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Literary Notices: Book Review of Alessandro Manzoni's I Promessi Sposi, or the Betrothed Lovers

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Napoleon of the realms of criticism,” as to congratulate our readers on the appearance of a work, which promises to be the commencement of a new style in novel writing. Since the days of Fielding, unimitated and inimitable—and of Smollett, between whose different productions there was a nearer family likeness, we have had a succession of dynasties reigning over the regions of romance. We have had the Satirical dynasty, the Edgeworth dynasty, and the Scott dynasty; each, like the family of the Csesars, passing from good to bad, and from bad to worse, until each has run out. Parallel movements in the provinces have occasionally set up the standard of rival aspirants: but these have soon passed away. Heroines from the bogies, and heroes from the highlands of Scotland, or the Polish wilds, could not maintain their pretensions, though uniting in themselves all that is admirable both in the civilized and the savage character. Perhaps this was the reason. We like to read of things that may a little remind us of what we have seen in real life. Sir Charles Grandison and the Scottish Kilt, is a startling apparition.

The younger D'Arblon has indeed, occasionally flashed upon us the light of his capricious genius; but one of his caprices has been to disappoint the hope that he had raised. He has shown us what he could do, and that is all. Mr. Bulwer too, in a sort of freak of literary radicalism, has set up for himself. He speeded to add to the number of those who dress themselves in the cast-off habiliments of Scott; and, study, as at a guess, to make themselves like him, as if ambitious to display their thens. He learned the craft of plagiarism in the Spartan school, where detection was the only displeasure. He would not steal, not be, from any but “the poor man, who had nothing save one little ewe lamb, that lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter.” He would imitate none but himself, and draw from no other models. His novels are all echoes of each other. There is hardly a page which might not be known for his, nor a favorite character which is not an exhibition of one of the phases of his exquisite self. The variety is between what he imagines himself to be, and what he imagines that he might have been, had he been a cavalier of the seventeenth century, or had circumstances made him a highwayman or a murderer. We are aware that he denies all this, and may be unconvinced of it; but his identity can no more be mistaken than that of the one-eyed companion of Hogarth’s &quot;Idle Apprentice.” We are aware too, that Mr. Bulwer is a member of a certain literary cabal, who aspire to direct the public taste, and bring all the influences of wealth and fashion and political connexion in aid of their pretensions. He is a sort of literary Jack Cade. A &quot;His mouth is the law.” We know that the &quot;amphibion on Fon dire” is always the true amphibion. But we never expect to travel as enterers for a public journal. We in the south do not do that sort of thing. We are not taught so to “raise the wind.” We are not up to peripatetic motion, nor to the art of making our living by taking our pleasure. We feel ourselves therefore under no obligation to admire Mr. Roger’s poems, though he be a banker—not Mr. Bulwer’s novels, nor himself, though he be a member of Parliament; nor though his female doahere Lady Blessington, “have the finest feet,” and “the prettiest foot,” and be “the finest woman in London.” We do not put the names

LITERARY NOTICES.


The appearance of this work strongly reminds us of the introductory remarks with which the Edinburgh Review, thirty years ago, prefaced its announcement of Waverley. We would gladly appropriate them, were it fair to do so; but “honor among thieves!” Reviewers must not steal from Reviewers; and what is it but theft, when he who borrows, can never have anything worthy of acceptance to give in return?

