

GENERAL LITERATURE; AND THE CAUSES THAT INFLUENCE THE  
REVOLUTIONS OF OPINION.*(Concluded from Page 518, Vol. III.)*

But if those few writers, who may be properly termed the pillars of literature and science, will not admit truth on the authority of uninvestigated antiquity, how much less will they feel disposed to yield to the opinions and judgments of their own times, knowing, that an opinion which has commanded the assent of ages is more likely to bear the test of examination, than the opinion which is only of yesterday. It is idle indeed to dispute the merit of works of taste, when this merit has been once decided on by the public—the antiquity of such works is the best commentary on their excellence. Mankind will never be pleased with works, of taste, unless the sentiments which they convey are found to associate with their natural feelings and sympathies; and the great object of every writer on subjects of taste, is neither to adopt nor admit into his work, any sentiment, notion, or opinion, but what is in perfect unison with those by which mankind are already governed, or which, at least, bears so kindred, and so obvious a relation to them, that its force is instantaneously recognized. When a writer, then, gives the public satisfaction, it clearly demonstrates, that he has consulted their prejudices, and natural biases; for if they had not, they could not possibly be pleased, and if he has done so, his merit is in proportion to the pleasure which he has given, and the invention, or, more properly the ingenuity, which he has displayed in discovering the sources whence these pleasures were collected. What is called invention, in poetry, and which Pope justly considers to be the grand characteristic of genius, is not, strictly, what that term means, in its general acceptation. To invent properly, means to frame or fashion something that did not exist before; but this was not the invention of Homer and Milton; they introduced nothing into their poems, the existence of which was not already known, or the possibility of its existence immediately recognized; they did not invent manners, characters, sentiments, opinions, prejudices, biases, or propensities, that were never heard of before their own time; but justly considered the greatest excellence to which they could arrive, consisted in keeping as close to the reigning and popular sentiments, characters and manners, as the nicest investigation of human nature would enable them. In describing a great character, for instance, they took all their ideas of human excellence from whatever accomplishments, or personal qualifications, they found most admired among their countrymen. They were not solicitous of knowing whether the character they had sketched was such as truth and virtue required at their hands,—satisfied with painting truth, virtue, and all other qualities of the mind, agreeable to the ideas which they knew were formed of them by those for whom they wrote, without stopping to examine, whether these ideas were correct, or agreeable to universal truth and virtue, or not. Accordingly Homer has given us many traits of character which he would never have sketched, had he written in less barbarous times—but his great