

Cardinal Richelieu

THE present anecdote concerning Cardinal Richelieu may serve to teach the man of letters how he deals out criticisms to the *great*, when they ask his opinion of manuscripts, be they in verse or prose.

The cardinal placed in a gallery of his palace the portraits of several illustrious men, and he was desirous of composing the inscriptions to be placed round the portraits. The one which he intended for Montluc, the marechal of France, was conceived in these terms: *Multa fecit, plura scripsit, vir tamen magnus fuit*. He showed it without mentioning the author to Bourbon, the royal Greek professor, and asked his opinion concerning it. He reprobated it, and considered that the Latin was much in the style of the breviary; and if it had concluded with an *allelujah*, it would serve for an *anthem* to the *Magnificat*. The cardinal agreed with the severity of his strictures, and even acknowledged the discernment of the professor; “for,” he said, “it is really written by a priest.” But however he might approve of Bourbon’s critical powers, he punished without mercy his ingenuity. The pension his majesty had bestowed on him was withheld the next year.

The cardinal was one of those ambitious men who foolishly attempt to rival every kind of genius; and see-

ing himself constantly disappointed, he envied with all the venom of rancour, those talents which are so frequently the *all* that men of genius possess.

He was jealous of Balzac’s splendid reputation, and offered the elder Heinsius ten thousand crowns to recite a criticism which should ridicule his elaborate compositions. This Heinsius refused, because Salmasius threatened to revenge Balzac on his *Herodes Infanticida*.

He attempted to rival the reputation of Corneille’s “Cid,” by opposing to it one of the most ridiculous dramatic productions; it was the allegorical tragedy called “Europe,” in which the *minister* had congregated the four quarters of the world! Much political matter was thrown together, divided into scenes and acts. There are appended to it keys of the *dramatis personæ* and of the allegories. In this tragedy Francion represents France; Ibere, Spain; Parthenope, Naples, &c.; and these have their attendants:—Lilian (alluding to the French lilies) is the servant of Francion, while Hispale is the confidant of Ibere. But the key to the allegories is much more copious:—Albione signifies England; *three knots of the hair of Austrasie* mean the towns of Ciermont, Stenay, and Jamet, these places once belonging to Lorraine. *A box of diamonds* of Austrasie is the town

of Nancy, belonging once to the dukes of Lorraine. The *key* of Iberia's great porch is Perpignan, which France took from Spain; and in this manner is this sublime tragedy composed! When he first sent it anonymously to the French Academy it was reprobated. He then tore it in a rage, and scattered it about his study. Towards evening, like another Medea lamenting over the members of her own children, he and his secretary passed the night in uniting the scattered limbs. He then ventured to avow himself; and having pretended to correct this incorrigible tragedy, the submissive Academy retracted their censures, but the public pronounced its melancholy fate on its first representation. This lamentable tragedy was intended to thwart Corneille's "Cid." Enraged at its success, Richelieu even commanded the Academy to publish a severe *critique* of it well known in French literature. Boileau on this occasion has these two well-turned verses:—

“En vain contre le Cid, un ministre se ligue;
Tout Paris, pour *Chimene*, a les yeux de *Rodrigue*.”

To oppose the Cid, in vain the statesman tries;
All Paris, for *Chimene*, has *Roderick's* eyes.

It is said that in consequence of the fall of this tragedy the French custom is derived of securing a number

of friends to applaud their pieces at their first representations. I find the following droll anecdote concerning this droll tragedy in Beauchamp's *Récherches sur la Théâtre*.

The minister, after the ill success of his tragedy, retired unaccompanied the same evening to his country house at Ruel. He then sent for his favourite Desmaret, who was at supper with his friend Petit. Desmaret, conjecturing that the interview would be stormy, begged his friend to accompany him.

“Well!” said the cardinal as soon as he saw them, “the French will never possess a taste for what is lofty: they seem not to have relished my tragedy.”—“My lord,” answered Petit, “it is not the fault of the piece, which is so admirable, but that of the *players*. Did not your eminence perceive that not only they knew not their parts, but that they were all *drunk?*”—“Really,” replied the cardinal, something pleased, “I observed they acted it dreadfully ill.”

Desmaret and Petit returned to Paris, flew directly to the players to plan a *new mode* of performance, which was to *secure* a number of spectators; so that at the second representation bursts of applause were frequently heard!

Richelieu had another singular vanity of closely imi-

tating Cardinal Ximenes. Pliny was not a more servile imitator of Cicero. Marville tells us that, like Ximenes, he placed himself at the head of an army: like him, he degraded princes and nobles; and like him, rendered himself formidable to all Europe. And because Ximenes had established schools of theology, Richelieu undertook likewise to raise into notice the schools of the Sorbonne. And, to conclude, as Ximenes had written several theological treatises, our cardinal was also desirous of leaving posterity various polemical works. But his gallantries rendered him more ridiculous. Always in ill health, this miserable lover and grave cardinal would, in a freak of love, dress himself with a red feather in his cap and sword by his side. He was more hurt by an offensive nickname given him by the queen of Louis XIII. than even by the hiss of theatres and the critical condemnation of academics.

Cardinal Richelieu was assuredly a great political genius. Sir William Temple observes that he instituted the French Academy to give employment to the *wits*, and to hinder them from inspecting too narrowly his politics and his administration. It is believed that the Marshal de Grammont lost an important battle by the orders of the cardinal; that in this critical conjuncture

of affairs his majesty, who was inclined to dismiss him, could not then absolutely do without him.

Vanity in this cardinal levelled a great genius. He who would attempt to display universal excellence will be impelled to practise meannesses, and to act follies which, if he has the least sensibility, must occasion him many a pang and many a blush.