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OBSERVATIONS ON THE PRESENT STATE
OF LITERATURE IN GREAT BRITAIN.

A COMPREHENSIVE and accurate survey of *modern literature* requires a more extended and general knowledge, than an individual observer can be expected to possess: it ought rather to be the work of an association of *literati*. The elder Pliny, indeed, presented to his countrymen a view of the state of science and the arts, and his multifarious performance was considered as amusing, informative, and instructive: yet, in various parts and in numerous instances, he evinced an ignorance of the particular subject of discussion. In one branch of learning, the exertions of a single writer are sometimes superior to the labors of a society. Furetières, for example, compiled a more estimable dictionary of his native language than the aggregate French academy had produced. But, when all branches of learning are discussed, it may be contended that two or more contributors are better than one, in allusion to an old proverb which I need not repeat. In defiance of this axiom, the present editor, unadvised and unassisted (for surely no aid is necessary in a slight sketch), ventures to offer some re-

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marks on the existing state of literature.

Theology may justly form the primary topic, to which we doubt whether due attention is now given. In the reign of the first James, many learned divines flourished; and, when his grandson of the same name, the infatuated bigot, misgoverned the realm, the number did not appear to be diminished. But, in our own times, we cannot boast of the transcendent learning of our clergy. Undoubtedly, there are some who can ably defend the doctrines and discipline of the church, and can preach sermons which are not contemptible. There are many who maintain the dignity of their holy profession, both in erudition and in morals, and whom even calumny has not dared to stigmatize. Some excel in poetry; some are intelligent critics; and not a few are gifted with philosophical minds: but no one, we think, will say that our ecclesiastical hemisphere exhibits a bright galaxy or a luminous assemblage. The majority, as Pope says of archbishop Secker, are *decent*; and that is, perhaps, a sufficient, if not a high panegyric.

That learning which is connected with natural philosophy is more stu-

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diously cultivated. The Newtonian system has been boldly assailed; but it has been defended with superior vigor, and maintained by scientific ability. At the same time, philosophy seems to have been rendered more subservient to the accommodations of ordinary life, and more promotive of human comfort and convenience, than it ever was before the present century.

In natural history, we have some distinguished proficient. The Linnæan classification has been improved, and new light has been thrown upon the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms. A taste for botany is particularly prevalent; and though some of its fair votaries are chiefly influenced by an admiration of floral beauty, others attend to the science with more enlightened views, and have even given to the world the fruits of their researches.

In the history of states and of empires, I do not find that any living writers have been so fortunate as to obtain very high celebrity. When Hume and Robertson were in the zenith of their fame, an ingenious and well-known essayist put this question to the readers of history:—‘Where, after all, is the painting of a Livy, or the concise elegance of a Sallust?’ or where (he might have asked) is the *acumen* of a Tacitus? If such interrogatories might then have been reasonably urged, they may now more appropriately serve to expose, by the answers which they will quickly elicit, the inferiority of recent British historians.

If poetry could shine in proportion to the number of its cultivators, this might be called the age of poetical excellence. We have the productions of the muse in every form and upon almost every subject. By no rules are the authors fettered; and to common sense they have no strong pretensions. They readily listen to the suggestions of Sir Francis Bacon, who says, that ‘poetry is a kind of learning extremely licentious, and truly belonging to the imagination, which, being unrestrained

by laws, may make what unnatural mixtures and separations it pleases.’ They wantonly riot in the regions of fancy, soar into the clouds, and lose themselves in pathless wanderings. Yet some there are, who enchant us with the flowers of poetry; who make affecting appeals to our keenest sensibilities, and alternately soothe and animate their readers. At the head of the splendid groupe, lord Byron is usually placed, though his claim to the honor of supremacy is contested by various critics. The author of *Marmion* is also a towering object in the poetic horizon. He excels in the representation of scenes of chivalry, and excites the most pleasing emotions in the details of amorous sentiment. Southey is endowed with unquestionable talents, and has a natural vein of poetry: but, if we may judge from appearances, he is endeavouring to *write himself down*. Coleridge has been styled the most imaginative poet of the age; yet his effusions are not generally admired, and some of them sink beneath contempt. Crabbe has been blamed for entering too fully into the *minutiae* of vulgar life.

The decline of the drama is a frequent source of regret. Where many theatres flourish, dramatists will necessarily be numerous: but such is the scarcity of talent, that no comedy of superlative merit has been produced since the *School for Scandal*, and no excellent tragedy has appeared since the witty author of that celebrated piece ridiculed the dull and abortive efforts of dramatic pretenders. We have been favored with *miscellaneous* plays (as some imitations of popular German pieces may be called), not reducible to any distinct class; and to some of these we may allow considerable merit, even amidst the introduction of false sentiment and improbable incidents. The plays of Joanna Baillie are not so obviously borrowed from that school: but they partake of its wild extravagance; and her *Montfort*, in particular, is justly amenable to critical animadversion, for

deriving fierce resentment and implacable revenge from a very inadequate cause. Maturin pretends to follow nature, while he multiplies scenes of horror, and, like a ranting player, 'tears a passion to rags.' Sheil is a great borrower, while he asserts his claim to the praise of originality.

