

THE  
**EDINBURGH MAGAZINE,**

AND

*LITERARY MISCELLANY;*

A NEW SERIES

OF THE

**SCOTS MAGAZINE.**

JULY—DECEMBER, 1818.

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*Ne quid falsi dicere audeat, ne quid veri non audeat.*

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EDINBURGH MAGAZINE,  
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SEPTEMBER 1818.

ORIGINAL COMMUNICATIONS.

ON FASHION.

"Born of nothing, begot of nothing."

"His garment neither was of silk nor say,  
But painted plumes in goodly order dight,  
Like as the sun-burnt Indians do array  
Their tawny bodies in their proudest  
plight:

As those same plumes, so seem'd he vain  
and light,

That by his gait might easily appear;  
For still he far'd as dancing in delight,  
And in his hands a windy fan did bear,  
That in the idle air he mov'd still here and  
there."

FASHION is an odd jumble of contradictions, of sympathies and antipathies. It exists only by its being participated among a certain number of persons, and its essence is destroyed by being communicated to a greater number. It is a continual struggle between "the great vulgar and the small," to get the start of or keep up with each other in the race of appearances, by an adoption on the part of the one of such external and fantastic symbols as strike the attention and excite the envy or admiration of the beholder, which are no sooner made known and exposed to public view for this purpose, than they are successfully copied by the multitude, the slavish herd of imitators, who do not wish to be behind-hand with their betters in outward show and pretensions, and which then sink, without any farther notice, into disrepute and contempt. Thus fashion lives only in a perpetual round of giddy innovation and restless vanity. To be old fashioned is the greatest crime a coat or a hat can be guilty of. To look like nobody else is a sufficiently mortifying reflection; to be in danger of

being mistaken for one of the rabble is worse. Fashion constantly begins and ends in the two things it abhors most, singularity and vulgarity. It is the perpetual setting up and disowning a certain standard of taste, elegance, and refinement, which has no other foundation or authority than that it is the prevailing distinction of the moment, which was yesterday ridiculous from its being new, and tomorrow will be odious from its being common. It is one of the most slight and insignificant of all things. It cannot be lasting, for it depends on the constant change and shifting of its own harlequin disguises; it cannot be sterling; for, if it were, it could not depend on the breath of caprice; it must be superficial, to produce its immediate effect on the gaping crowd; and frivolous, to admit of its being assumed at pleasure by the numbers of those who affect, by being in the fashion, to be distinguished from the rest of the world. It is not any thing in itself, nor the sign of any thing but the folly and vanity of those who rely upon it as their greatest pride and ornament. It takes the firmest hold of the most flimsy and narrow minds, of those whose emptiness conceives of nothing excellent but what is thought so by others, and whose self-conceit makes them willing to confine the opinion of all excellence to themselves and those like them. That which is true or beautiful in itself, is not the less so for standing alone. That which is good for any thing, is the better for being more widely diffused. But fashion is the abortive issue of vain ostentation and exclusive egotism: it is haughty, trifling, affected, servile, despotic, mean, and

ambitious, precise and fantastical, all in a breath—tied to no rule, and bound to conform to every whim of the minute. “The fashion of an hour old mocks the wearer.” It is a sublimated essence of levity, caprice, vanity, extravagance, idleness, and selfishness. It thinks of nothing but not being contaminated by vulgar use, and winds and doubles like a hare, and betakes itself to the most paltry shifts to avoid being overtaken by the common hunt that are always in full chase after it. It contrives to keep up its fastidious pretensions, not by the difficulty of the attainment, but by the rapidity and evanescent nature of the changes. It is a sort of conventional badge, or understood passport into select circles, which must still be varying (like the watermark in bank-notes) not to be counterfeited by those without the pale of fashionable society; for to make the test of admission to all the privileges of that refined and volatile atmosphere depend on any real merit or extraordinary accomplishment, would exclude too many of the pert, the dull, the ignorant, too many shallow, upstart, and self-admiring pretenders, to enable the few that passed muster to keep one another in any tolerable countenance. If it were the fashion, for instance, to be distinguished for virtue, it would be difficult to set or follow the example; but then this would confine the pretension to a small number, (not the most fashionable part of the community,) and would carry a very singular air with it. Or if excellence in any art or science were made the standard of fashion, this would also effectually prevent vulgar imitation, but then it would equally prevent fashionable impertinence. There would be an obscure circle of *virtù* as well as virtue, drawn within the established circle of fashion, a little province of a mighty empire;—the example of honesty would spread slowly, and learning would still have to boast a respectable minority. But of what use would such uncourtly and out-of-the-way accomplishments be to the great and noble, the rich and the fair, without any of the *eclat*, the noise and nonsense which belong to that which is followed and admired by all the world alike? The real and solid will never do for the current coin, the common wear and

