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The Henriade

Voltaire

London, 1762

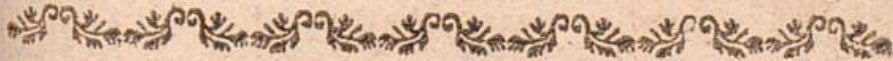
The Henriade. Canto the Sixth.

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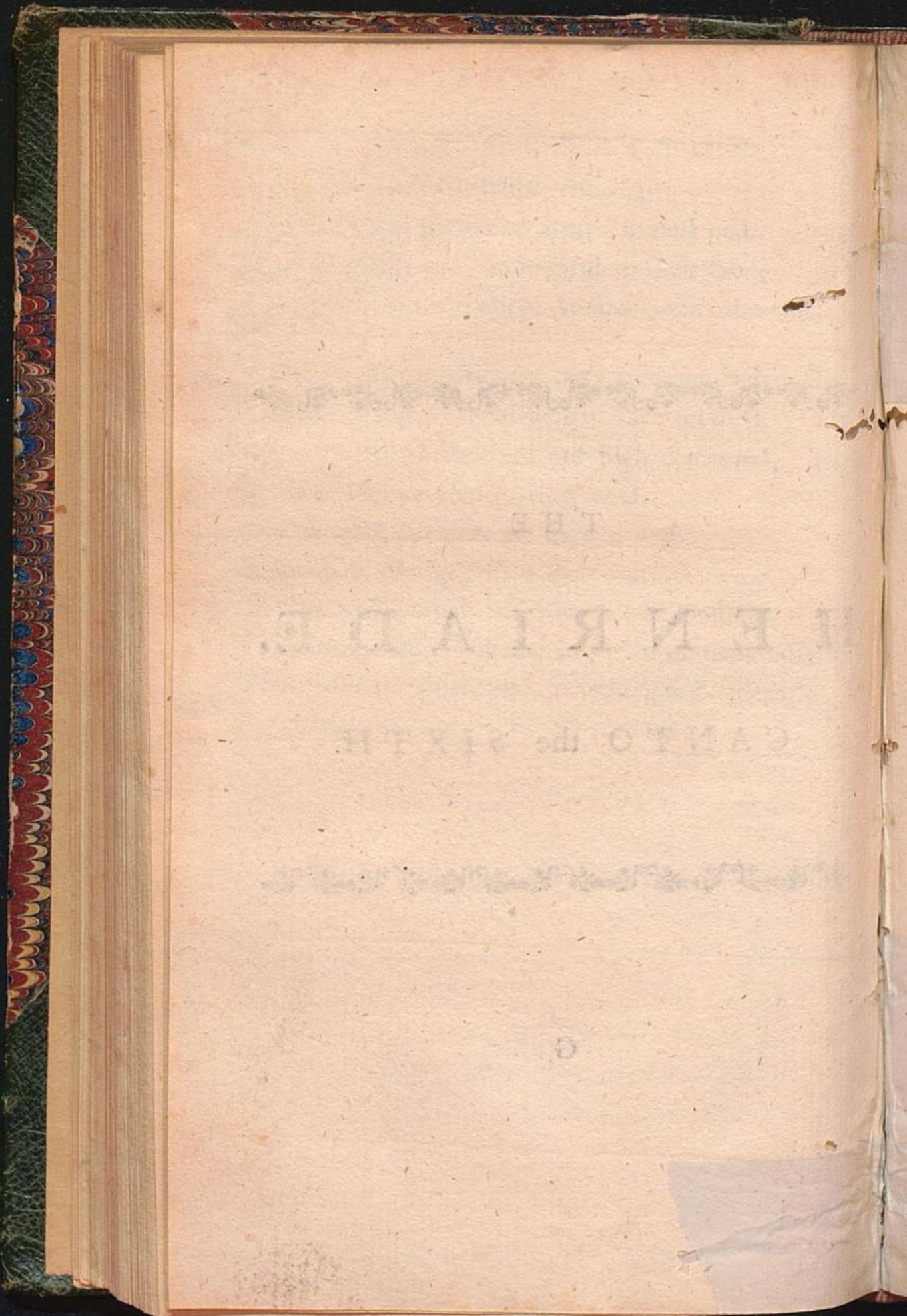


THE
HENRIADE.

