

Sketches of Criticism

It may perhaps be some satisfaction to show the young writer, that the most celebrated ancients have been as rudely subjected to the tyranny of criticism as the moderns. Detraction has ever poured the “waters of bitterness.”

It was given out, that Homer had stolen from anterior poets whatever was most remarkable in the Iliad and Odyssey. Naucrates even points out the source in the library at Memphis in a temple of Vulcan, which according to him the blind bard completely pillaged. Undoubtedly there were good poets before Homer: how absurd to conceive that a finished and elaborate poem could be the first! We have indeed accounts of anterior poets, and apparently of epics, before Homer; their names have come down to us. Ælian notices Syagrus, who composed a poem on the siege of Troy; and Suidas the poem of Corinnus, from which it is said Homer greatly borrowed. Why did Plato so severely condemn the great bard, and imitate him?

Sophocles was brought to trial by his children as a lunatic; and some, who censured the inequalities of this poet, have also condemned the vanity of Pindar; the rough verses of Æschylus; and Euripides, for the conduct of his plots.

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Socrates, considered as the wisest and the most moral of men, Cicero treated as an usurer, and the pedant Athenæus as illiterate; the latter points out as a Socratic folly, our philosopher disserting on the nature of justice before his judges, who were so many thieves. The malignant buffoonery of Aristophanes, who, as Jortin says, was, a great wit, but a great rascal, treats him much worse; but though some would revive this calumny, such modern witnesses may have their evidence impeached in the awful court of history.

Plato, who has been called, by Clement of Alexandria, the Moses of Athens; the philosopher of the Christians, by Arnobius; and the god of philosophers, by Cicero; Athenæus accuses of envy; Theopompus, of lying; Suidas, of avarice; Aulus Gellius, of robbery; Porphyry, of incontinence; and Aristophanes, of impiety.

Aristotle, whose industry composed more than four hundred volumes, has not been less spared by the critics; Diogenes Laertius, Cicero, and Plutarch, have forgotten nothing that can tend to show his ignorance, his ambition, and his vanity,

It has been said, that Plato was so envious of the celebrity of Democritus, that he proposed burning all his works; but that Amydis and Clinias prevented it, by re-

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monstrating that there were copies of them everywhere; and Aristotle was agitated by the same passion against all the philosophers his predecessors!

Virgil is destitute of invention, if we are to give credit to Pliny, Carbilus, and Seneca. Caligula has absolutely denied him even mediocrity; Herennus has marked his faults; and Perilius Faustinus has furnished a thick volume with his plagiarisms. Even the author of his apology has confessed, that he has stolen from Homer his greatest beauties; from Apollonius Rhodius, many of his pathetic passages; from Nicander, hints for his *Georgics*; and this does not terminate the catalogue.

Horace censures the coarse humour of Plautus; and Horace, in his turn, has been blamed for the free use he made of the Greek minor poets.

The majority of the critics regard Pliny's *Natural History* only as a heap of fables; and seem to have quite as little respect for Quintus Curtius, who indeed seems to have composed little more than an elegant romance.

Pliny cannot bear with Diodorus and Vopiscus; and in one comprehensive criticism, treats all the historians as narrators of fables.

Livy has been reproached for his aversion to the Gauls; Dion, for his hatred of the republic; Velleius Paterculus, for speaking too kindly of the vices of Tiberius; and

Herodotus and Plutarch, for their excessive partiality to their own country: while the latter has written an entire treatise on the malignity of Herodotus. Xenophon and Quintus Curtius have been considered rather as novelists than historians; and Tacitus has been censured for his audacity in pretending to discover the political springs and secret causes of events. Dionysius of Halicarnassus has made an elaborate attack on Thucydides for the unskilful choice of his subject and his manner of treating it. Dionysius would have nothing written but what tended to the glory of his country and the pleasure of the reader; as if history were a song! adds Hobbes, while he also shows that there was a personal motive in this attack. The same Dionysius severely criticises the style of Xenophon, who, he says, whenever he attempts to elevate his style, shows he is incapable of supporting it. Polybius has been blamed for his frequent introduction of moral reflections, which interrupt the thread of his narrative; and Sallust has been blamed by Cato for indulging his own private passions, and studiously concealing many of the glorious actions of Cicero. The Jewish historian Josephus is accused of not having designed his history for his own people so much as for the Greeks and Romans, whom he takes the utmost care never to offend. Josephus assumes a Roman name, Fla-

vius; and considering his nation as entirely subjugated, he only varies his story to make them appear venerable and dignified to their conquerors, and for this purpose, alters what he himself calls the *Holy books*. It is well known how widely he differs from the scriptural accounts. Some have said of Cicero, that there is no connection, and, to adopt their own figures, no blood and nerves, in what his admirers so warmly extol. Cold in his extemporaneous effusions, artificial in his exordiums, trifling in his strained raillery, and tiresome in his digressions. This is saying a good deal about Cicero.

Quintilian does not spare Seneca; and Demosthenes, called by Cicero the prince of orators, has, according to Hermippus, more of art than of nature. To Demades, his orations appear too much laboured; others have thought him too dry; and, if we may trust Æschines, his language is by no means pure.

The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius, and the Deipnosophists of Athenæus, while they have been extolled by one party, have been degraded by another. They have been considered as botchers of rags and remnants; their diligence has not been accompanied by judgement; and their taste inclined more to the frivolous than to the useful. Compilers, indeed, are liable to a hard fate, for little distinction is made in their ranks; a disagreeable

situation, in which honest Burton seems to have been placed; for he says of his work, that some will cry out, "This is a thinge of meere industrie; a collection without wit or invention ; a very toy! So men are valued! their labours vilified by fellowes of no worth themselves, as things of nought; who could not have done as much? some understande too little, and some too much."

Should we proceed with this list to our own country, and to our own times, it might be curiously augmented, and show the world what men the critics are! but, perhaps, enough has been said to soothe irritated genius, and to shame fastidious criticism. "I would beg the critics to remember," the Earl of Roscommon writes, in his preface to Horace's Art of Poetry, "that Horace owed his favour and his fortune to the character given of him by Virgil and Varius; that Fundanius and Pollio are still valued by what Horace says of them; and that in their golden age, there was a good understanding among the ingenious, and those who were the most esteemed were the best natured."