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978-1-108-07740-8 - Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century:  
Consisting of Authentic Memoirs and Original Letters of Eminent Persons, and Intended  
as a Sequel to the 'Literary Anecdotes': Volume 7

John Nichols

Excerpt

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ILLUSTRATIONS  
OF THE  
LITERATURE  
OF THE  
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

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THE PERCY CORRESPONDENCE.

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GEORGE STEEVENS, Esq.

A BRIEF memoir of this distinguished Commentator on Shakspeare will be found in the "Literary Anecdotes," vol. ii. p. 680; and a Series of his Letters in the "Literary Illustrations," vol. v. p. 427 to 443. The following Letters, addressed to Bishop Percy, contain much literary information, and are very characteristic of the writer.

GEORGE STEEVENS, Esq. to Bishop PERCY.

"MY DEAR LORD, Hampstead Heath, Jan. 11, 1788.

"As I left my own house at the beginning of September, and only returned to it just before Christmas, your letter did not reach my hands till some months later than it was written. Since I came home, two deaths in my family have furnished me with a considerable share of

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business, and therefore I have been obliged to delay my thanks to your Lordship till now.

"I should be inclined to follow Lord Charlemont's advice with much readiness and gratitude; but our painters are too self-sufficient to avail themselves of any hint or instruction I could afford them.\* All dresses which are not in modern use they conceive to be ancient; or, to express myself more clearly, provided they clothe their characters in such habiliments as were never seen in England (or perhaps anywhere else), they suppose they shall escape censure on the score of anachronism, or impropriety. As to the head † you do me the honour to mention, I hardly suppose such a thing can ever be wanted; for so far from expecting to bring the work to a conclusion, I may not live to see even its beginning. In short, the proprietors by no means exert themselves with a degree of zeal proportionable to the encouragement they have received. Of any advances toward the production of this book, except a picture or two painted for it, I am utterly unconscious, nor have I heard a syllable further on the score of paper or typography. It may be supposed that the remonstrances of the public will, ere long, awaken Messieurs Boydell ‡ into more active measures. I believe, within a few months, you may expect the appearance of Mr. Malone's Shakspeare. I have been told that Mr. Colman also threatens us with a new edition of the same

\* On the subject of Boydell's Shakspeare Gallery.

† Probably Lord Charlemont meant a portrait of Mr. Steevens to be added to Boydell's Shakspeare. Mr. Steevens was to superintend the press.

‡ Alderman John Boydell died Dec. 11, 1804. An account of him will be found in "Literary Anecdotes," vol. III. p. 411, in which the full history of the origin of the Shakspeare Gallery and the splendid edition of Shakspeare is also detailed. A more elaborate memoir of him is given by Mr. Chalmers, in *Biog. Dict.* VI. 301. His nephew Josiah Boydell, esq. was well known as an eminent encourager of the Arts, and himself a very superior artist. He was a man of mild and unassuming manners, strict integrity, and great benevolence. On the establishment of the Corps of Hampstead Volunteers in 1803, Mr. Boydell, who had been the first in command of the Hampstead Association (disbanded about a twelvemonth before), and had been extremely active in the formation of the new corps, was unanimously elected Lieutenant Commandant. After having been many years a partner with his uncle, he succeeded not only to the extensive business, but to the civic gown vacant by his uncle's death in 1804. His health being considerably impaired, he resigned the office of Alderman in 1809. In 1811 he was elected Master of the Stationers' Company. After the expiration of that year, his strength and spirits gradually and visibly declined, and he died at Halliford in Middlesex, March 27, 1817.

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author. I say *threatens*, because his publication will prove sufficiently hostile to those of his predecessors.

“The line of Spenser which Lord Charlemont enquires after, is in the second Canto of the third Book of the ‘Faëry Queen.’ I beg leave to trouble your Lordship with my best compliments to him, and hope he will not impute the tardiness of my answer to any voluntary negligence of his commands.

“The character your Lordship gives of Mr. J. Monck Mason’s production\* is thoroughly just. He is often ingenious and sometimes right; but occasionally outdoes even Dr. Warburton in absurdity of conjecture. There is also somewhat of ferocity in his manner which had better been avoided. Still, with all his extravagances, I must allow that he is a man of thinking and erudition.

