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Remarks On The Life and Writings Of Dr. Jonathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin

Orrery, John Boyle of

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Short characters of Homer.

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tors. HOMER, says our traveller, "*was the taller, and comelier person of the two: walked very erect for one of his age, and his eyes were the most quick and piercing I ever beheld.*" It is certain, that HOMER has rather gained, than lost vigour by his years. Twenty six centuries have not unbraced his nerves, or given one wrinkle to his brow: and although GULLIVER has bestowed upon him the additional ornament of fine eyes, yet I am apt to think they made the figure of this divine old man less awful: at least I am glad that he wanted his eye sight while he lived, since it is impossible, not to conclude from the productions of HOMER and MILTON, that the *Mind's Eye* becomes more intensely discerning, when it is not interrupted by external objects. It is an old observation, that HOMER has nourished more persons than SYLLA, CÆSAR, and AUGUSTUS; and while their pictures have decayed, not a letter of the Iliad has been lost. The Grecian poet not only preserves his original form, but breathes freely, and looks beautiful in other languages: a happier metempsychosis than PYTHAGORAS ever dreamt of. However, if HOMER was absolutely obliged to wear the different dresses, which have been given to him, he would sometimes, I believe, find the motion of his limbs uneasy and confined: and would prefer his own simple attire even to the birth day suit, which our English bard has given him. The commentators have done less honour to HOMER than the translators. Some of these learned pedants have entirely wasted their observations upon particles and words: others have run into a minute exactness,

actness, in comparing the propriety of his images : while others again, have endeavoured to trace out from the Iliad and Odyssey, all the rudiments of arts and sciences. Some there are, who dwell on such narrow circumstances, as were neglected by HOMER, and can only be suitable to their own confined genius. They are not able to pursue him in his sublime flights, and attempt therefore, to bring him upon a level with themselves. Their low mechanical notions remind me of an absurd problem proposed by the famous Monsieur HUET, whether the Iliad might not be written upon vellum in so small a hand, that the whole might be contained within a nutshell? This important question is said to have engaged the thoughts and attention of the French court, and gives us a true picture of a laborious, tasteless critic upon HOMER. The Dauphin, and his train, are for putting the Iliad into a nutshell, when ALEXANDER, and his courtiers, chose the richest, and most curious cabinet of DARIUS, as the only proper repository for HOMER'S works.

HOMER and ARISTOTLE were as opposite as possible in their characters: but Dr. SWIFT has placed them together, chiefly with a view of shewing their commentators, in that just and ridiculous light, in which those scholiasts ought to appear. When an age is blessed with the productions of an uncommon genius, such as resembles HOMER, it must, in some measure, be punished by bad imitations and comments; in the same manner that you may have observed the sun by its heat and influence raising vapours, and animating insects,

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that infect and perhaps corrupt the air, in which he shines with so much lustre. But, when an original admired author, as ARISTOTLE, is really erroneous, and deceives with false specious principles, what a train of errors must arise from commentators on such subjects, who, while they endeavour to pursue and extend a pleasing enchanted prospect, that has no real foundation, deviate into a dark, disagreeable road of briers and thorns?

It is on this account that the Dean has introduced ARISTOTLE in company with HOMER. The description of that philosopher is fine, and in a few words represents the true nature of his works. "*He stooped much, and made use of a staff. His visage was meagre, his hair lank and thin, and his voice hollow.*" By not having the immortal spirit of HOMER, he was unable to keep his body erect: and the staff which weakly supported him, like his commentators, made this defect more conspicuous. He wanted not some useful qualities, but these real ornaments, like his hair, were thin and ungraceful. His style was harsh, and, like his voice, had neither force nor harmony. He was without doubt a man of great genius and penetration, but he did infinitely more prejudice than service to real literature. He studied words more than facts, and delivered his philosophy perplexed with such intricate logical terms, as have laid a foundation for the endless scholastic disputations, which have corrupted and retarded the progress of learning. He waged war with all his predecessors. He never quotes an author, except
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