

MODERN LITERATURE.

Here fleeting phantoms of the heated brain
Swarm forth like locusts from the prels of
LANE;

Grim-visaged heroes, clasp'd in martial hosts,
And walking skeletons, and sheeted ghosts,
Here hold their court, from German fetters
free,

And doom poor common sense to slavery.
Ye female scribes! who write without a blot,
"Mysterious Warnings" of—the Lord
knows what;

O quit this trade, exert your proper skill,
Resume the needle, and lay down the quill.
VIRG.

LITERATURE, like States and Empires, has its period of prosperity and decay; prosperity which human power has ever been unable to prolong, and decay which no sagacity can foresee or prevent. All that human wisdom can effect, is to consider the state of learning in remote times; and, by comparing the probable causes of its downfall with those appearances that at present exist, endeavour by analogy to prevent those consequences which history in similar cases has recorded. It has been well observed, that a passion for the marvellous is the distinguishing characteristic of a nation emerging from, or sinking into, barbarity; as man, in the opposite extremes of childhood and old age, requires rocking in a cradle. If this statement be true, and history certainly confirms it, the prospects of the present age are of a nature extremely alarming; for perhaps there never was a period, since the days of Charlemagne, that teemed with such extravagant romances. I have, during my peregrinations, watched with some attention the decline and fall of novels in the present age. I remember the time when genuine nature was the test of the town; when we condescended to be pleased with the transactions of an inn, or a kitchen fire-side, delineated by the masterly pen of a Fielding or a Smollett: wit was then thought

a necessary appendage to a writer, and the simple descriptions of real life were perused with avidity and satisfaction. This period, however, vanished; and "Britain changeful as a child at play," grew so luxurious and dainty, that common life ceased to interest her. Sentimental delicacy succeeded next, and a whole host of sighing swains, with the voluminous Richardson at their head, continued to entangle the town in delicate distresses, errors of innocence, and excessive sensibility. Nature, though thrown in the back ground, was yet not totally deserted; but was occasionally brought forward, like inferior objects in a picture, to increase the effect. It was reserved for the present times to 'out-herod Herod,' and introduce extravagancies hitherto unheard of, and catastrophes which the most fertile imagination could not have conceived. Not that the sentimental class is totally excluded; we have still a flying squadron (as any one who takes the trouble to peruse Mr. Lane's catalogue may perceive), composed of embarrassed attachments, exalted attachments, errors of sensibility, excessive sensibility, &c. &c. but the main body is put to flight, and in their stead a race of exotics is introduced, incumbered with the Gothic pomp of German armour, which I sincerely hope, for the credit of our nation, will not be long suffered to keep their ground. We have generally and justly been reckoned an honest and upright people; but should a foreigner of ordinary nerves take up a catalogue of our present publications, he would certainly suppose us a set of the most invidious and sanguinary creatures that ever infested the world. The Danish Mafacre, The Mysteries of Udolpho, Mysterious Warnings, Phantoms of the Cloisters, or the Mysterious Manuscript, interspersed (as the fair author kindly informs us) with beautiful

ful pieces of Poetry. The Mysteries of the Black Tower, The Sorcerer, with a countless *et cetera* of books of the same tendency, would certainly deprive us of all claims to openness and candour, if the manners and dispositions of a people are to be discovered from the state of Literature among them.

Thus it appears that the Literature of our country has been divided into three classes, the natural, the sentimental, and the marvellous, answering precisely to the periods of prosperity, decline, and fall of the Roman Empire; and perhaps the causes of both may be traced to the same source, namely, an enormous increase of luxury, and the repeated inroads of *Gothic barbarians*.

It is worthy observation, that most of the romances above enumerated are the productions of female pens; and it will be discovered, that Mr. Lane is obliged to the female sex for furnishing at least three-fourths of his ample library, where, to quote his own words, "the soft, tender, sympathetic soul, who wishes poetical amusements, will find solace;" and where, "for his gay volatile friends, whose desires center in a cheerful amusement of their leisure hours, an assiduous collection has been made of every novel and romance that has ever been published!" Heavens, what a slough of despond to wade through! how inexpressibly is the world obliged to him for his care and attention! What praises are sufficient to celebrate this Mæneas of the age; and how much more should we be delighted, if, instead of the present emblematical device in the frontispiece of his catalogue, of Minerva protecting Literature, he had depicted himself, like another Jupiter, sitting in state, with his inferior deities around him, and Minerva issuing from his head.