“Boswell’s book † is not yet gone to press. He waits, I believe, till Mrs. Piozzi has published two volumes of Johnson’s correspondence with her, which is expected to comprize near 200 letters. Lord Lonsdale has appointed Boswell recorder of Carlisle, and he is gone to take possession of his new office.

“Mr. Jephson’s ‡ ‘Julia’ I have neither seen nor read; but am told the playhouse lost by performing it, and that the author’s only gain has been by the sale of the copy.

“In about a month or six weeks we are to expect the three volumes, quarto, which conclude Mr. Gibbon’s cele-

\* The Right Hon. John Monck Mason was a privy councillor of Ireland, and commissioner of revenue for that kingdom. He published the Dramatic Works of John Massinger, with Notes critical and explanatory; to which is prefixed, an Essay on his Life and Writings, Lond. 1779, 1794, 4 vols. 8vo. Comments on Reed’s edition of Shakspeare’s Plays, 1785, 8vo. Comments on the Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher; with an Appendix, containing some further Observations on Shakspeare, extended to the late edition of Malone, by Stevens, Lond. 1788. An Oration commemorative of the late Major-Gen. Hamilton, 1804, 8vo. He is among the best of the Shakspeare critics. He married Catharine, daughter of Henry Mitchell, esq. but had no issue; and died at Dublin in 1809. His portrait, by J. Harding, is in “Shakspeare Illustrated,” 1791. His great-nephews now living are William Monck Mason, of Dublin, esq. author of the History of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, and Henry Joseph Monck Mason, LL.D. of Dargle cottage, co. Dublin, author of an Essay on the origin, authority, and constitution of Parliaments in Ireland, and a work on the Introduction of Christianity into that country, and the religious doctrines of her primitive saints, &c. &c.

† Life of Dr. Johnson.

‡ Mr. Robert Jephson, the dramatic writer, was born in Ireland in 1736, and died at Black Rock, near Dublin, May 31, 1803. For Memoirs of him, see Gentleman’s Magazine for June 1803, p. 600; and Chalmers’s Biog. Dict. vol. XIX. p. 1.

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brated work. Mr. Bruce's Abyssinian Tour is also at press, but will be withheld till next winter. It will be dedicated to the Honourable Daines Barrington, with singular propriety, as he is the only one who possesses credulity enough for the author's purposes. Your Lordship and I may perhaps unwillingly believe that in the kingdom of Amhara every jessamine tree is as big as *two* English oaks; and yet this fact our traveller is said to have asserted in conversation. I relate it on the authority of Mr. Gibbon.

"I hear with pleasure of your kindness to the relation of our friend Dr. Goldsmith, and hope the expiration of copyright will soon afford scope to your supplemental charity. Your proposals have not hitherto fallen in my way.

"I have been so long absent from the literary world, that the intelligence I offer you is scarce worth your reading. One circumstance, however, I must not omit. Your antagonist Mr. Ritson, about a month ago, got drunk, and assaulted an inoffensive barber, who brought an action against him, and has obliged him to pay severely for his frolic; a proper warning to critics militant.

"Your Lordship has expressed a desire to possess a cast from Nollekens' bust of Johnson. Such a thing is undoubtedly to be had, and without much expence. But as I lately attempted to execute a similar commission, and had the mortification to find that any package containing a plaster of Paris figure, unless taken uncommon care of, will not travel with safety, especially when its transit is both by sea and land, I wish you to wait for a resemblance of our deceased friend till you come to England, and can give orders about it yourself. I sent a very expensive group not very long ago into the country, and had the misfortune to hear it was half ground to powder before it reached the person who desired me to provide it; and yet it was packed by the artist who made it. Any commission of a less hazardous kind I shall be always ready to undertake for your Lordship.

"Supposing your Lordship either is, or will be soon, at Dublin, I address you at your former place of residence; and, with my best compliments to Mrs. Percy, and much apology for these pages of inanity, have the honour to be your Lordship's most obliged and obedient servant,

"GEO. STEVENS."

