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In Four Volumes

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N^o 58. *Monday, May 7.*

Ut pictura, poesis erit-----

Hor.

Nothing is so much admired, and so little understood, as Wit. No Author that I know of has written professedly upon it; as for those who make any mention of it, they only treat on the subject as it has accidentally fallen in their way, and that too in little short reflections, or in general declamatory flourishes, without entering into the bottom of the matter. I hope therefore I shall perform an acceptable work to my Countrymen, if I treat at large upon this subject; which I shall endeavour to do in a manner suitable to it, that I may not incur the censure which a famous Critick bestows upon one who had written a Treatise upon *the Sublime* in a low groveling style. I intend to lay aside a whole week for this undertaking, that the scheme of my thoughts may not be broken and interrupted; and I dare promise my self, if my Readers will give me a week's attention, that this great City will be very much changed for the better by next *Saturday* night. I shall endeavour to make what I say intelligible to ordinary capacities; but if my Readers meet with any paper that in some parts of it may be a little out of their reach, I would not have them discouraged, for they may assure themselves the next shall be much clearer.

As the great and only end of these Speculations is to banish vice and ignorance out of the territories of *Great Britain*, I shall endeavour as much as possible to establish among us a taste of polite writing. It is with this view that I have endeavoured to set my Readers right in several points relating to Opera's and Tragedies; and shall from time to time impart my notions of Comedy, as I think they may tend to its refinement and perfection. I find by my Bookseller that these papers of Criticism, with that upon Humour, have met with a more kind reception than indeed I could have hoped for from such subjects; for which reason I shall enter upon my present undertaking with greater cheerfulness.

VOL. II.

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In

In this, and one or two following papers, I shall trace out the history of false Wit, and distinguish the several kinds of it as they have prevailed in different ages of the world. This I think the more necessary at present, because I observed there were attempts on foot last winter to revive some of those antiquated modes of Wit that have been long exploded out of the Common-wealth of Letters. There were several Satyrs and Panegyricks handed about in Acrostick, by which means some of the most arrant undisputed blockheads about the town began to entertain ambitious thoughts, and to set up for polite Authors. I shall therefore describe at length those many arts of false Wit, in which a writer does not shew himself a man of a beautiful genius, but of great industry.

The first species of false wit which I have met with, is very venerable for its antiquity, and has produced several pieces which have lived very near as long as the *Iliad* it self: I mean those short Poems printed among the minor *Greek* Poets, which resemble the figure of an Egg, a pair of Wings, an Ax, a shepherd's Pipe, and an Altar.

As for the first, it is a little oval Poem, and may not improperly be called a Scholar's egg. I would endeavour to hatch it, or, in more intelligible language, to translate it into *English*, did not I find the interpretation of it very difficult; for the Author seems to have been more intent upon the figure of his Poem, than upon the sense of it.

The pair of wings consists of twelve verses, or rather feathers, every verse decreasing gradually in its measure according to its situation in the wing. The subject of it (as in the rest of the Poems which follow) bears some remote affinity with the figure, for it describes a God of Love, who is always painted with wings.

The Ax methinks would have been a good figure for a Lampoon, had the edge of it consisted of the most satyrical parts of the work; but as it is in the original, I take it to have been nothing else but the poesie of an Ax which was consecrated to *Minerva*, and was thought to have been the same that *Epeus* made use of in the building of the *Trojan* Horse; which is a hint I shall leave to the consideration of the Criticks. I am apt to think that the Poesie was written originally upon the Ax, like those which our modern Cutlers inscribe upon their knives; and that therefore the Poesie still remains in its ancient shape, though the Ax it self is lost.

The Shepherd's pipe may be said to be full of musick, for it is composed of nine different kinds of verses, which by their several lengths resem-

resemble the nine stops of the old musical instrument, that is likewise the subject of the Poem.

The Altar is inscribed with the epitaph of *Troilus* the son of *Hecuba*; which, by the way, makes me believe, that these false pieces of wit are much more antient than the Authors to whom they are generally ascribed; at least I will never be persuaded, that so fine a writer as *Theocritus* could have been the Author of any such simple works.

It was impossible for a man to succeed in these performances who was not a kind of Painter, or at least a Designer: he was first of all to draw the out-line of the subject which he intended to write upon, and afterwards conform the description to the figure of his subject. The Poetry was to contract or dilate it self according to the mould in which it was cast. In a word, the verses were to be cramped or extended to the dimensions of the frame that was prepared for them; and to undergo the fate of those persons whom the Tyrant *Procrustes* used to lodge in his iron bed; if they were too short, he stretched them on a rack, and if they were too long, chopped off a part of their legs, till they fitted the couch which he had prepared for them.

Mr. *Dryden* hints at this obsolete kind of wit in one of the following Verses in his *Mac Fleckno*; which an *English* reader cannot understand, who does not know that there are those little Poems abovementioned in the shape of Wings and Altars.

—Chuse for thy command
Some peaceful Province in Acrostick land;
There may'st thou Wings display, and Altars raise,
And torture one poor word a thousand ways.

This fashion of false wit was revived by several Poets of the last age, and in particular may be met with among Mr. *Herbert's* Poems; and, if I am not mistaken, in the translation of *Du Bartas*. I do not remember any other kind of work among the moderns which more resembles the performances I have mentioned, than that famous picture of King *Charles* the First, which has the whole book of *Psalms* written in the lines of the face and the hair of the head. When I was last at *Oxford* I perused one of the whiskers; and was reading the other, but could not go so far in it as I would have done, by reason of the impatience of my friends and fellow-travellers, who all of them pressed to see such a piece of curiosity. I have since heard, that there is now an eminent writing-master in town, who has transcribed all the *Old Testament* in a full-bottomed perriwig;

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and

and if the fashion should introduce the thick kind of Whigs which were in vogue some few years ago, he promises to add two or three supernumerary locks that shall contain all the *Apocrypha*. He designed this Wig originally for King *William*, having disposed of the two books of *Kings* in the two forks of the foretop; but that glorious Monarch dying before the Wig was finished, there is a space left in it for the face of any one that has a mind to purchase it.

But to return to our ancient Poems in picture, I would humbly propose, for the benefit of our modern smatterers in Poetry, that they would imitate their brethren among the antients in those ingenious devices. I have communicated this thought to a young poetical Lover of my acquaintance, who intends to present his Mistress with a copy of verses made in the shape of her fan; and, if he tells me true, has already finished the three first sticks of it. He has likewise promised me to get the measure of his Mistress's marriage-finger, with a design to make a poeie in the fashion of a ring which shall exactly fit it. It is so very easie to enlage upon a good hint, that I do not question but my ingenious Readers will apply what I have said to many other particulars; and that we shall see the Town filled in a very little time with poetical tippetts, handkerchiefs, snuff-boxes, and the like female ornaments. I shall therefore conclude with a word of advice to those admirable *English* Authors who call themselves Pindarick writers, that they would apply themselves to this kind of wit without loss of time, as being provided better than any other Poets with verses of all sizes and dimensions.

N^o 59. *Tuesday, May 8.*

Operosè nihil agunt.

Sen.

THERE is nothing more certain than that every man would be a Wit if he could, and notwithstanding Pedants of pretended depth and solidity are apt to decry the writings of a polite Author, as *Flash* and *Froth*, they all of them shew upon occasion that they would spare no pains to arrive at the character of those whom they seem to despise.