I was led into this train of thought

by a conversation which I lately overheard in a circulating library. I had not been many minutes there, when the appearance of two very pretty women drew my attention, between whom the following conversation passed: "My dear Laura, have you read the new novel I recommended to you, The Animated Skeleton? I assure you it is the production of a very young lady, and is her first appearance in that character."—L. "Heaven grant it may be her last! What, a young lady in the character of an animated skeleton? I protest I shudder at the bare idea."—"Pooh! You will know better soon! To be sure they used to frighten me a little at first, but it is nothing when you are used to it; there is nothing else read now, and for my part I would not give a farthing for a novel that had not something about ghosts, and skeletons, and hobgoblins, and Emily walking alone with a great lamp in her hand through a parcel of damp cellars, in search of something to terrify her to her heart's content."

—L. "Well, it is surprising to me what pleasure you can take in such shocking books, that ought to inspire you with horror; for my part I never touch a novel that is not recommended by Capt. O—, and he always sends me Disinterested Love, Excessive Sensibility, Delusions of the Heart, and all those charming books that melt my very soul, and make me weep while sitting under the great Oak in our garden." Here the conversation sunk to so low a whisper, that I could not overhear what passed, but retired, convinced of the error of the race of snarling moralists, who find fault with the tendency of those innocent recreations.

To speak seriously, I cannot approve of the present rage for writing that infects our fair countrywomen; the pen in the hands of a woman (when thus applied) is almost as uncouth an instrument as a lance or a musquet;

musquet; and if, like the Amazons of old, they are determined to wield the arms of men, they will, like those warlike virgins, be obliged to disfigure themselves in order to be qualified for the undertaking. Authorship is at best but an idle trade, and all the private anecdotes I have been able to collect of those females who have devoted themselves to its perils, have not induced me to alter my opinion. The fate of many a female writer may be considered in two points of view. In youth she is perhaps handsome in her person, and possessed of an ardent imagination, strong passions, and weak judgment. She sets out with a determination to distinguish herself in the world, but unluckily is not very nice with regard to the manner. From her eccentricities she is shut out from the few modes by which a woman may render herself independent, and thus at an early age relies on the exertions of her pen for support. If such a woman be any way attractive in her person, she cannot fail to fall a sacrifice to some artful suitor, who, attacking her with her own arguments, persuades her to live with him unshackled by the marriage tie. The consequences of such an union are easily foreseen; a few months of joy, then indifference on the one side, and frantic upbraidings on the other: a separation ensues, and if the lady be a *thoroughbred modern philosopher*, she claims the liberty of doing as she pleases with her own person, and quits the world in a rage. If this event does not take place, she in her eccentric course attaches herself to some man, who, having like her tasted of the fruit of perverted knowledge, is, like her, self-exiled from the paradise of social pleasure. With him she labours in the vineyard of innovation, and rails, at her sex for not adopting maxims, which to her have brought nothing but disappointment and misery. Such are her pursuits while youth and beauty

in some sort extenuate her foibles; but when old age approaches, that time in which singularities of any sort are less easily tolerated, her situation becomes much worse. She is now negligent in her appearance, slighted by her acquaintance, and ridiculed by the world; and sits like the female Writer of Tragedy, so well described by Smollett, in all the confusion of genius and literary dishabille, "while hens and dogs and hogs are feeding by." Happy the woman who is content with the lot in which Providence has placed her; who can improve herself by the literary labours of others, without wishing to become one of the fraternity; and who, in old age, looks back with transport on her past life, conscious that the well-educated family around her are indebted to her steadiness and prudence for the various advantages they enjoy.



ODDS AND ENDS.

MILTON'S DAUGHTERS.

AS Milton at his death left his affairs very much in the power of his widow, though she acknowledged that he died worth fifteen hundred pounds, yet she allowed but *one hundred pounds* to each of his three daughters. Anne, the eldest, was decrepid and deformed; but had a very handsome face; she married a master-builder, and died in child-bed of her first child, who died with her. Mary, the second, lived and died single. Deborah, the youngest, in her father's life time went over to Ireland with a lady; and afterwards was married to Mr. Abraham Clarke, a weaver in Spitalfields, and died in August, 1727, in the 76th year of her age. She is said to have been a woman of good understanding and genteel behaviour, though in low circumstances. As she had been