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The History Of English Poetry

From The Close of the Eleventh To The Commencement of the Eighteenth
Century

Warton, Thomas

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Preface.

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P R E F A C E.

IN an age advanced to the highest degree of refinement, that species of curiosity commences, which is busied in contemplating the progress of social life, in displaying the gradations of science, and in tracing the transitions from barbarism to civility.

That these speculations should become the favourite pursuits, and the fashionable topics, of such a period, is extremely natural. We look back on the savage condition of our ancestors with the triumph of superiority; we are pleased to mark the steps by which we have been raised from rudeness to elegance: and our reflections on this subject are accompanied with a conscious pride, arising in great measure from a tacit comparison of the infinite disproportion between the feeble efforts of remote ages, and our present improvements in knowledge.

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In the mean time, the manners, monuments, customs, practices, and opinions of antiquity, by forming so strong a contrast with those of our own times, and by exhibiting human nature and human inventions in new lights, in unexpected appearances, and in various forms, are objects which forcibly strike a feeling imagination.

Nor does this spectacle afford nothing more than a fruitless gratification to the fancy. It teaches us to set a just estimation on our own acquisitions; and encourages us to cherish that cultivation, which is so closely connected with the existence and the exercise of every social virtue.

On these principles, to develope the dawning of genius, and to pursue the progress of our national poetry, from a rude origin and obscure beginnings, to its perfection in a polished age, must prove an interesting and instructive investigation. But a history of poetry, for another reason, yet on the same principles, must be more especially productive of entertainment and utility. I mean, as it is an art, whose object is human society: as it has the peculiar merit, in its operations on that object, of faithfully recording the features of the times, and of pre-
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erving the most picturesque and expressive representations of manners: and, because the first monuments of composition in every nation are those of the poet, as it possesses the additional advantage of transmitting to posterity genuine delineations of life in its simplest stages. Let me add, that anecdotes of the rudiments of a favourite art will always be particularly pleasing. The more early specimens of poetry must ever amuse, in proportion to the pleasure which we receive from its finished productions.

Much however depends on the execution of such a design, and my readers are to decide in what degree I have done justice to so specious and promising a disquisition. Yet a few more words will not be perhaps improper, in vindication, or rather in explanation, of the manner in which my work has been conducted. I am sure I do not mean, nor can I pretend, to apologise for its defects.

I have chose to exhibit the history of our poetry in a chronological series: not distributing my matter into detached articles, of periodical divisions, or of general heads. Yet I have not always adhered so scrupulously to the regularity of annals, but that I

have often deviated into incidental digressions ; and have sometimes stopped in the course of my career, for the sake of recapitulation, for the purpose of collecting scattered notices into a single and uniform point of view, for the more exact inspection of a topic which required a separate consideration, or for a comparative survey of the poetry of other nations.

A few years ago, Mr. MASON, with that liberality which ever accompanies true genius, gave me an authentic copy of Mr. POPE's scheme of a History of English Poetry, in which our poets were classed under their supposed respective schools. The late lamented Mr. GRAY had also projected a work of this kind, and translated some Runic odes for its illustration, now published : but soon relinquishing the prosecution of a design, which would have detained him from his own noble inventions, he most obligingly condescended to favour me with the substance of his plan, which I found to be that of Mr. POPE, considerably enlarged, extended, and improved.

It is vanity in me to have mentioned these communications. But I am apprehensive my vanity will justly be thought much greater, when it shall appear, that in giving the history of English poetry,
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I have rejected the ideas of men who are its most distinguished ornaments. To confess the real truth, upon examination and experiment, I soon discovered their mode of treating my subject, plausible as it is, and brilliant in theory, to be attended with difficulties and inconveniencies, and productive of embarrassment both to the reader and the writer. Like other ingenious systems, it sacrificed much useful intelligence to the observance of arrangement; and in the place of that satisfaction which results from a clearness and a fulness of information, seemed only to substitute the merit of disposition, and the praise of contrivance. The constraint imposed by a mechanical attention to this distribution, appeared to me to destroy that free exertion of research with which such a history ought to be executed, and not easily reconcilable with that complication, variety, and extent of materials, which it ought to comprehend.

The method I have pursued, on one account at least, seems preferable to all others. My performance, in its present form, exhibits without transposition the gradual improvements of our poetry, at the same time that it uniformly represents the progression of our language.

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Some perhaps will be of opinion, that these annals ought to have commenced with a view of the Saxon poetry. But besides that a legitimate illustration of that jejune and intricate subject would have almost doubled my labour, that the Saxon language is familiar only to a few learned antiquaries, that our Saxon poems are for the most part little more than religious rhapsodies, and that scarce any compositions remain marked with the native images of that people in their pagan state, every reader that reflects but for a moment on our political establishment must perceive, that the Saxon poetry has no connection with the nature and purpose of my present undertaking. Before the Norman accession, which succeeded to the Saxon government, we were an unformed and an unsettled race. That mighty revolution obliterated almost all relation to the former inhabitants of this island; and produced that signal change in our policy, constitution, and public manners, the effects of which have reached modern times. The beginning of these annals seems therefore to be most properly dated from that era, when our national character began to dawn.

It was recommended to me, by a person eminent in the republic of letters, totally to exclude from these

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these volumes any mention of the English drama. I am very sensible that a just history of our Stage is alone sufficient to form an entire and extensive work; and this argument, which is by no means precluded by the attempt here offered to the public, still remains separately to be discussed, at large, and in form. But as it was professedly my intention to comprise every species of English Poetry, this, among the rest, of course claimed a place in these annals, and necessarily fell into my general design. At the same time, as in this situation it could only become a subordinate object, it was impossible I should examine it with that critical precision and particularity, which so large, so curious, and so important an article of our poetical literature demands and deserves. To have considered it in its full extent, would have produced the unwieldy excrescence of a disproportionate episode: not to have considered it at all, had been an omission, which must detract from the integrity of my intended plan. I flatter myself however, that from evidences hitherto unexplored, I have recovered hints which may facilitate the labours of those, who shall hereafter be inclined to investigate the antient state of dramatic exhibition in this country, with due comprehension and accuracy.

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It will probably be remarked, that the citations in the first volume are numerous, and sometimes very prolix. But it should be remembered, that most of these are extracted from antient manuscript poems never before printed, and hitherto but little known. Nor was it easy to illustrate the darker and more distant periods of our poetry, without producing ample specimens. In the mean time, I hope to merit the thanks of the antiquarian, for enriching the stock of our early literature by these new accessions: and I trust I shall gratify the reader of taste, in having so frequently rescued from oblivion the rude inventions and irregular beauties of the heroic tale, or the romantic legend.

The design of the DISSERTATIONS is to prepare the reader, by considering apart, in a connected and comprehensive detail, some material points of a general and preliminary nature, and which could not either with equal propriety or convenience be introduced, at least not so formally discussed, in the body of the book; to establish certain fundamental principles to which frequent appeals might occasionally be made, and to clear the way for various observations arising in the course of my future enquiries.

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