

### *Literary Impostures*

SOME authors have practised singular impositions on the public. Varillas, the French historian, enjoyed for some time a great reputation in his own country for his historical compositions, but when they became more known, the scholars of other countries destroyed the reputation which he had unjustly acquired. "His continual professions of sincerity prejudiced many in his favour, and made him pass for a writer who had penetrated into the inmost recesses of the cabinet: but the public were at length undeceived, and were convinced that the historical anecdotes which Varillas put off for specific facts had no foundation, being wholly his own inventions:—though he endeavoured to make them pass for realities by affected citations of titles, instructions, letters, memoirs, and relations, all of them imaginary!" He had read almost everything historical, printed and manuscript; but he had a fertile political imagination, and gave his conjectures as facts, while he quoted at random his pretended authorities. Burnet's book against Varillas is a curious little volume.

Gemelli Carreri, a Neapolitan gentleman, for many years never quitted his chamber; confined by a tedious indisposition, he amused himself with writing a *Voyage round the World*; giving characters of men, and descrip-

tions of countries, as if he had really visited them: and his volumes are still very interesting. Du Halde, who has written so voluminous an account of China, compiled it from the Memoirs of the Missionaries, and never travelled ten leagues from Paris all his life; though he appears, by his writings, to be very familiar with Chinese scenery.

Damberger's travels more recently made a great sensation—and the public were duped; they proved to be the ideal voyages of a member of the German Grubstreet, about his own garret! Too many of our "Travels" have been manufactured to fill a certain size; and some which bear names of great authority were not written by the professed authors.

There is an excellent observation of an anonymous author:—"Writers who never visited foreign countries, and *travellers* who have run through immense regions with fleeting pace, have given us long accounts of various countries and people; evidently collected from the idle reports and absurd traditions of the ignorant vulgar, from whom only they could have received these relations which we see accumulated with such undiscerning credulity."

Some authors have practised the singular imposition

of announcing a variety of titles of works as if preparing for the press, but of which nothing but the titles have been written.

Paschal, historiographer of France, had a reason for these ingenious inventions; he continually announced such titles, that his pension for writing on the history of France might not be stopp'd. When he died, his historical labours did not exceed six pages!

Gregorio Leti is an historian of much the same stamp as Varillas. He wrote with great felicity, and hunger quickened his pen. He took everything too lightly; yet his works are sometimes looked into for many anecdotes of English history not to be found elsewhere; and perhaps ought not to have been there if truth had been consulted. His great aim was always to make a book: he swells his volumes with digressions, interspices many ridiculous stories, and applies all the repartees he collected from old novel-writers to modern characters.

Such forgeries abound; the numerous "Testaments Politiques" of Colbert, Mazarine, and other great ministers, were forgeries usually from the Dutch press, as are many pretended political "Memoirs."

Of our old translations from the Greek and Latin authors, many were taken from French versions.

The travels written in Hebrew, of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, of which we have a curious translation, are, I believe, apocryphal. He describes a journey, which if ever he took, it must have been with his nightcap on; being a perfect dream! It is said that to inspire and give importance to his nation, he pretended that he had travelled to all the synagogues in the east; he mentions places which he does not appear ever to have seen, and the different people he describes, no one has known. He calculates that he has found near eight hundred thousand Jews, of which about half are independent, and not subjects of any Christian or Gentile sovereign. These fictitious travels have been a source of much trouble to the learned; particularly to those who in their zeal to authenticate them followed the aërial footsteps of the Hyppogriffe of Rabbi Benjamin. He affirms that tomb of Ezekiel, with the library of the first and second temples, were to be seen in his time at a place on the banks of the river Euphrates; Wesselius of Groningen, and many other literati, travelled on purpose to Mesopotamia, to reach the tomb and examine the library, but the fairy treasures were never to be seen, nor even heard of!

The first on the list of impudent impostors is Annius of

Viterbo, a Dominican, and master of the sacred palace under Alexander VI. He pretended he had discovered the genuine works of Sanchoniatho, Manetho, Berosus, and other works, *of which only fragments* are remaining. He published seventeen books of antiquities! But not having any MSS. to produce, though he declared he had found them buried in the earth these literary fabrications occasioned great controversies; for the author died before he made up his mind to a confession. At their first publication universal joy was diffused among the learned.—Suspicion soon rose, and detection followed. However, as the forger never would acknowledge himself as such, it has been ingeniously conjectured that he was imposed on, rather than that he was the impostor; or, as in the case of Chatterton, possibly all may not be fictitious. It has been said that a great volume in MS., anterior by two hundred years to the seventeen books of Annii, exists in the Bibliothèque Colbertine, in which these pretended histories were to be read; but as Annii would never point out the sources of his, the whole may be considered as a very wonderful imposture. I refer the reader to Tyrwhitt's Vindication of his Appendix to Rowley's or Chatterton's Poems, p, 140, for some curious observations, and some facts of literary imposture.