We may, nevertheless, so far imitate “the grand...
of our fine women in the newspapers. The business of female education with us, is not to qualify a woman to be the head of a literary estate, nor to figure in the journal of a travelling coxcomb. We prepare her, as a mother, to form her son to walk in his father's steps, and in turn, to take his place among the good and wise and great. When we have done this, we have accomplished, if not all, at least the best that education can do. Her praise is found in the happiness of her husband, and in the virtues and honors of her sons. Her name is too sacred to be profaned by public breath. She is only seen by that dim doubtful light, which, like "the majesty of darkness," so much enhances true dignity. She finds her place by the side of the "Mother of the Gracchi," and of her whom an English poet, who well knew how to appreciate and how to praise female excellence, has simply designated as "Mutter der Mutter." We much fear, that after all this, the author of the work before us will have no reason to thank us for our praise. On the contrary, there may be danger of involving him in the displeasure, which we may draw upon ourselves from that same cauldron, which has its members on both sides of the Atlantic. "Ca me; Ca thee," is the order of the day. If half the praise be due, which is lavished on the works that daily issue from the press, we may live to see the writings which instructed and delighted our youth, laid on the same shelf with Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. Men can no more read everything than they can eat everything; and the petits plats, that are handed round hot and hot, leave us no room to do honor to the roast beef of old England, nor to the savoury Virginia lawn. But these are the food by which the thews and sinews of mankind are best nourished. They at once exercise and help digestion. Dyspepsia was not of the day. It came in with French Gastronomy. Are we mistaken in thinking, that we see symptoms of a sort of intellectual dyspepsia, arising from the incessant exhibition of the bonbons and kickshaws of the press? Well! here is something that will stick by the ribs; a work of which we would try to give a sort of outline, would gladly grace our pages with it. It would probably be too much to say that this novel is, in every sense of the word, original. The writer is obviously familiar with English literature, and seems to have taken at least one hint from Sir Walter Scott. The use made by that writer of the records and traditions of his times gone by, has suggested this hint. It naturally occurred to Manzoni, a native of Italy, that much of the same sort of material was to be found among the archives of the petty Italian states, now blotted from the map of Europe. It is obvious that the collisions of small states, though less interesting to the politician than those of mighty nations, must afford more occasion for the display of individual characters, and the exercise of those passions which give romance its highest interest. But what is known of great and good men who nobly acted their parts in these scenes, when the very theatre of their acts is crushed and buried beneath the rubbish of revolution? To drag them from beneath the ruins, and permit the world to dwell for a moment on the contemplation of their virtues is a pious and praiseworthy task. It is and to think how that cheered the last moments of the patriot and the hero. "For his country he lived, for his country he died!" his country was all to him; but his country has perished, and his name has perished with it. With the civil wars of England we are all familiar; and our hearts have glowed, and our tears have fallen, in contemplating the virtues and the sufferings of those who acted in those scenes; but, if we may credit the traditions imbedded in this book, a contemporary history of the Italian Republics would display characters yet more worthy of our admiration and our sympathy. The Cardinal Borromeo is an historical character. The writer obviously means to paint him as he was; and the annals of mankind may be searched in vain for a more glorious example of the purity, the enthusiasm, and the inspiration of virtue.

We might suspect that something of a zeal for the honor of the Romish Church had mingled itself in the rich coloring of this picture. But Manzoni was as much alive, as Luther himself, to the abuses of that church. In an episode, which will be found at page fifty-eight, he discloses some, of the precise character of which we were not hitherto aware. We knew that something was wrong, but what that something might be, was never certainly known. The author has unveiled the mystery. He has withdrawn a curtain, behind which we had never been permitted to look. We had guessed, and we had read the guesses of others; but we never knew precisely what was there. The monstero coercion, more cruel than bodily torture, by which a poor girl, the victim of the heartless pride of her parents, without command, without even persuasion, (for both it seems are forbidden) is driven to the cloister, that her brother may have more ample means of the press? dealing with conjectures. We turn to the scene exhibited in this work, and we know it to be real life. We would gladly grace our pages with it. It would probably be read with more interest than any thing we can say; but it is before the public, and we have no right to discharge our debts to our readers, by giving them what is theirs already. We will only pray their indulgence so far as to offer a short extract, as a specimen of the writer's power. It is a picture of some of the horrors of the plague, as it raged in Milan in the year 1628. It may serve to show us that the pestilence, which lately stooped upon us, was in comparison, an angel of mercy.