CANTO the SIXTH.



G



THE ARGUMENT.

After the death of Henry III. the Leaguers assemble in Paris to elect a king. In the midst of their debates, Henry IV. storms the city. The assembly is dismissed. The members that composed it repair to the ramparts. Description of the ensuing battle.

THE ARGUMENT.

After the death of Henry III. the Emperor's efforts in
Paris to elect a king. In the night of this election
Henry IV. entered the city. The emperor is obliged
to withdraw, but cannot get up as the emperor
is obliged to his going home.

62

THE
HENRIADE.

CANTO the SIXTH.

IN France an ancient custom we retain,
When death's rude stroke has closed the monarch's
reign,

When destiny cuts short the smooth descent,
And all the royal pedigree is spent,
The people to their former rights restor'd, 5
May change the laws or chuse their future lord.

The states in council represent the whole,
Elect the king, and limit his controul ;
Thus our renown'd forefathers did ordain
That Capet should succeed to Charlemagne. 10

The League with vain presumption arrogates
This right, and hastens to convene the states.

G 3

They

They thought the murder of the king bestow'd
 That pow'r perhaps, on those who shed his blood,
 Thought that the semblance of a throne would
 shroud

15

Their dark designs, and captivate the croud,
 Would help their jarring counsels to unite,
 And give their foul pretence an air of right;
 That from what source so'er his claim may spring,
 Just or unjust, a king is still a king,
 And worthy or unworthy of the sway,
 A Frenchman must have something to obey.

20

Swift to the Louvre with imperious air
 And fierce demeanour the proud chiefs repair;
 Thither whom Spain embassador had sent,
 And Rome, with many a priestly bigot went,
 To speed th' election with tumultuous haste,
 An insult on the kings of ages past,
 And in the splendor of their trains, expence
 Was seen, the child of public indigence.
 No princely potentate or high-born peer
 Sprung from our old nobility, was there,
 Their grandeur now a shadowy form alone,
 Though lawgivers by birth and kinsmen of the throne.

30

No

No sage assertors of the public claim 35
 Strenuous and hardy, from the commons came,
 No lilies as of old the court array'd,
 But foreign pomp and pageant in their stead.
 There sumptuous o'er the throne for May'ne prepar'd,
 A canopy of royal state was rear'd, 40
 And on the front with rich embroid'ry graced,
 Oh dire indignity! these lines were traced.
 "Kings of the earth, and judges of mankind,
 "Who deaf to mercy, by no laws confin'd,
 "Lay nature waste beneath your fierce domain, 45
 "Let Valois' fate instruct you how to reign."

Forthwith contentious rage with jarring sound,
 And clam'rous strife discordant eccho round.
 Slave to the smiles of Rome, obsequious here
 A venal flatt'rer soothes the legates ear; 50
 'Tis time, he cries, the lily should bow down
 Her head, obedient to the triple crown,
 Time that the church should lift her chast'ning hand,
 And from her high tribunal scourge the land.

Line. 54. The dukes of Guise wanted to establish the inquisition in France.

Cruel tribunal ! scene of monkish pow'r, 55
 Which ev'n the realms that suffer it, abhor ;
 Whose fiery priests by bigotry prepar'd,
 Torture and death without remorse award,
 Disgraceful to the sacred cause they guard,
 As if mankind were, as of old, possess'd, 60
 With pagan blindness, when the lying priest
 T'appease the wrath of heav'n with vengeance fir'd,
 The sacrifice of human blood requir'd.

