

simplicity of her drefs and countenance, might altogether have a considerable influence in heightening the effect. But if thofe added charms to the mufe, the mufe alfo added charms to thee; and I refolv'd, as I faw, to

*An Effay on the ENGLISH SONNET; illustrated by a Comparison between the Sonnets of MILTON and thofe of CHARLOTTE SMITH.*

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do the juftice required to the enchanting art, and to picture to the world a fcece of domeftic enjoyment, which I fhould be happy to fee imitated in every houfe I enter.

No one, I am fure, can admire this fuperlative poet more than I myself, or be more enraptured with the beautiful fymmetry of that arrangement, by which, in his hand, all the charms of variety are blended with all the advantages of the ftrictft unity of action. Yet (for who fhall dare to prefer a boundary, to limit the operations of human intellect) I cannot fee the impoffibility of fome choic'd genius, at a future day, prefenting the world with a fpecimen of epic poetry on a different, a more beautiful, and even a more perfect plan. Should, however, fuch a thing ever be produced, is it not evident from the prefent fentiments of the literary world, that it muft fall dead-born from the prefs, arranged in the very womb, if I may to exprefs myfelf, by the pious care of thofe literary midwives the critics, as a monfter too hideous for exiftence?

But leaving this bold imagination to the experiment of fome happier age, when poetic genius fhall be more liberal patronage, I will venture to obferve, that, in the more humble walks of poetry, (notwithstanding all the empiricifm of pedantic critics) there are fome who, quitting the dull path of precedent, have prefumed, with daring irregularity, to attempt the celebrated writers for improving upon thofe models they have been cenfured.

Among the foremoft of thofe is to be reckoned the poetick and elegant Charlotte Smith, whole *Illuftrations* (for the fpiritual cour of criticism has thought proper to baptize them) difplay a more touching melancholy, a more poetick fimplicity,

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may I will venture to fay, a greater vigour and correctness of genius, than any other English poem that I have ever feen, under the fame denomination: and I certainly do not mean to except the fonnets of Milton.

Yet I remember to have heard fome proflick critics exprefs a very different opinion upon this fubject; and that, too, upon no better argument than their nonconformity to certain arbitrary regulations, 'more honoured (according to my judgment, at leaft) in the breach than the obfervance.'

To criticism of this kind I was by no means difpofed to liften with flint attention. But what was my fuprize when I heard one of thefe 'mighty lords of literary awe,' after dwelling for a confiderable time upon the praifes of one of thofe minor wits, whole paffive obedience to the dogmas of the critical hyman had fecured his approbation, conclude his paegyric by obferving, that 'his Sonnet was in Milton's beft fyle; which was certainly the highft of all poffible praife.'

Whether this be the cafe or no, let thofe decide who have perused Milton's Sonnets with pleasure: for my part, I confefs, I read them, as a talk; unwilling to be entirely ignorant of any of the beauties of the author of thofe many fables and wonderful parables that dignify the *Paradife Loft*, under whatever ples of dulnefs or pedantry, thofe more obfcure beauties might be hid.

But the critic I am fpeaking of, was not content with adding the *dead* of his incense to the effluence of a reputation too eftablifhed to be injured, even by injudicious praife; he muft alfo cloud, with as ill-founded cenfure, the fting fplendour of our poetick Aurora, and criticife what he appeared to want talk to enjoy.

'Little elegies,' fald he, 'confifting of four ftanzas and a couplet, are no more *faints* than they are *epic poems*.' 'Be it fo then,' replied I, 'call them epic poems if you will. 'The time is coming, I hope, when we fhall ultimate things, not by their titles, but their merits.' 'But,' continued he,

'the fonnet is of a particular and arbitrary conftruction; it partakes of the nature of blank verfe, by the lines running into each other at proper intervals.—'Why not write them in blank verfe then? 'For I appeal to every reader of poetry, whether this is the defcription of a kind of verfication ever agreeable in English rhyme, except, indeed, in poems of fome length, where it is occasionally introduced, with great faucefs, to relieve the ear from that fatiety, which the uniform harmony of the couplet might elfe produce? But make the pedantry of the rule that follows.