In the composition of romances and novels, it does not appear that the British writers have lately declined. In merit and potency, Sir Walter Scott is 'himself a host,' if we may really consider him as the author of *Waverley* and *Guy Mannering*. Masterly delineations of character and manners, strong elucidations of the motives of action, a vivid display of all the passions which agitate the frames and influence the conduct of human beings, and powerful excitements of interest and sympathy, have secured to this writer a very high degree of popularity. Even those pieces which he seems to have written for an increase of fortune rather than for the extension of his fame, have not exposed him to the asperity of censure,—so strong is the hold which he has taken of the mind of every reader of taste and sentiment. Other novels occasionally appear; but they are in a great measure superseded by the attractions of this fascinating author.

Godwin is not only a political economist, a biographer, and an essayist, but also a writer of fictitious narratives. He has an acute perception and inventive powers, not sufficiently chastened, however, by the coolness of judgement. *Caleb Williams* is his first and best novel; and it continues to please, without including a detail of the perplexities and the delights of love. Maturin's novels would be more agreeable, if they were less wild and desultory.

Among the female novelists of the day, we may give the palm to Madame d'Arblay, Miss Edgeworth, and Mrs. Opie. The first lady exhibits a variety of characteristic portraits, and gratifies us by the skilful construction of her stories. The second touches, with a

spirited pencil, the follies and caprices of fashionable life; and the third rouses the best feelings of the heart. Mrs. West is not only a strenuous advocate of morality; but her talents also enable her to afford that fund of amusement which softens the apparent rigidity of her precepts. Lady Morgan writes with vivacity, and pleasingly depicts the Hibernian character. The venerable Hannah More must not be forgotten on this occasion. Her novel of *Cœlebs*, though too grave for the generality of readers, is by no means uninteresting; and her religious and moral works reflect high credit upon her character.

Elementary works, connected with the important task of education, have been multiplied and greatly improved. Mrs. Barbauld, in addition to her poetical merit, is an amiable and respectable veteran in this department; and the laudable example of Mrs. Trimmer has excited, among ingenious and well-disposed females, the sedulous zeal of imitation.

The literature which refers to politics I am almost unwilling to discuss, because it is apt to produce asperity and ill-will, in the perturbed state of the public mind; yet something ought to be said upon a subject of general concern. No very interesting or well-written political pamphlets have lately appeared; but, in the daily and weekly vehicles of intelligence, some portion of literary talent is occasionally observable. Constitutional topics are freely examined; the fine arts are noticed with a critical eye; the varying manners and fashions are praised or satirised; and the drama (the mirror of life) is systematically investigated. But an overweening self-conceit, a strong propensity to scandal, and the increasing malignity and virulence of party, have so debased many of these prints, that an honest and candid mind turns from them with disgust. Both parties are intemperate, acrimonious, and illiberal; but the ministerial editors seem to be more *au fait* than their opponents in using the

language of defamation and scurrility. They are seemingly of opinion, that they cannot be too free in speaking of the conduct of their audacious adversaries, whose licentiousness would otherwise transgress all bounds. They have lately procured the aid of a body of men called the constitutional association. I know, and respect, some of the members of this society; but I cannot refrain from observing that their irritability scoffs and spurns at moderation, and their zeal outruns their prudence and discretion. If a political junta be formed, it ought rather to be composed of that part of the community which cannot expect the powerful assistance of the attorney and solicitor general. 'Libels (says a learned judge) abound on both sides:' but the new auxiliaries of the court encourage one species, while they feel the highest indignation at the prevalence of the other class. Is it just or reasonable to prosecute only those who have found specks in the sun or in the constellation of power, and do not conceal the discovery? Are all to be denounced as bad subjects, who make occasional mention of the existence of abuses and grievances? Are those to be called libellous incendiaries, who deny or dispute the infallibility of his majesty's ministers? Are those to be stigmatised as seditious democrats or rank jacobins, who claim the privileges of Britons, and the full enjoyment of all the blessings of the constitution? But let me check the spirit of rambling, and not quit the flowery paths of general literature for the thorny maze of politics.

In this sketch the reviews ought not to pass unnoticed, as they have a considerable influence on the minds of readers. The principal works of that description are the Quarterly and the Edinburgh Reviews. A rivalry in politics, and an emulation of learning and talent, actuate the writers, who, not content with meagre and desultory criticism, produce long essays and dissertations, which are sometimes carried on amidst an apparent obli-

vision of the works that gave rise to them. A greater degree of vigor is manifested in the Scottish work, while a superiority of erudition appears in the other. The Monthly Review has long been ill-conducted; and it therefore declines in influence and in fame. The Critical Review was formerly a respectable work; but, if it be not now extinct, it is at least approaching to expiration.

To the magazines some attention is also due. That which was the first in point of time, is not at present the first in merit. Every number certainly contains some valuable articles; but they are mingled with much trash, and the poetry is generally despicable. The magazines published at Edinburgh are considered, even by many English readers, as superior in the talent which they display to those which the London press pours forth. Several ingenious writers are liberally paid by the northern proprietors for their communications, when the favors of volunteer correspondents are either insufficient in number or supposed to be defective in excellence.

Such is the present avidity for the perusal of periodical productions, that they are eagerly multiplied by the corresponding zeal of publishers. There are many, we believe, who seldom read except when reviews, magazines, or newspapers, are before them; and, to those who have little leisure, they are useful substitutes for profound and recondite reading. They are amusing and instructive, and suggest interesting topics of speculation and inquiry.

REMARKS ON THE DISCOVERIES OF ANCIENT AND MODERN PHILOSOPHERS.

From the highest to the lowest orders of creation, there is a regular chain of subordination and dependence; and, if one single link be broken or disarranged, the connexion will be lost, and the whole system will fall into confusion.