Some for Iberian gold betray the state,
 And sell it to the Spaniard whom they hate. 65
 But mightier than the rest, their pow'r was shewn,
 Who destin'd May'ne already to the throne.
 The splendour of a crown was wanting yet,
 To make the fullness of his fame complete ;
 To that bright goal his daring wish he sends, 70
 Nor heeds the danger that on kings attends.

Then Potier rose ; plain, nervous and untaught
 His eloquence, the language of his thought.
 No blemish of the times had touch'd the sage,
 Rever'd for virtue in a vicious age ; 75
 Oft had he check'd, with courage uncontroul'd,
 The tide of faction headlong as it roll'd,

Afferte

Afferted hardily the laws he loved,
Nor ever fear'd reproof, or was reprov'd.

He rais'd his voice; struck silent at the sound 80
The croud was hush'd, and list'ning gather'd round.

So when at sea the winds have ceas'd to roar,
And the loud sailer's cries are heard no more,
No sound survives, but of the dashing prow
That cleaves with prosp'rous course th' obedient wave
below. 85

Such Potier seem'd; no rude disturbance broke
Th' attentive calm, while freely thus he spoke.

“ May'ne, I perceive then, has the gen'ral voice,
“ And though I praise not, can excuse your choice;
“ His virtues I esteem not less than you, 90
“ And were I free to chuse, might chuse him too.
“ But if the laws ambitious he pervert,
“ His claim of empire cancels his desert.”

Thus far the sage; when lo! that instant May'ne
Himself appear'd, with all a monarch's train. 95

“ Prince! he pursued, and spoke it boldly forth,
“ I dare oppose you, for I know your worth;

G 5

“ Dare

" Dare step between your merit and the throne,
 " Warm in the cause of France, and in our own.
 " Vain your election were, your right unsound, 100
 " While yet in France a Bourbon may be found
 " Heav'n in its wisdom placed you near the throne,
 " That you might guard but not usurp the crown;
 " His ashes sprinkled with a monarch's gore
 " The shade of injured Guise can ask no more; 105
 " Point not your vengeance then at Henry's head,
 " Nor charge him with the blood he never shed.
 " Heav'n's influence on you both too largely flows,
 " And 'tis your rival virtue makes you foes.
 " But hark! the clamour of the common herd 110
 " Ascends the skies, and heretick's the word;
 " And see the priesthood ranged in dark array,
 " To deeds of blood insatiate urge their way!
 " Barbarians hold — what custom yet unknown,
 " What law, or rather frenzy of your own, 115 }
 " Can cancel your allegiance to the throne.
 " Comes he, this Henry, savage and unjust,
 " To'erthrow your shrines, and mix them with the
 dust?
 " He, to those shrines in search of truth he flies,
 " And loves the sacred laws yourselves despise; 120

" Virtue

“ Virtue alone, whatever form she wears,
 “ Whatever sect she graces he reveres;
 “ Nor like yourselves, weak, arrogant and blind,
 “ Dares do the work of God, and judge mankind;
 “ More righteous, and more christian far than you, 125
 “ He comes to rule, but to forgive you too.
 “ And shall you judge your master, and shall he,
 “ The friend of freedom, not himself be free?
 “ Not such, alas! nor sullied with your crimes,
 “ Were the true christian race of elder times; 130
 “ They tho’ all heathen errors they abhorred,
 “ Serv’d without murmuring their heathen lord,
 “ The doom of death without a groan obey’d,
 “ And bless’d the cruel hand by which they bled:
 “ Such are the christians whom true faith assures, 135
 “ They died to serve their kings, you murder yours,
 “ And God, whom you describe for ever prone
 “ To wrath, if he delights to show’r it down
 “ On guilty heads, shall aim it at your own, }

He clos’d his bold harrangue, confusion scar’d 140
 Their conscions souls, none answer’d him, or dar’d;
 In vain they would have shaken from their hearts,
 The dread which truth to guiltiness imparts,

With

With fear and rage their troubled thoughts were tofs'd,
 When sudden a loud shout from all their host 145
 Was heard, to arms, to arms or we are lost.

