

Imitators

SOME writers, usually pedants, imagine that they can supply by the labours of industry the deficiencies of nature. It is recorded of Paulus Manutius, that he frequently spent a month in writing a single letter. He affected to imitate Cicero. But although he has painfully attained to something of the elegance of his style, he is still destitute of the native graces of unaffected composition. He was one of those whom Erasmus bantered in his *Ciceronianus*, as so slavishly devoted to Cicero's style, that they ridiculously employed the utmost precautions when they were seized by a Ciceronian fit. The *Nosoponus* of Erasmus tells us of his devotion to Cicero; of his three indexes to all his words, and his never writing but in the dead of night; employing months upon a few lines, and his religious veneration for *words*, with his total indifference about the *sense*.

Le Brun, a Jesuit, was a singular instance of such unhappy imitation. He was a Latin poet, and his themes were religious. He formed the extravagant project of substituting a *religious Virgil* and *Ovid* merely by adapting his works to their titles. His *Christian Virgil* consists, like the Pagan Virgil, of *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and of an *Epic* of twelve books, with this difference, that devotional subjects are substituted for fabulous ones.

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His epic is the *Ignaciad*, or the pilgrimage of Saint Ignatius. His *Christian Ovid* is in the same taste; everything wears a new face. The *Epistles* are pious ones; the *Fasti* are the six days of the Creation; the *Elegies* are the lamentations of Jeremiah; a poem on the *Love of God* is substituted for the *Art of Love*; and the history of some *Conversions* supplies the place of the *Metamorphoses*! This Jesuit would, no doubt, have approved of a family Shakespeare!

A poet of far different character, the elegant Sannazarius, has done much the same thing in his poem *De partu Virginis*. The same servile imitation of ancient taste appears. It professes to celebrate the birth of *Christ*, yet his name is not once mentioned in it! The *Virgin* herself is styled *spes deorum*! "The hope of the Gods!" The *Incarnation* is predicted by *Proteus*. The *Virgin*, instead of consulting the *sacred writings*, reads the *Sybilline oracles*! Her attendants are *Dryads*, *Nereids*, &c. This monstrous mixture of polytheism with the mysteries of Christianity appeared in every thing he had about him. In a chapel at one of his country seats he had two statues placed at his tomb, *Apollo* and *Minerva*; Catholic piety found no difficulty in the present case, as well as in innumerable others of the same kind, to in-

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scribe the statue of *Apollo* with the name of *David*, and that of *Minerva* with the female one of *Judith*!

Seneca, in his 114th Epistle, gives a curious literary anecdote of the sort of imitation by which an inferior mind becomes the monkey of an original writer. At Rome, when Sallust was the fashionable writer, short sentences, uncommon words, and an obscure brevity, were affected as so many elegancies. Arruntius, who wrote the history of the Punic Wars, painfully laboured to imitate Sallust. Expressions which are rare in Sallust are frequent in Arruntius, and, of course, without the motive that induced Sallust to adopt them. What rose naturally under the pen of the great historian, the minor one must have run after with a ridiculous anxiety. Seneca adds several instances of the servile affectation of Arruntius, which seem much like those we once had of Johnson, by the undiscerning herd of his apes.

One cannot but smile at these imitators; we have abounded with them. In the days of Churchill, every month produced an effusion which tolerably imitated his rough and slovenly versification, his coarse invective, and his careless mediocrity—but the genius remained with the English Juvenal. Sterne had his countless multitude; and in Fielding's time, Tom Jones produced more bastards in wit than the author could

ever suspect. To such literary echoes, the reply of Philip of Macedon to one who prided himself on imitating the notes of the nightingale may be applied; "I prefer the nightingale herself!" Even the most successful of this imitating tribe must be doomed to share the fate of Silius Italicus in his cold imitation of Virgil, and Cawthorne in his empty harmony of Pope.

To all these imitators I must apply an Arabian anecdote. Ebn Saad, one of Mahomet's amanuenses, when writing what the prophet dictated, cried out by way of admiration—"Blessed be God the best Creator!" Mahomet approved of the expression, and desired him to write those words down also as part of the inspired passage.—The consequence was, that Ebn Saad began to think himself as great a prophet as his master, and took upon himself to imitate the Koran according to his fancy; but the imitator got himself into trouble, and only escaped with life by falling on his knees, and solemnly swearing he would never again imitate the Koran, for which he was sensible God had never created him.