'Each line,' continued he, 'of the firft eight, rhymes *four times*, and the order in which thefe rhymes fhould fall is *dezyde*.'

Independent of the difficulty of this (for labour, with out critic, is a requifite ingredient of beauty) it is not enough that all the graces of form are followed by nature, and thofe of invention and *genere* by a political cultivation, how upon hour muft be devoted to thefe tedious details of art may be conspicuous in the finishing.—Independent, I fay, of the difficulty of this, in a language whole rhymes do not flow with that copious facility, which diftinguifhes the Italian terminations, let me again appeal to the ear of the reader, and ask him, whether even some of the moft beautiful *canzas* in Spenser (in which only one of the rhymes is repeated to the fourth, and another to the third time) do not tie the ear by this frequent recurrence of fimilar founds, and whether even the exquisite poem of Beattie does not fometimes, like more than it gains by the refinements of this form of verfication?

'Of Milton's English fonnets,' perfuaded the critic, 'only that to O. Cromwell ends with a couplet; but that fingle instance is a fufficient precedent.' 'Bavo!' fald I, 'does not this fmanter a little of the authoritative wildom of the Roman law, when every final judgment of a fourth or fifth annual emperor, became a precedent for

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the regulation of future judgments? In my humble opinion, the sonnet-erminating with a couplet, would not have been a whit less beautiful, even though Milton had omitted this single influence!

'The style of the sonnet,' continued the critic, declining to reply to hisacious observation, 'should be nervous; and where the subject will properly bear elevation, *Admirer!* with which simplicity of language is by no means incompatible. If the subject is familiar and domestic, the style should, though affectionate, be vigorous; though plain, energetic.'

With these observations I to perforce acquiesced, to show that all the *essential* qualities required by this hyperbolic are to be found in the sonnets, which it was the business of his criticism to deery. What, for example, can be more nervous or sublime than the following sonnet from the novel of Emmeline!

Far on the banks, the bow, retaining only  
In silent moments fondly seems to flow,  
And o'er the world of waters, blue and  
wide,

The flying summer wind forgets to blow.  
As frisks the dry tear in the joy, wet,  
The broken waves, with rickrackon gloves,  
Almost can tranquil nature give the rest,  
Or leave of beauty, such not to expect,  
Can the fair lady of the Rapsody man,  
Van radiant beauty, or an *exquisite's*  
charms,

Engle the written troubles of the brain,  
Which men my sources and which joint  
admirer?  
O'er and a better franker quiet prove,  
That buds with calm serenity, and un-  
singingly I love?

And as far the sonnet on familiar subjects, how exorbitant is the ninth of this writer—

'Ere I am display'd on the turf re-  
cumb'd, No  
And the twenty-seventh.  
Singing I see you in the hoop at play, &c.  
But can imagination conceive a more charming association of all the

requires called for by the critic, than in the following:

*To Sleep.*

'Come, balmy Sleep! thy nature's soft  
front!  
On these faint temples all thy poppies shed;  
And had gay dreams from *Adorphaus* say  
court,  
Flout in light vision round my aching  
head!  
Secure of all thy *Admirer's* partial power!  
On his head had the peasant throws him  
down;  
And the poor fat boy, in the rudest hour,  
Enjoys thee more than he who wears a  
crown.

Clasp'd in her faithful shepherd's guardian  
arms,  
Well may the village girl sweet slumbers  
prove;  
And they, O gentle Sleep! I still taste thy  
charms,  
Who wake to labour, liberty, and love,  
But still thy quiet and doth than deny  
To calm the anxious breast, to close the  
thrumning eye.

Now is it any serious objection to the excellence of this sonnet, that some of the images are borrowed from other poets; since the selection and arrangement judiciously prove the taste and judgment of the writer, and her claim to imagination is sufficiently substantiated by what she has added, of equal merit, of her own.