Dark clouds of dust in floating volumes rise
 Wide o'er the champian, and obscure the skies;
 The clarion and the drum with horrid sound,
 Dread harbingers of slaughter eccho round. 150
 So from his gloomy chambers in the north,
 When the fierce spirit of the storm breaks forth,
 His dusky pinions shroud the noon-day light,
 And thunder and sharp winds attend his dreary flight.

'Twas Henry's host came shouting from afar, 155
 Disdaining ease, and eager for the war;
 O'er the wide plain they stretch'd their bright array,
 And to the ramparts urged their furious way.

These hours the chief vouchsaf'd not to consume
 In empty rites perform'd at Valois' tomb, 160
 Unprofitable tribute! fondly paid
 By the proud living to th' unconscious dead;
 No lofty dome, or monumental pile,
 On the waste shore he rais'd with fruitless toil,

Vain

T H E H E N R I A D E. 133

Vain arts ! to rescue the departed great, 165
From the rough tooth of time and rage of fate ;
A nobler meed on Valois' shade below,
And worthier gifts he hasten'd to bestow,
T' avenge his murder, make rebellion cease,
And rule the subjugated land in peace. 170

The din of battle gath'ring at their gates,
Dissolv'd their council, and dispers'd the states.
Swift from the walls to view th' advancing host
The gen'ral flew, the soldier to his post,
With shouts th' approaching hero they incense, 175
And all is ripe for onset and defence.

Tho' pleasure now, and peace securely reign
In all her courts, not such was Paris then,
But girt with massy walls, and unexpos'd,
An hundred forts the narrower town inclos'd; 180
The suburbs now defenceless and unbarr'd,
The gentle hand of peace their only guard,
Adorn'd with all the pomp that wealth supplies,
Proud spires and palaces that pierce the skies,
Were then a cluster of rude huts alone, 185 }
A rampart all around of earth was thrown,
With a deep foss to part them from the town. }

From

From th'east the mighty chief his march began,
 And death with hasty strides came foremost in his van.
 Wing'd with red flames impetuous from on high 190
 And from below, the show'ry bullets fly,
 The rattling storm resistless thickens round,
 And tumbles tow'r and bastion to the ground ;
 Gor'd and defaced the gay battalions bleed,
 And on the plain their shatter'd limbs are spread. 195

In earlier times, unaided and untaught,
 His fate by simpler means the soldier wrought ;
 Strength against strength oppos'd the contest tried,
 And on their swords alone the combatants relied ;
 More cruel wars their children learn'd to wage, 200
 Nor less than light'ning satisfied their rage.
 Then first was heard the thunder-bearing bomb,
 Imprison'd mischief dragging in it's womb,
~~down~~ on the destin'd mark the pond'rous shell
 Came down, and spread destruction where it fell. 205

Next, dire improvement on the barb'rous trade,
 In hollow vaults the secret mine was laid ;
 In vain the warrior trusting in his might,
 Speeds his bold march, and seeks the promis'd fight,

A sudden blast divides the yawning earth, 210
 And the black vapour kindles into birth,
 Smote by strange thunder sinks th'astonish'd host,
 Deep in the dark abyfs for ever loft.

These dangers Bourbon unappall'd defies,
 Impatient for the strife, a throne the prize. 215
 Where'er his hardy bands the hero leads,
 'Tis hell beneath, and tempest o'er their heads,
 His glorious steps undunated they pursue,
 Fir'd by his deeds still bright'ning in their view.

Grave in the midst the valiant Mornay went, 220
 Though slow his march, intrepid his intent;
 Rage he alike disdain'd and slavish dread,
 Nor heard the thunders bursting round his head;
 War was heav'ns scourge on man, he wisely thought,
 Nor lov'd the task, but took it as his lot; 225
 Ev'n for the wonders of his sword he griev'd,
 And loath'd it for the glories it atchiev'd.