tear of foppery and fashion. It must be the meretricious, the showy, the outwardly fine, and intrinsically worthless—that which lies within the reach of the most indolent affectation, that which can be put on or off at the suggestion of the most willful caprice, and for which, through all its fluctuations, no mortal reason can be given, but that it is the newest absurdity in vogue! The shape of a head-dress, whether flat or piled (curl on curl) several stories high by the help of pins and pomatum, the size of a pair of paste buckles, the quantity of gold-lace on an embroidered waistcoat, the mode of taking a pinch of snuff or of pulling out a pocket handkerchief, the lisping and affected pronunciation of certain words, the saying *Mé'm* for *Madam*, Lord Foppington's *Tum* and *Paun honour*, with a regular set of visiting phrases and insipid sentiments ready sorted for the day, were what formerly distinguished the mob of fine gentlemen and ladies from the mob of their inferiors. These marks and appendages of gentility had their day, and were then discarded for others equally peremptory and unequivocal. But in all this chopping and changing, it is generally one folly that drives out another; one trifle that by its specific levity acquires a momentary and surprising ascendancy over the last. There is no striking deformity of appearance or behaviour that has not been made “the sign of an inward and invisible grace.” Accidental imperfections are laid hold of to hide real defects. Paint, patches, and powder, were at one time synonymous with health, cleanliness, and beauty. Obscenity, irreligion, small oaths, tipping, gaming, effeminacy in the one sex and Amazon airs in the other, any thing is the fashion, while it lasts. In the reign of Charles II. the profession and practice of every species of extravagance and debauchery were looked upon as the indispensable marks of an accomplished cavalier. Since that period the court has reformed, and has had rather a rustic air. Our belles formerly overloaded themselves with dress: of late years, they have affected to go almost naked,—“and are, when unadorned, adorned the most.” The women having left off stays, the men have taken to wear them, if we are to believe the authentic Memoirs of the Fudge Family.

The Niobe head is at present buried in the *poke* bonnet, and the French milliners and *marchands des modes* have proved themselves an overmatch for the Greek sculptors, in matters of taste and costume.

A very striking change has, however, taken place in dress of late years, and some progress has been made in taste and elegance, from the very circumstance, that, as fashion has extended its empire in that direction, it has lost its power. While fashion in dress included what was costly, it was confined to the wealthier classes: even this was an encroachment on the privileges of rank and birth, which for a long time were the only things that commanded or pretended to command respect, and we find Shakespear complaining that "the city madam bears the cost of princes on unworthy shoulders;" but, when the appearing in the top of the mode no longer depended on the power of purchasing certain expensive articles of dress, or on the right of wearing them, the rest was so obvious and easy, that any one who chose might cut as coxcombical a figure as the best. It became a matter of mere affectation on the one side, and gradually ceased to be made a matter of aristocratic assumption on the other. "In the grand carnival of this our age," among other changes this is not the least remarkable, that the monstrous pretensions to distinction in dress have dwindled away by tacit consent, and the simplest and most graceful have been in the same request with all classes. In this respect, as well as some others, "the age is grown so pick'd, the peasant's toe comes so near the courtier's heel, it galls his kibe;" a lord is hardly to be distinguished in the street from an attorney's clerk; and a plume of feathers is no longer mistaken for the highest distinction in the hand! The ideas of natural equality and the Manchester steam-engines together have, like a double battery, levelled the high towers and artificial structures of fashion in dress, and a white muslin gown is now the common costume of the mistress and the maid, instead of their wearing, as heretofore, rich silks and satins or coarse lincey-wolsey. It would be ridiculous (on a similar principle) for the courtier to take the wall of the citizen, without having a sword by his side to maintain his right

of precedence; and, from the stricter notions that have prevailed of a man's personal merit and identity, a cane dangling from his arm is the greatest extension of his figure that can be allowed to the modern *petit-maitre*.