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\* \* \* \* \* "If therefore, my Lord, you are serious, and really have a Nephew, I request that my best compliments may be delivered to him, accompanied by a sincere wish that he may live to bring forward some collection equal in merit to the *Reliques*, which (I borrow the very words of your antagonist Ritson) is undoubtedly 'one of the most delightful books of curiosity and entertainment that was ever published.'

"I have the honour to be, my dear Lord, your most faithful and obedient servant,  
GEO. STEEVENS."

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"Hampstead Heath, June 2, 1796.

"Mr. Steevens presents his best compliments to the Bishop of Dromore, and is sorry to find that the miscellaneous volume containing, among other articles, the juvenile work of James I. was lent, about a month ago, to a gentleman who has carried it with him into Nottinghamshire. It was borrowed for the sake of another curious tract bound up with the 'Reulis and Cautelis.' When the book returns into the hands of Mr. Steevens, it shall be immediately forwarded to the Bishop, if he is at that time in England."

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"Hampstead Heath, Oct. 24, 1796.

"My very good Lord, and most esteemed Uncle; notwithstanding you persist in refusing to acknowledge me in the character of your legitimate Nephew, I have not so far forgotten my duty as to neglect your interests on the slightest occasion. I therefore take the liberty of pointing out a passage in our late friend Mr. Tyrwhitt's edition of Chaucer, that seems to encourage an idea that there has been blank verse, by a century at least, more ancient than any you have ascertained.\* Such a circumstance, I trust, may deserve mention in the preface to your nepotick publication.

"['The Tale of Melibeus.'] Mr. Thomas has observed, that 'this Tale seems to have been written in *blank verse*. [MSS. notes upon Chaucer, ed. Urry, in Brit. Mus.] It

\* Dr. Percy collected and printed specimens of the *earliest* Blank Verse in our Language, which are affixed to *some* copies (as that of Mr. J. P. Collier) of his scarce Edition of Lord Surrey's Poems.

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is certain, that in the former part of it we find a number of blank verses intermixed, in a much greater proportion than in any of our author's other prose writings. But this poetical style is not, I think, remarkable, beyond the first four or five pages.'—Vol. iv. p. 325.

“I cannot conclude, my Lord, without conjuring you to present my duty to the good Lady Isengrine mine aunt, and also to express my best wishes towards my fair cousins, the Ladies Geraldine and Blanch. And (though he may finally supplant me in your codicils, &c.) I must not forget to offer my respects to the young Ingulfus, whom (though with perfect jocularly, I hope) you style your Nephew, instead of appropriating that title where it is most due, I mean, to your indubitable Nephew, and most faithful humble servant,  
G. STEEVENS.”

“P. S. On the 24th of last month, when our excellent friend Dr. Farmer returned from Bath to college, he was the mere shadow of what he had been. He assured me, he had neither the benefit of appetite, sleep, or spirits. In the course of the next three weeks, however, he eat as much as he ought, slept with few interruptions, and enlivened his companions as much as ever. But in these circumstances, I must confess, I have little confidence. He still wants flesh and the genuine colour of health. His disorder, I am afraid, is referable to the state of his liver. I should add, that this supposition is merely my own, and has not been authorised by our London or Cambridge physicians. I sincerely wish I could, consistently with truth, have transmitted you more welcome intelligence.

“Another word, and I have done. You cannot more successfully ingratiate yourself with your coadjutor, the Rev. Henry Meen, than by requesting him to give you a copy of “*Happiness*,”\* a poem in blank verse, which he published while he was resident in Emanuel college.

“More last words.—Of Mr. Burke's genuine pamphlet, published on the 20th by the Rivingtons, five editions, consisting of a thousand each, are already sold; and half as many of the spurious and pirated copy by Owen, are said to have been dispersed. Before now, I must suppose you have seen the one or the other of these publica-

\* This early production Mr. Meen was very desirous that his friends should forget, which caused the wicked wag to recommend it to the bishop's notice. See Mr. Meen's Letter to Bp. Percy, Dec. 15, 1796, printed hereafter.