Now pour'd their legions down the dreadful way,
 Where smear'd with blood the sloping Glacis lay;
 More fierce as more in danger, with the slain, 230
 They choke the foss, and lift it to the plain,

Then

Then born upon the supple numbers, reach
 The ramparts, and rush headlong to the breach.
 Waving his bloody fauchion, Henry led
 The way, and enter'd furious at their head. 235
 Already fixt by his victorious hand
 High on the walls his glitt'ring banners stand :
 Awe-struck the Leaguers seem'd, as they implor'd
 The conqu'ror's mercy, and confess'd their lord ;
 But May'ne recalls them to their guilty part, 240
 And drives the dawning grace from ev'ry heart,
 'Till crowded in close Phalanx, they beset
 Their king, whose eye their hardiest fear'd to meet.
 Fierce on the battlements, and bathed in blood
 Of thousands slain, the fury Discord stood ; 245
 There best her horrid mandates they obey,
 And join'd in closer fight more surely slay.

Sudden the deep-mouth'd engines cease to roar,
 And the loud thunder of the war is o'er :
 At once an universal silence round, 250
 With awful pause, succeeds the deaf'ning sound ;
 Now thro' his foes the soldier cleaves his way,
 And on the sword alone depends the day ;
 Alternate the contending leaders boast
 The bloody ramparts won, and yield them lost : 255
 Still

Still victory the doubtful balance sway'd,
 And join'd in air the mingling banners play'd,
 Till oft triumphant, and as oft subdued,
 Fleer the pale League, and Henry swift pursued.
 'Tis thus the restless billows wash the shore, 260
 By turns o'erwhelm it, and by turns restore.

Then most in that tremendous hour was shewn,
 The might of Bourbon's rival, and his own;
 'Twas then each hero's warlike soul was prov'd,
 That in the shock of charging hosts unmov'd, 265
 Amidst confusion, horror and despair,
 Ranged the dread scene and ruled the doubtful war.

Mean while renown'd for many a martial deed,
 A gallant English band brave Essex led,
 In Gallia's cause with wonder they advance, 270
 And scarcely can believe they fight for France.
 On the same ramparts where the conquer'd Seine,
 Saw in old time their great forefathers reign,
 For England's sake they wage the mortal strife,
 Proud to enhance her fame, and prodigal of life. 275
 Impetuous Essex first the breach ascends,
 Where fierce D'Aumale the crowded pass defends,

To

To fight like fabled demi-gods they came,
 Their age, their ardour, and their force the same;
 French, English, Lorraine in combat close, 288
 And in one stream the mingled slaughter flows.

Oh thou! the genius of that fatal day,
 Soul of the strife, destroying angel, say,
 Whose was the triumph then, which hero's host
 Yourself assisted, and heav'n favour'd most. 285
 Long time the chiefs with rival glory crown'd,
 Dealt equal slaughter thro' the legions round;
 At length, by factious rage in vain assail'd,
 The righteous cause and Henry's arms prevail'd;
 Worn with disastrous toil and long fatigue, 290
 Exhausted, hopeless, fled the vanquish'd League.
 As on Pyrene's ever-clouded brow,
 When swelling torrents threat the vale below,
 A while with solid banks and lofty mounds,
 They stay the foaming deluge in it's bounds; 295
 But soon, the barrier broke, the rushing tide
 Roars unresisted down the mountain's side,
 Unroots the forest oaks, and bears away,
 Flocks, folds and herds, an undistinguish'd prey:
 So from the smoking walls with matchless force, 300
 Victorious Bourbon urged his rapid course,
 Such

Such havock where the royal warrior pass'd,
 Deform'd the ranks and lay'd the battle waste.
 At length the friendly gates, by May'ne's command
 Flung wide, receiv'd the desolated band. 305

