

## PREFACE

THE substance of the following discourse was lately read at an evening meeting of the Royal Institution in London, and most of it was afterwards delivered in the form of lectures to my class at Liverpool. It is now published in the hope that it may call attention to a neglected side of superstition and stimulate enquiry into the early history of those great institutions which still form the framework of modern society. If it should turn out that these institutions have sometimes been built on rotten foundations, it would be rash to conclude that they must all come down. Man is a very curious animal, and the more we know of his habits the more curious does he appear. He may be the most rational of the beasts, but certainly he is the most absurd. Even the saturnine wit of Swift, unaided by a knowledge of savages, fell far short of the reality in his attempt to set human folly in a strong light. Yet the odd thing is that in spite, or perhaps by virtue, of his absurdities man moves steadily upwards; the more we learn of his past history the more groundless does the old theory of his degeneracy prove to be. From false premises he often arrives at sound conclusions: from a chimerical theory he deduces a salutary practice. This discourse will have served a useful purpose if it illustrates a few