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tions, which, I trust, will be as warmly received in your kingdom as in ours. Mr. Burke has commenced a suit against Owen, whose treachery, ingratitude, and impudence, are without a parallel in bibliopolic history. In one of his very extraordinary advertisements he appears to threaten Mr. Burke for having published his own pamphlet. Surely, this is a bravado worthy of *Dublin itself*.

“Mr. Thomas’s remark on the *metrical* turn of the Melibeus,\* may be countenanced, perhaps, in some degree, by the following article in Du Fresnoy’s *Bibliothèque*, vol. ii. p. 248. ‘Le roman de Melibée, &c. *en vers*, in fol. manuscrit, et in 4. dans la *Bibliothèque Segulier*.’

“Some such MS. might have been Chaucer’s original. He might have commenced his imitation in verse; and when he changed his design might have been too lazy to obliterate the vestiges of his first resolution.”

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“MY DEAR LORD, Hampstead Heath, Dec. 26, 1796.

“On the 23d, I had the honour of your letter, and next morning communicated it to little Meen, whom I found in the vestry at St. Paul’s.

“He told me he had sent you at least three sheets since you left England. But he is so confused and irregular in all his undertakings, that I believe he hardly

\* Mr. Thomas has remarked, that Chaucer’s Tale of Melibeus seems to have been written in blank verse; and the late ingenious Editor of the old Bard observes, that in the first pages a number of blank verses are intermixed in a much greater proportion.

The reader may observe the following specimens :

Chaucer, vol. ii. page 243.

The Apostle Paule unto the Romaines writeth,  
Man shal rejoyce with hem that maken joye,  
And wepen with swiche folk as wepen.

And again, p. 244.

Remembreth you that Jesus Sirak sayth,  
A man that is joyous and glad in herte  
It him conserveth flourishing in his age.

————— He saith eke thus,

That sorwe in herte sleeth ful many a man.

And in page 24.

————— For Jesus Sirak sayth, that  
Musike in weping is a noious thing.

These, and a few more such passages, seem reducible to blank verse; but the far greater proportion, though in a kind of poetic prose, is utterly incapable of any such metrical arrangement; these few specimens are so intermixed therewith that they seem evidently casual, and unlikely to have suggested to Lord Surrey any regular composition in blank verse like what he hath produced.—BP. PERCY.

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knows the number of the proofs he has revised. I am also well convinced that he often takes what he means to do for what he has really done. I have striven in vain to make him more attentive to your trust; but, as Shakspeare says, it were as easy to

“ —— breathe life into a stone,  
Quicken a rock, and make it dance canary,”

as to enforce his punctuality, or accelerate his motions. He has much learning and many virtues; but these estimable requisites are too often thrown away for want of a sufficient degree of method and constancy in their application. Hence, he is always employed, without doing anything; and climbs downward, and advances backward, more adroitly than any other man in the whole circle of my acquaintance. The very table he writes at, and the room he sits in, are emblematick of himself; for they contain many articles of value, but in such disorder that nothing wanted can readily be found. In short, my endeavours to render him more useful to your Lordship have hitherto been quite thrown away, and consequently are discontinued.

“ You will find the *Tale of the two Swannes* reprinted in the fifth volume of the last edition of Leland’s *Itinerary*; I think, at the very beginning of it. The original in 1590 I have never seen, nor am I acquainted with any person who has it; a faint recollection, however, suggests that it may be found at Oxford, the Alma Mater of my brother-nephew. It was also republished in a small Latin collection which I have met with more than once, though at present it does not occur in the catalogues of our principal booksellers, whom I have applied to on this emergency. But Mr. Nichols, in all probability, has Leland, or at least can borrow it to print from.

“ Our newspapers may have informed you that a compound of illiterateness, folly, and deceit, entitled, ‘An Authentic Account of the Shakspearian MSS.\* &c. by W. H. Ireland,’† has made its appearance. In this publication a new game of fraud should seem to have been

\* On the probable origin of this literary forgery see *Literary Illustrations*, vol. V. p. 463.

