

Minute Writing

THE Iliad of Homer in a nutshell, which Pliny says that Cicero once saw, it is pretended might have been a fact, however to some it may appear impossible. Ælian notices an artist who wrote a distich in letters of gold, which he enclosed in the rind of a grain of corn.

Antiquity and modern times record many such penmen, whose glory consisted in writing in so small a hand that the writing could not be legible to the naked eye. One wrote a verse of Homer on a grain of millet, and another, more indefatigably trifling, transcribed the whole Iliad in so confined a space, that it could be enclosed in a nutshell. Menage mentions, he saw whole sentences which were not perceptible to the eye without the microscope; and pictures and portraits which appeared at first to be lines and scratches thrown down at random; one of them formed the face of the Dauphiness with the most pleasing delicacy and correct resemblance. He read an Italian poem, in praise of this princess, containing some thousands of verses, written by an officer in a space of a foot and a half. This species of curious idleness has not been lost in our own country; where this minute writing has equalled any on record. Peter Bales, a celebrated calligrapher in the reign of Elizabeth, astonished the eyes of beholders by

showing hem what they could not see; for in the Harleian MSS. 530, we have a narrative of “a rare piece of work brought to pass by Peter Bales, an Englishman, and a clerk of the chancery;” it seems by the description to have been the whole Bible “in an English walnut no bigger than a hen’s egg. The nut holdeth the book: there are as many leaves in his little book as the great Bible, and he hath written as much in one of his little leaves as a great leaf of the Bible.” We are told that this wonderfully unreadable copy of the Bible was “seen by many thousands.” There is a drawing of the head of Charles I. in the library of St. John’s College at Oxford, wholly composed of minute written characters, which at a small distance resemble the lines of an engraving. The lines of the head, and the ruff, are said to contain the book of Psalms, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer. In the British Museum we find a drawing representing the portrait of Queen Anne, not much above the size of the hand. on this drawing appear a number of lines and scratches, which the librarian assures the marveling spectator includes the entire contents of a thin *folio*, which on this occasion is carried in the hand.

On this subject it may be worth noticing, that the learned Huet asserts that he, like the rest of the world,

for a long time considered as a fiction the story of that industrious writer who is said to have enclosed the Iliad in a nutshell. But having examined the matter more closely, he thought it possible. One day in company at the Dauphin's, this learned man trifled half an hour in proving it. A piece of vellum, about ten inches in length and eight in width, pliant and firm, can be folded up and enclosed in the shell of a large walnut. It can hold in its breadth one line, which can contain 30 verses, and in its length 250 lines. With a crow-quill the writing can be perfect. A page of this piece of vellum will then contain 7500 verses, and the reverse as much; the whole 15,000 verses of the Iliad. And this he proved in their presence, by using a piece of paper, and with a common pen. The thing is possible to be effected; and if on any occasion paper should be most excessively rare, it may be useful to know, that a volume of matter may be contained in a single leaf.