An extraordinary literary imposture was that of one Joseph Velia, who, in 1794, was an adventurer in Sicily, and pretended that he possessed seventeen of the lost books of Livy in Arabic: he had received this literary treasure, he said; from a Frenchman who had purloined it from a shelf in St. Sophia's church at Constantino-ple. As many of the Greek and Roman classics have been translated by the Arabians, and many were first known in Europe in their Arabic dress, there was nothing improbable in one part of his story. He was urged to publish these long-desired books; and Lady Spenser, then in Italy, offered to defray the expenses. He had the effrontery, by way of a specimen, to edit an Italian translation of the sixtieth book, but that book took up no more than one octavo page! A professor of Oriental literature in Prussia introduced it in his work, never suspecting the fraud; it proved to be nothing more than the epitome of Florus. He also gave out that he possessed a code which he had picked up in the abbey of St. Martin, containing the ancient history of Sicily, in the Arabic period comprehending above two hundred years; and of which ages their own historians were entirely deficient in knowledge. Velia declared he had a genuine official correspondence between the Arabian governors of Sicily and their superiors in Africa, from the first

landing of the Arabians on that island. Velia was now loaded with honours and pensions! It is true he showed Arabic mss., which, however, did not contain a syllable of what he said. He pretended he was in continual correspondence with friends at Morocco and elsewhere. The King of Naples furnished him with money to assist his researches. Four volumes in quarto were at length published! Velia had the adroitness to change the Arabic mss. he possessed, which entirely related to Mahomet, to matters relative to Sicily; he bestowed several weeks' labour to disfigure the whole, altering page for page, line for line, and word for word, but interspersed numberless dots, strokes, and flourishes, so that when he published a fac-simile, every one admired the learning of Velia, who could translate what no one else could read. He complained he had lost an eye in this minute labour; and every one thought his pension ought to have been increased. Everything prospered about him, except his eye, which some thought was not so bad neither. It was at length discovered by his blunders, &c. that the whole was a forgery: though it had now been patronized, translated, and extracted through Europe. When this ms. was examined by an Orientalist, it was discovered to be nothing but a history of *Mahomet and his family*. Velia was condemned to imprisonment.

The Spanish antiquary, Medina Conde, in order to favour the pretensions of the church in a great lawsuit, forged deeds and inscriptions, which he buried in the ground, where he knew they would shortly be dug up. Upon their being found, he published engravings of them, and gave explanations of their unknown characters, making them out to be so many authentic proofs and evidences of the contested assumptions of the clergy.

The Morocco ambassador purchased of him a copper bracelet of Fatima, which Medina proved by the Arabic inscription and many certificates to be genuine, and found among the ruins of the Alhambra, with other treasures of its last king, who had hid them there in hope of better days. This famous bracelet turned out afterwards to be the work of Medina's own hand, made out of an old brass candlestick!

George Psalmanazar, to whose labours we owe much of the great Universal History, exceeded in powers of deception any of the great impostors of learning. His Island of Formosa was an illusion eminently bold, and maintained with as much felicity as erudition; and great must have been that erudition which could form a pretended language and its grammar, and fertile the genius which could invent the history of an unknown

people: it is said that the deception was only satisfactorily ascertained by his own penitential confession; he had defied and baffled the most learned. The literary impostor Lauder had much more audacity than ingenuity, and he died contemned by all the world. Ireland's Shakespeare served to show that commentators are not blessed, necessarily, with an interior and unerring tact. Genius and learning are ill directed in forming literary impositions, but at least they must be distinguished from the fabrications of ordinary impostors.

A singular forgery was practised on Captain Wilford by a learned Hindu, who, to ingratiate himself and his studies with the too zealous and pious European, contrived, among other attempts, to give the history of Noah and his three sons; in his "Purana" under the designation of Satyavrata. Captain Wilford having *read* the passage, transcribed it for Sir William James, who translated it as a curious extract; the whole was an interpolation by the dexterous introduction of a forged sheet, discoloured and prepared for the purpose of deception, and which, having served his purposes for the moment, was afterwards withdrawn. As books in India are not bound, it is not difficult to introduce loose leaves. To confirm his various impositions, this learned forger had the patience to write two volumi-

nous sections, in which he connected all the legends together in the style of the *Puranas*, consisting of 12,000 lines. When Captain Wilford resolved to collate the manuscript with others, the learned Hindu began to disfigure his own manuscript, the captain's, and those of the college, by erasing the name of the country and substituting that of Egypt. With as much pains, and with a more honourable direction, our Hindu Lauder might have immortalised his invention.

We have authors who sold their names to be prefixed to works they never read; or, on the contrary, have prefixed the names of others to their own writings. Sir John Hill, once when he fell sick, owned to a friend that he had overfatigued himself with writing seven works at once! one of which was on architecture, and another on cookery! This hero once contracted to translate Swammerdam's work on insects for fifty guineas. After the agreement with the bookseller, he perfectly recollected that he did not understand a single word of the Dutch Language! Nor did there exist a French translation. The work, however, was not the less done for this small obstacle. Sir John bargained with another translator for twenty-five guineas. The second translator was precisely in the same situation as the first; as ignorant, though not so well-paid as the knight. He rebargained

with a third, who perfectly understood his original, for twelve guineas! So that the translators who could not translate feasted on venison and turtle, while the modest drudge, whose name never appeared to the world, broke in patience his daily bread! The craft of authorship has many mysteries. The great patriarch and primeval dealer in English literature is said to have been Robert Green, one of the most facetious, profligate, and indefatigable of the Scribleri family. He laid the foundation of a new dynasty of literary emperors. The first act by which he proved his claim to the throne of Grub-street has served as a model to his numerous successors—it was an ambidextrous trick! Green sold his “Orlando Furioso” to two different theatres, and is supposed to have been the first author in English literary history who wrote as a *trader*; or as crabbed Anthony Wood phrases it in the language of celibacy and cynicism, “he wrote to maintain his *wife*, and that high and loose course of living which *poets generally follow*.” With a drop still sweeter, old Anthony describes Gayton, another worthy; “he came up to London to live in a *shirking condition*, and wrote *trite things* merely to get bread to sustain him and his *wife*.” The hermit Anthony seems to have had a mortal antipathy against the Eves of literary men.