

Milton

It is painful to observe the acrimony which the most eminent scholars have infused frequently in their controversial writings. The politeness of the present times has in some degree softened the malignity of the man, in the dignity of the author, but this is by no means an irrevocable law.

It is said not to be honourable to literature to revive such controversies; and a work entitled “*Querelles Litteraries*,” when it first appeared, excited loud murmurs. But it has its moral; like showing the drunkard to a youth that he may turn aside disgusted with ebriety. Must we suppose that men of letters are exempt from the human passions? Their sensibility, on the contrary, is more irritable than that of others. To observe the ridiculous attitudes in which great men appear, when they employ the style of the fish-market, may be one great means of restraining that ferocious pride often breaking out in the republic of letters. Johnson at least appears to have entertained the same opinion; for he thought proper to republish the low invective of *Dryden* against *Settle*: and since I have published my “*Quarrels of Authors*,” it becomes me to say no more.

The celebrated controversy of *Salmasius* continued by Morus with *Milton*—the first the pleader of King

Charles, the latter the advocate of the people—was of that magnitude, that all Europe took a part in the paper-war of these two great men. The answer of Milton, who perfectly massacred *Salmasius*, is now read but by the few. Whatever is addressed to the times, however great may be its merit, is doomed to perish with the times; yet on these pages the philosopher will not contemplate in vain.

It will form no uninteresting article to gather a few of the rhetorical *weeds*, for *flowers* we cannot well call them, with which they mutually presented each other. Their rancour was at least equal to their erudition, the two most learned antagonists of a learned age!

Salmasius was a man of vast erudition, but no taste. His writings are learned; but sometimes ridiculous. He called his work *Defensio Regia*, Defence of Kings. The opening of this work provokes a laugh. “Englishmen! who toss the heads of kings as so many tennis-balls; who play with crowns as if they were bowls; who look upon sceptres as so many crooks.”

That the deformity of the body is an idea we attach to the deformity of the mind, the vulgar must acknowledge; but surely it is unpardonable in the enlightened philosopher thus to compare the crookedness of corpo-

real matter with the rectitude of the intellect; yet Milbourne and Dennis, the last a formidable critic, have frequently considered, that comparing Dryden and Pope to whatever the eye turned from with displeasure was very good argument to lower their literary abilities. Salmasius seems also to have entertained this idea, though his spies in England gave him wrong information; or, possibly, he only drew the figure of his own distempered imagination.

Salmasius sometimes reproaches Milton as being but a puny piece of man; an homunculus, a dwarf deprived of the human figure, a bloodless being, composed of nothing but skin and bone; a contemptible pedagogue, fit only to flog his boys: and sometimes elevating the ardour of his mind into a poetic frenzy, he applies to him the words of Virgil, "Monstum horrendum, informe, ingens, cui lumen ademptum." Our great poet thought this senseless declamation merited a serious refutation; perhaps he did not wish to appear despicable in the eyes of the ladies; and he would not be silent on the subject, he says, lest any one should consider him as the credulous Spaniards are made to believe by their priests, that a heretic is a kind of rhinoceros or a dog-headed monster. Milton says, that he does not think any one ever considered him as unbeautiful; that his

size rather approaches mediocrity than the diminutive; that he still felt the same courage and the same strength which he possessed when young, when, with his sword, he felt no difficulty to combat with men more robust than himself; that his face, far from being pale, emaciated, and wrinkled, was sufficiently creditable to him; for though he had passed his fortieth year, he was in all other respects ten years younger. And very pathetically he adds, "that even his eyes, blind as they are, are unblemished in their appearance; in this instance alone, and much against my inclination, I am a deceiver."

Morus, in his Epistle dedicatory of his *Regii Sanguinis Clamor*, compares Milton to a hangman; his disordered vision to the blindness of his soul, and vomits forth his venom.

When Salmasius found that his strictures on the person of Milton were false, and that, on the contrary, it was uncommonly beautiful, he then turned his battery against those graces with which Nature had so liberally adorned his adversary. And it is now that he seems to have laid no restrictions on his pen; but raging with the irritation of Milton's success, he throws out the blackest calumnies, and the most infamous aspersions.

It must be observed, when Milton first proposed to answer Salmasius he had lost the use of one of his eyes:

and his physicians declared, that if he applied himself to the controversy, the other would likewise close for ever! His patriotism was not to be baffled but with life itself. Unhappily, the prediction of his physicians took place. Thus a learned man in the occupations of study falls blind: a circumstance even now not read without sympathy. Salmasius considers it as one from which he may draw caustic ridicule and satiric severity.

Salmasius glories that Milton lost his health and his eyes in answering his apology for King Charles! He does not now reproach him with natural deformities; but he malignantly sympathises with him, that he now no more is in possession of that beauty which rendered him so amiable during his residence in *Italy*. He speaks more plainly in a following page; and in a word, would blacken the austere virtue of Milton with a crime too infamous to name.

Impartiality of criticism obliges us to confess that Milton was not destitute of rancour. When he was told that his adversary boasted he had occasioned the loss of his eyes, he answered, with the ferocity of the irritated passion—“*And I shall cost him his life!*” A prediction which was soon after verified: for Christina, Queen of Sweden, withdrew her patronage from Salmasius, and sided with Milton. The universal neglect the proud

scholar felt hastened his death in the course of a twelve-month.

How the greatness of Milton’s mind was degraded! He actually condescended to enter into a correspondence in Holland to obtain little scandalous anecdotes of his miserable adversary Morus, and deigned to adulate the unworthy Christina of Sweden, because she had expressed herself favourably on his “Defence.” Of late years we have had but too many instances of this worst of passions; the antipathies of politics!