

A Defence

OF LITERARY STUDIES IN MEN OF BUSINESS.

Among the cautions which prudence and worldly wisdom inculcate on the young, or at least among those sober truths which experience often pretends to have acquired, is that danger, which is said to result from the pursuit of letters and of science, in men destined for the labours of business, for the active exertions of professional life. The abstraction of learning, the speculations of science, and the visionary excursions of fancy are fatal, it is said, to the steady pursuit of common objects, to the habits of plodding industry, which ordinary business demands. The fineness of mind which is created or increased by the study of letters, or the admiration of the arts, is supposed to incapacitate a man for the drudgery by which professional eminence is gained; as a nicely tempered edge, applied to a coarse and rugged material, is unable to perform what a more common instrument would have successfully achieved. A young man, destined for law or commerce, is advised to look only into his folio of precedents, or his method of book-keeping; and dulness is pointed to his homage, as that benevolent goddess, under whose protection the honours of station and the blessings of opulence are to be obtained; while learning and genius are proscribed, as leading their votaries to barren indigence and merited neglect.

In doubting the truth of these assertions, I think I shall not entertain any hurtful degree of skepticism, because the general current of opinion seems, of late years, to have set too strongly in the contrary direction, and one may endeavour to prop the falling cause of literature, without being accused of blameable or dangerous partiality.

In the examples which memory and experience produce of idleness, of dissipation, and of poverty, brought on by indulgence of literary or poetical enthusiasm, the evidence must necessarily be on one side of the question only. Of the few whom learning or genius has led astray, the ill success or the ruin is marked by the celebrity of the sufferer. Of the many who have been as dull as they were profligate, and as ignorant as they were poor, the fate is unknown, from the insignificance of those by whom it was

endured. If we may reason *a priori* on the matter, the chance, I think, should be on the side of literature. In young minds of any vivacity, there is a natural aversion to the drudgery of business, which is seldom overcome till the effervescence of youth is allayed by the progress of time and habit, or till that very warmth is enlisted on the side of their profession, by the opening prospects of ambition or emolument. From this tyranny, as youth conceives it, of attention and of labour, relief is commonly sought from some favourite avocation or amusement, for which a young man either finds or steals a portion of his time, either patiently plods through his task, in expectation of its approach, or anticipates its arrival by deserting his work before the legal period for amusement is arrived. It may fairly be questioned, whether the most innocent of these amusements is either so honourable or so safe as the avocation of learning or of science. Of minds uninformed and gross, whom youthful spirits agitate, but fancy and feeling have no power to impel, the amusement will generally be boisterous or effeminate, will either dissipate their attention, or weaken their force. The employment of a young man's vacant hours is often too little attended to by those rigid masters, who exact the most scrupulous observance of the periods destined for business. The waste of time is, undoubtedly, a very calculable loss; but the waste or the depravation of mind is a loss of a much higher denomination. The votary of study, or the enthusiast of fancy, may incur the first, but the latter will be suffered chiefly by him whose ignorance or want of imagination has left him to the grossness of mere sensual enjoyments.

In this, as in other respects, the love of letters is friendly to sober manners and virtuous conduct, which, in every profession, is the road to success and to respect. Without adopting the common-place reflections against some particular departments, it must be allowed, that in mere men of business, there is a certain professional rule of right, which is not always honourable, and, though meant to be selfish, very seldom profits. A superior education generally corrects this, by opening the mind to different motives of action, to the feelings of delicacy, the sense of honour, and a contempt of wealth, when earned by a desertion of those principles.