I have amiable solicitude with which Mrs. Smith has been careful to quote the passages she has made use of, is an argument of the liberality of her mind, as well as the frequent tributes of applause, she has paid to the genius of contemporary and departed writers; a liberality that should have secured her from the harsh treatment of many critics. But the cold severity of pedantry is insensible to all such appeals of candour. There seems, however, to be a passage in Young's 'Night Thoughts,' which has escaped the attention of Mrs. Smith, to which the first line at least of this sonnet has some obligations:—

'Ere I am display'd on the turf re-  
cumb'd, No  
But can imagination conceive a more charming association of all the

But to proceed with the conversion: my critic expatiated on what he called the great models of perfection for the sublime and for the domestic sonnet. In this display of critical acumen, I found that he wandered sometimes into the regions of obloquy; for, with whatever attention I regarded his eloquent declamation, I found it not easy to develope his meaning. I considered, however, that a little obliquity in their subjects, either in the writer or the speaker is not amiss. It gives an air of mystery to the oracular hat, that perplexes the judgment of the hearer, and induces him to implicit submission, that he may avoid the trouble of unravelling the meaning.

'The great models of perfection for the sublime and domestic sonnet:—*Damocles*!—I shall never get past this word. I have heard of domestic virtues, domestic enjoyments, domestic animals, domestic utensils, &c. but never of the domestic sonnet before. When we hear a critic talking of domestic poetry, would we not suppose he alluded to some art of cookery in rhyme?—But, 'The models, continued my critic, 'for the sublime and for the domestic sonnet are Milton's 'To the Soldier to spare his Dwelling place, and 'To Mr. Law-  
rence.'

Let us bring them before the reader, then, that he may know what perfection is.

SONNET VIII.

*When the Affaid went intruding on the City,  
'Captain or colonel, or knight in arms,  
Whole chance on these defenceless doors  
may fall,*

If dead of honour *did thee ever please,*  
Guard them, and him within *grate* from  
barrel.  
He can require thee, for he knows the  
chairs  
*That call fame on /sub gentle art,* as  
they,  
And he can spread thy name o'er lands  
and seas,  
Whatever clime the sun's bright circle  
warms.

Lift not thy spear against the mule's  
horns?  
The great Emulation conqueror did spare  
the bowle of Pinchus, when temple  
and tower  
*Went to the great;* and the regretted air  
Of sad Elisha's poet had the power  
To save the Arabian walls from ruin  
have!

Such is the sonnet adduced by my very critic; and I must confess, that notwithstanding that it is not entirely free from 'certain harshness,' on which he expatiated much, a noble sonnet it is; yet certainly not equal in judgment of the hearer, and induces him to implicit submission, that he may avoid the trouble of unravelling the meaning.

'Prais'd by the moon, mute artists of  
tide,  
While the loud equinox its power con-  
bines,  
The sea no more its swelling surge con-  
fines,  
But o'er the thinking land *sublimely* rides,  
The wild boat, riding from the western  
caves,  
Dives the huge billows from their heav-  
ing boat;  
Tears from their gully, towards the village  
decal,  
And breaks the silent *Admirer* of the grave!  
With shells and sea-weed mingled, on this  
shore,  
Lo! their homes whiten in the frequent  
wave.

But vain to them the winds and waters  
rave!  
They hear the warring elements no more;  
While I am down'd—by life's long storm  
oppress'd,  
To gaze with envy on their gloomy rest!

Perhaps it is not saying too much to declare, that in the narrow compass of these fourteen lines, are included all the requisites of good poetry; vivid painting, numerous harmony, sublimity of thought, and expedition, and paths of tenderness. What, in particular, can surpass the thought of  
3 F 2  
break-

breeding the silent sabbath of the day subjects whatever, that can compare? Due to return to Milton, we've either model of perfection, I South.

SONNET XX.

To Mr. Lawley.

'Lament of virtuous father, virtuous son,  
Now, for me, in his medals, and ways  
are my,  
Where shall we find him, and by  
the his  
Help wake a fallen day, what may be  
was  
From the land of glory? Time will  
run  
On together, till Reason's re-ignite  
The seven earth, and clothe in truth  
and  
The the and roots, that neither fow'd nor  
grew  
What me of I paid shall feed us, light and  
choice.

