

The Bibliomania

THE preceding article is honourable to literature, yet impartial truth must show that even a passion for collecting books is not always a passion for literature.

The BIBLIOMANIA, or the collecting an enormous heap of books without intelligent curiosity, has, since libraries have existed, infected weak minds, who imagine that they themselves acquire knowledge when they keep it on their shelves. Their motley libraries have been called the *madhouses of the human mind*; and again, *the tomb of books* when the possessor will not communicate them, and coffins them up in the cases of his library—and as it was facetiously observed, these collections are not without a *Lock on The Human Understanding*.*

The BIBLIOMANIA has never raged more violently than in the present day. It is fortunate that literature is in no ways injured by the follies of collectors, since though they preserve the worthless, they necessarily defend the good.

Some collectors place all their fame on the *view* of a splendid library, where volumes arrayed in all the pomp

* An allusion and pun which occasioned the French translator of the present work an unlucky blunder: puzzled no doubt by my *facetiously*, he translates “mettant comme on l’a très-judicieusement fait observer, l’entendement humain sous la clef.” The book, and the author alluded to, quite escaped him.

of lettering, silk linings, triple gold bands and tinted leather, are locked up in wire cases, and secured from the vulgar hands of the *mere reader*, dazzling our eyes like eastern beauties peering through their jealousies!

BRUYERE has touched on this mania with humour: “Of such a collector,” says he, “as soon as I enter his house, I am ready to faint on the staircase, from a strong smell of Morocco leather: in vain he shows me fine editions, gold leaves, Etruscan bindings, &c, naming them one after another, as if he were showing a gallery of pictures! a gallery by the by which he seldom traverses when *alone*, for he rarely reads, but me he offers to conduct through it! I thank him for his politeness, and as little as himself care to visit the tan-house, which he calls his library.”

LUCIAN has composed a biting invective against an ignorant possessor of a vast library. Like him, who in the present day, after turning over the pages of an old book, chiefly admires the *date*. LUCIAN compares him to a pilot who was never taught the science of navigation; to a rider who cannot keep his seat on a spirited horse; to a man who, not having the use of his feet, wishes to conceal the defect by wearing embroidered shoes; but, alas! he cannot stand in them! He ludicrously com-

parens him to Thersites wearing the armour of Achilles, tottering at every step; leering with his little eyes under his enormous helmet, and his hunch-back raising the cuirass above his shoulders. Why do you buy so many books? he says:—you have no hair, and you purchase a comb; you are blind, and you will have a grand mirror; you are deaf, and you will have fine musical instruments! Your costly bindings are only a source of vexation, and you are continually discharging your librarians for not preserving them from the silent invasion of the worms, and the nibbling triumphs of the rats!

Such collectors will contemptuously smile at the collection of the amiable Melancthon. He possessed in his library only four authors, Plato, Pliny, Plutarch, and Ptolemy the geographer.

Ancillon was a great collector of curious books, and dexterously defended himself when accused of the *Bibliomania*. He gave a good reason for having the most elegant editions; which he did not consider merely as a literary luxury. He said the less the eyes are fatigued in reading a work, the more liberty the mind feels to judge of it: and as we perceive more clearly the excellencies and defects of a printed book than when in MS.; so we see them more plainly in good paper and clear type than when the impression and paper are both bad.

He always purchased *first editions*, and never waited for second ones; though it is the opinion of some that a first edition is generally the least valuable, and is only to be considered as an imperfect essay, which the author proposes to finish after he has tried the sentiments of the literate world. Bayle approves of Ancillon's plan. Those who wait calmly for a book, says he, till it is reprinted, show plainly that they are resigned to their ignorance, and prefer the saving of a pistole to the acquisition of useful knowledge. With one of these persons, who waited for a second edition, which never appeared, a literary man argued, that it was much better to have two editions of a book than to deprive himself of the advantage which the reading of the first might procure him; and it was a bad economy to prefer a few crowns to that advantage. It has frequently happened, besides, that in second editions, the author omits, as well as adds, or makes alterations from prudential reasons; the displeasing truths which he *corrects*, as he might call them, are so many losses incurred by Truth itself. There is an advantage in comparing the first with subsequent editions; for among other things, we feel great satisfaction in tracing the variations of a work, when a man of genius has revised it. There are also other secrets, well known to the intelligent curious, who are versed

in affairs relating to books. Many first editions are not to be purchased for the treble value of later ones. Let no lover of books be too hastily censured for his passion, which, if indulged with judgment, is useful. The collector we have noticed frequently, said, as is related of Virgil, "I collect gold from Ennius's dung." I find, added he, in some neglected authors, particular things, not elsewhere to be found. He read many of these, but not with equal attention, "*Sicut canis ad Nilum bibens et fugiens,*" like a dog at the Nile, drinking and running.

Fortunate are those who only consider a book for the utility and pleasure they may derive from its possession. Those students, who, though they know much, still thirst to know more, may require, this vast sea of books; yet in that sea they may suffer many shipwrecks. Great collections of books are subject to certain accidents besides the damp, the worms, and the rats; one not less common is that of the *borrowers*, not to say a word of the *purloiners!*