What shews the worthlessness of mere fashion is, to see how easily this vain and boasted distinction is assumed, when the restraints of decency or circumstances are once removed, by the most uninformed and commonest of the people. I know an undertaker that is the greatest prig in the streets of London, and an Aldermanbury haberdasher, that has the most military strut of any loungee in Bond Street or St James's. We may, at any time, raise a regiment of fops from the same number of fools, who have vanity enough to be intoxicated with the smartness of their appearance, and not sense enough to be ashamed of themselves. Every one remembers the story in Peregine Pickle, of the strolling gipsy that he picked up in spite, had well scoured, and introduced her into genteel company, where she met with great applause, till she got into a passion by seeing a fine lady cheat at cards, rapt out a volley of oaths, and let nature get the better of art. Dress is the great secret of address. Clothes and confidence will set any body up in the trade of modish accomplishment. Look at the two classes of well-dressed females whom we see at the playhouse, in the boxes. Both are equally dressed in the height of the fashion, both are *rouged*, and wear their neck and arms bare,—both have the same conscious, haughty, theatrical air;—the same toss of the head, the same stoop in the shoulders, with all the grace that arises from a perfect freedom from embarrassment, and all the fascination that arises from a systematic disdain of formal prudery,—the same pretence and jargon of fashionable conversation,—the same mimicry of tones and phrases,—the same "lisping, and ambling, and painting, and nicknaming of Heaven's creatures;"—the same every thing but real propriety of behaviour, and real refinement of sentiment. In all the externals, they are as like as the reflection in the looking-glass. The only difference between the woman of fashion and the woman of pleasure is, that the one is what the other only

seems to be; and yet, the victims of dissipation who thus rival and almost outshine women of the first quality in all the blaze, and pride, and glitter of shew and fashion, are, in general, no better than a set of raw, uneducated, inexperienced country girls, or awkward coarse-fisted servant maids, who require no other apprenticeship or qualification to be on a level with persons of the highest distinction in society, in all the brilliancy and elegance of outward appearance, than that they have forfeited its common privileges, and every title to respect in reality. The truth is, that real virtue, beauty, or understanding, are the same, whether "in a high or low degree;" and the airs and graces of pretended superiority over these which the highest classes give themselves, from mere frivolous and external accomplishments, are easily imitated, with provoking success, by the lowest,—whenever they dare.

The two nearest things in the world are gentility and vulgarity—

"And thin partitions do their bounds divide."

Where there is much affectation of the one, we may be always sure of meeting with a double share of the other. Those who are conscious to themselves of any real superiority or refinement, are not particularly jealous of the adventitious marks of it. Miss Burney's novels all turn upon this slender distinction. It is the only thing that can be said against them. It is hard to say which she has made out to be the worst; low people always aping gentility, or people in high life always avoiding vulgarity. Mr Smith and the Brangtons were everlastingly trying to do as their fashionable acquaintances did, and these again were always endeavouring not to do and say what Mr Smith and the Brangtons did or said. What an instructive game at cross purposes! "Kings are naturally lovers of low company," according to the observation of Mr Burke; because their rank cannot be called into question by it, and they can only hope to find, in the opposite extreme of natural and artificial inequality, any thing to confirm them in the belief, that their personal pretensions at all answer to the ostensible superiority to which they are raised. By associating only

with the worst and weakest, they persuade themselves that they are the best and wisest of mankind.

W. H.

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MR NAPIER ON THE SCOPE AND INFLUENCE OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL WRITINGS OF BACON.

IN the Report of the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, inserted in our Number for May, we gave a short view of the substance of this valuable paper. As it has since been printed in the eighth volume of the Transactions of this learned body, we have now an opportunity of presenting our readers with some more copious specimens.

It has, we know, been objected by those who form in other respects the highest estimate of this essay, that it has rated the merits of Bacon higher than those of any individual can justly be rated. It is urged, that all the great revolutions in the history of science depend upon general causes, which would have acted, although the individuals who have actually taken the lead in them had never existed. Although there had never been a Bacon, a Boyle, or a Newton, the experimental philosophy, it is said, would have been carried on with equal zeal and success. We are fully disposed to coincide with this train of reasoning, so far as it goes merely to assert, that the revolutions of science depend upon general causes, and that the most splendid discoveries of any individual were prepared by the state of the world, and by the previous train of philosophical inquiry. To trace the secret sources from which these revolutions arose, forms, no doubt, a very curious and interesting inquiry. But we conceive the principle not to be justly applied, when it is made to depreciate the glory of those master-minds which have taken the lead in these high intellectual processes. Thus, although the Reformation was prepared and rendered certain by the whole complexion and character of the times, yet we do not the less regard Luther as its author, and admire the independence, energy, and intrepidity with which he achieved it. The doctrine, even, that these great revolutions would have taken place, although the individuals who took the most conspicuous part in them had never