SONNET XXV.

To the Moon.

'Queen of the silver bow! by thy pale  
beams,  
Above and gentle, I might to thy,  
And watch the shadow trembling in the  
fleming,  
Or mark the floating clouds that cross thy  
way.  
And while I gaze, thy mild and placid  
light  
Shalt'st I find upon my troubled breast;  
And oft I think, fair planet of the night,  
That in thy orb the wrecked may have  
led:  
The darkness of the earth perhaps may go,  
Recess'd by death—to thy bright  
light,  
And th'at children of despair and woe  
forget in thee, their cup of sorrow here,  
Oh! that I soon may reach thy world fe-  
rion!

'Should the lone wanderer, fainting on  
his way,  
Rise for a moment of the airy hours,  
And, 'twixt his path thro' thorns and  
roughing lay,  
Pluck the wild rose, or woodbine's gad-  
ding flowers;  
Wearing, say wren's, beneath some field-  
cane tree,  
The fowl of sorrow he awhile may lofe;  
So have I fought thy bowers, fair Poet;  
So charm'd not way, with Friendship and  
the milk.  
But dark'er now grows life's unglorious day,  
Dark with new clouds of evil yet to come;  
And wren's Hekening Fancy throws away,  
And points my wishes to that tranquil  
flow,  
Where the pale spectre Cars, pursues no  
more.

SONNET XXXVI.

'Ignorance may perhaps admire the  
beaming, but common sense will lay  
little for the sake of the man who  
should refuse to be pleased with things  
because they are not what he chooses  
to term *his own good*. The meaning  
of the word *sonnet* is nothing more  
than

than a *little song*, or *little poem*; and if  
we permit the critic to prefer the  
number of lines which it is to count  
of, it is certainly too much to submit  
to them also the exact succession of  
the rhymes. This one's lately to be  
left to the genius of the writer; or at  
least to that of the language.  
'But Oh!' says the critic, 'this  
is making the art of poetry too easy.  
The sonnet is certainly the most dif-  
cult' (he might have added the most  
ardent!) 'specimens of composition;  
but difficultly well fabricated is excel-  
lence.' Since when? I should be  
glad to know, I humbly conceive  
that if the mind of the reader is de-  
voted and delighted with any pro-  
duction of genius, it is a matter of  
small consequence to him, what was  
the degree of trouble or facility with  
which that production was completed;  
otherwise the more coltish the brain of  
the poet, the greater ought to be the  
delight of the reader; though I de-  
cline in general it will be exactly the  
reverse.

SONNET XXXVII.

To the Nighthawk.

'O Nighthawk, that on yon bloomy spray  
Watchest thy eye, when all the woods  
are still,  
Thou with fresh hope the lover's heart  
dost fill,  
While the holy hours lead on precipitous  
Mars.  
Thy liquid notes that close thee of  
day,  
First heard before the swallow cuckoo's  
hail,  
Potential fowels in love; O if love's  
will  
Have link'd that amorous power to thy  
last day,  
Now timely sing, ere the rude bird of  
hate  
Foretell my hopeless doom in some grove  
night;  
As thou from year to year hast sing too  
late  
For my relief, yet hadst no reason why?  
Whether the muse, or love call thee his  
mate,  
Both then I grieve, and of their trans-  
an I.

SONNET XXXVIII.

To which I shall contrast

CHARLOTTE SMITH'S SONNET VII.  
*On the Degradation of the Nighthawk.*  
'Sweet poet of the woods—a long adieu!  
Farewell, soft miller of the early year!  
Ah! 'twill be long ere thou shalt sing  
anew,  
And pour thy music on the "night's dull  
car."  
Whether on Spring thy wandering flights  
await,  
Or whether silent in our groves you dwell,  
The pensive muse shall own thee for her  
mate,  
And still protect the song the lover so well.  
With

