. Eine Zeitschrift von August Wilhelm von Schlegel