

it in full possession of these perfections ; and we learn on no less authority than that of Plato, that still in his time the diction of Thamyris and Orpheus, supposed to have lived long before Homer, was singularly pleasing. From the Greek was derived the Latin orthography, and thence that of all western Europe ; among which the English, being the most irregular and imperfect, approaches nearer in character to the Oriental.

After the general excellence of the Greek language, the perfection which its Poetry attained, at an era almost beyond all memorials, except what the poetry itself has preserved, becomes an object of high curiosity. It is in vain, however, to enquire for the origin of that verse which, though means no longer exist for learning to express its proper harmony, still, by a charm almost magical, pleases universally. But it was the ignorance of letters that gave poetry its consequence in the early ages. To assist memory was perhaps the original purpose for which verse was invented. But this is doubted by some, and particularly by Lord Kames, who takes occasion to remark, that to undertake the painful task of composing in verse, merely for the sake of memory, would require more foresight than ever was exerted by a barbarian : not to mention that other means were used for preserving the memory of remarkable events : a heap of stones, a pillar, or other object that catches the eye.—The account given by Longinus is more ingenious. In a fragment of his treatise on verse, the only part that remains, he observes, “ that measure of verse belongs to poetry, because poetry represents the various passions with their language ; for which reason the ancients, in their ordinary discourse, delivered their thoughts in verse rather than in prose.” But be this as it may, it is certain, that the assistance which it gave to the memory was originally the most important uses of poetry. At this day, what school boy would not prefer to perform a task which depends principally on memory, in poetry rather than in prose ? For these causes, poetry has in all countries preceded regular prose composition. Laws were, among the early Greeks, always promulgated in verse, and often publicly sung ; a practice which remained, in some places, long after letters were become common. Morality was taught, history was delivered in verse : lawgivers, philosophers, historians, all who would apply their genius or experience to the instruction or amusement of others, were necessarily poets. “ The character of a poet was therefore a character of dignity : an opinion even of sacredness became attached to it : a poetical genius was esteemed an effect of divine inspiration, and a mark of divine favour : and the poet who moreover carried with him instruction and entertainment no way to be obtained without him, was a privileged person, enjoying by a kind of prescription, the rights of universal hospitality.”

But when subjects of writing multiplied, and became more and more involved ; when people began to reason, to teach, and to harangue ; they were obliged to descend to common prose : for to confine a writer or speaker to verse in handling subjects of that nature would be a burden insupportable. The prose compositions of