† Of Samuel Ireland, who died in July 1800, an account is given in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* for 1800, p. 901; and his character is defended p. 1258. His notorious son William Henry Ireland died April 17, 1835. His answer to the accusation respecting the Shakspeare forgery is given in his romance of “*The Abbess*.” See *Gent. Mag.* for 1799, p. 601.

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contrived. The hopeful youth takes on himself the guilt of the entire forgery, and strains hard to exculpate his worthy father from the slightest participation in it. The father, on the contrary, declares that his son had not sufficient abilities for the execution of so difficult a task. Between them, in short, there is a pretended quarrel, that they may not look as if they were acting in concert on the present occasion. No credit, however, is given to this extraordinary performance, which is produced with the sole view of whitewashing the senior culprit, and thickening the veil between the publick and the other parties concerned in the original imposture. We are threatened with a second pamphlet (or rather book) by Ireland the elder. In this he says (I use what is reported to have been his own elegance of expression) he will give a *lerupping* to all his adversaries. Mr. George Chalmers likewise is almost ready with a third work, designed as an Apology for the late Believers, &c. He means, I suppose, since the house has been on fire, to throw a featherbed out of the window, that he himself may fall soft upon it. I have told my story vilely; for I ought previously to have said, that (according to your friend Mr. Ritson's account of Mr. Ireland's intended narrative) the names of all those who subscribed to the authenticity of the Norfolk Street MSS. will be published, and that the words at the head of the paper subscribed were furnished by Dr. Parr. His name, and that of our friend Dr. Joseph Warton, for this last week, have been the sport of our daily papers. Like my neighbours, I am very poor, and had a serious regard for the 1000*l*. I subscribed to Mr. Pitt's loan, by which, even then, I expected to be a loser; but if any one would double that sum, and give it into my hands at this very moment, I would refuse the present, if the terms of it were, that my signature should be found on that register of shame—Mr. Ireland's list of believers. Yet in that situation, I hear, your friend Pinkerton's will make its appearance. But I forbear to take up more of your Lordship's time, by any further descant on so worthless a subject.

“The Club goes on as usual. A long and stubborn cold has prevented me from attending it; but Sir J. Banks assures me that no step toward filling up our vacancies has hitherto been taken.

“Dr. Farmer, as I learn, continues in a state of con-

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valescence. The last reports of him were sufficiently favourable. To-morrow (being St. John's day) he feasts his whole College; and I have just despatched the half of a house-lamb as my contribution to his entertainment. Your Lordship happily resides in a cheaper country than ours. A tenant of mine in Essex is obliged, by lease, to furnish me every year with a few lambs at a settled price. When three of these were sent, a few days ago, to be killed and dressed in Leadenhall Market, as Christmas presents, for a couple of the beasts (which were remarkably large and fine) an eminent butcher offered me the sum of *nine pounds*.

"Mr. Gough has issued out the second volume of his *Se-pulchral Monuments*,\* price nine guineas. It is a splendid publication, and, in my opinion, a cheap one; for, exclusive of head and tail-pieces, it contains 131 plates, many of which are engraved in a very finished style. In respect to decoration, we must allow its superiority over the work of Montfaucon. Gough's third and last volume also will appear in the course of a few months; at least, so says his printer and yours, Mr. John Nichols.

"My sheet being now full, your Lordship's patience can be no longer subject to the tediousness of your very faithful and obedient servant,

"G. STEEVENS.

"My best compliments attend your Nephew."

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"MY DEAR LORD, Hampstead Heath, Jan. 3, 1797.

"When I wrote to you last, I had not discovered the following small snap for your Lion.

"At the end of the commendatory verses prefixed to 'The EKATOMPIAΘIA, or the Passionate Centurie of Love,' &c.—'composed by Thomas Watson, gentleman,' &c. 4to. bl. l. [no date, but entered on the books of the Stationers Company, 1581.] is the following specimen of ante-Miltonian blank verse.

' *To the Authour.*

' If grauer headdes shall count it ouer light  
To treat of Loue: say thou to them: A staine  
Is incident vnto the finest die.  
And yet no staine at all it is for thee,

\* See several notices of this splendid work in Index to *Literary Anecdotes*, vol. VII. p. 273.