The ears spoken of in the following extract, are those in which the unconfined bodies of the dead were borne to a common receptacle, "asked for the most part, some badly wrapped up in dirty rags, heaped up and folded together like a knot of serpents." The "monastri" were men who, having had the plague, were considered exempt from future danger, and were employed to bury the dead.

"A lady came from the threshold of one of the houses, whose aspect announced youth advanced, but not yet passed away. Her beauty was obscure, but
sort of beauty, at once majestic and soft, which is so
conspicuous in the Lombard race. She walked with
pain, but did not stagger; her eyes shed no tears, but
bore marks of having done so abundantly. There
was, in her grief, a something inexpressibly quiet and
deep, betokening a soul imbued and filled with it. But
it was not her own appearance alone, that in the midst
of so much wretchedness, marked her especially for
commiseration, and awakened in her favor a feeling
now deadened and worn out in all hearts. She bore in
her arms a girl about nine years old,—dead, but dresscd
in a white frock of spotless purity, with her hair di­
Now, for the last time. 'Adieu, Cecilia! Rest in peace!
Having said this, she re-entered the house, and
presently appeared at the window, holding in her arms
a still younger darling, alive, but with the marks of
death on its face. She stood, as if contemplating the
unworthy obsequies of the first, until the car moved,
and while it remained in sight, and then she disappear­
ed. What remained, but to lay her only surviving
lalse upon the bed, place herself by her side, and die
with her; even as the stately blossom, with the bud
beside it on its stem, falls before the seythe that levels
all the plants in the meadow?

This is a great fault. In some instances it would be
unpunishable. In this instance, perhaps, it is more
than compensated by a kindred excellence. In a work
like this, abounding in the untranslatable phrases of
popular dialogue, it gives a quaint raciness which is not
unacceptable. It does more. Such translations of each
work, would soon make the English ear familiar with
Italian idioms, which once naturalized, would enrich
the language. It is already thus incalculably enriched
by the poetry of Burns and the novels of Scott. A fa­
miliarity with Shakespeare, (which is not the English
of the present day,) preserves a store of wealth which
would else be lost. The strength of a language is in
the number and variety of its idiomatic phrases. These
are forms of speech which use has rendered familiar,
and emancipated from the crippling restraint of regular
grammar. They enable the speaker to be brief, with­
out being obscure. His meaning, elastically expressed,
is distinctly and precisely understood. Should any
other work of Manzoni fall into the hands of Mr.
Featherstonhaugh, we hope he may have time to cor­
rect these inaccuracies of which he is doubtless sensible;
but we trust he will not consider his popular Italian
idioms as among his faults. Smollett, in his translation
of Don Quixotte, through extreme fastidiousness, threw
away an opportunity of doubling the force of the Eng­
lish language.

This work comes to us as the harbinger of glorious
things to the reading world. Here is a book, equal in
matter to any two of Cooper's novels, and executed at
least as well, which we receive at the moderate price of
forty-two cents! It forms one number of the Wash­
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There is a power in this to which we do not scruple
to give great praise. We regret to say that the trans­
lation has many faults. We lament it the more, be­
cause they are obviously faults of haste. The trans­
lator, we fear, was hungry; a misfortune with which
we know how to sympathize. The style is, for the
most part, Italian, in English words, but Italian still.

A coarse monnlti drew near the lady, and silently
offered to relieve her from her burthen, but with an air
of unwonted respect and involuntary hesitance. But
she, with an action betokening neither disgust nor
scorn, drew back, and said, 'No; do not touch her
now; I must lay her on that car myself; take this.'
She opened her hand, showed a pulse, and dropped it
into his. She then continued: 'Promise me not to
remove her from this spot, nor allow any other to do so,
then with an obsequious zeal, the eye like one subdued
by a new and strange emotion, then as if prompted by
the unexpected gift, he busied himself to make room
for the little corpse. The lady placed her

and while it remained in sight, and then she disappear­
ed. What remained, but to lay her only surviving
lalse upon the bed, place herself by her side, and die
with her; even as the stately blossom, with the bud
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