The victor host around the suburbs fly
 Incens'd, and hurl the blazing torch on high,
 Their temp'rate valour kindles into rage,
 And spoil and plunder are the war they wage.
 Henry perceiv'd it not; with eager flight 310
 He chaced the foe, dispers'd before his fight;
 Spurr'd by his courage, with success elate
 And ardent joy, he reach'd the hostile gate,
 Thence on his scatter'd pow'r aloud he calls,
 "Haste, fly my friends, and scale the haughty
 walls." 315

When sudden in a rolling cloud enshin'd,
 A beauteous form came floating on the wind,
 With gracious mien and awful to the view,
 Tow'rds Henry the descending vision flew,
 His brow was with immortal splendor grac'd, 320
 And horror mixt with love his radiant eyes express'd.
 Hold hapless conqu'ror of your native land!
 The phantom cried, and stay your vengeful hand;

This

This fair dominion you with war deface,
 Is yours of old, the birthright of your race; 325
 These lives you seek, are vassals of your throne,
 This wealth you give to plunder, is your own;
 Spare your own heritage, nor seek to reign
 A solitary monarch o'er the slain.
 Amaz'd the soldier heard the solemn sound, 330
 And dropp'd his spoils, and prostrate kiss'd the ground.
 Then Henry, rage still boiling in his breast,
 Like seas hoarse—murm'ring while they sink to rest,
 Say bright inhabitant of heav'n, what means
 Your hallow'd form amidst these horrid scenes? 335
 Mild as the breeze, at summers ev'ning tide
 Serene, the visionary shape replied.
 Behold the fainted king whom France adores,
 Protector of the Bourbon race, and yours,
 That Louis, who like you once urged the fight, 340
 Whose shrines you heed not, and whose faith you
 slight;
 Know when the destin'd days their course have run,
 Heav'n shall itself conduct you to the throne;
 Thine is the vict'ry, but that great reward,
 Is for thy mercy, not thy might, prepar'd. 345

He

He spoke, the list'ning chief with rapture hears,
 And down his cheek fast flow the joyful tears;
 Peace sooth'd his tranquil heart, he dropp'd his sword,
 And on his knees devout the shade ador'd.

Then twice around his neck his arms he flung, 350
 And thrice deceiv'd on vain embraces hung;
 Light as an empty dream at break of day,
 Or as a blast of wind, he rush'd away.

Mean while in haste to guard th'invested town,
 The swarming multitude the ramparts crown, 355
 Thick from above a fiery flood they pour,
 And at the monarch aim the fatal show'r,
 But heav'n's bright influence, round his temples shed,
 Diverts the storm, and guards his sacred head.

'Twas then he saw, protected as he stood, 360
 What thanks to his paternal faint he ow'd;
 Tow'rd's Paris his sad eye in sorrow thrown,
 Ye French! he cried, and thou ill-fated town,
 Ye citizens, a blind deluded herd,
 How long will you withstand your lawful lord! 365
 Nor more; but as the star that brings the day,
 At eve declining in his western way,
 More mildly shoots his horizontal fires,
 And seems an ampler globe as he retires,

Such

Such from the walls the parting hero turn'd, 370
 While all his kindred faint within his bosom burn'd.
 Vincennes he fought, where Louis whilom spoke
 His righteous laws beneath an aged oak.
 Vincennes, alas! no more a calm retreat,
 How art thou chang'd, thou once delightful seat! 375
 Thy rural charms, thy peaceful smiles are fled,
 And blank despair possesses thee instead.
 'Tis there the great, their hapless labours done,
 And all the short-liv'd race of glory run,
 The fickle changes of their various lot 380
 Conclude, and die neglected and forgot.

Now night o'er heav'n pursued her dusty way,
 And hid in shades the horrors of the day.

374. It is well known how many illustrious prisoners the
 cardinals Richlieu and Mazarin confin'd at Vincennes.