

# P R E F A C E.

**T**HE love of novelty, which, in some degree, is common to all mankind, is more particularly the characteristic of that mediocrity of parts, which distinguishes more than one half of the human species. This inconstant disposition is never more conspicuous, than in what regards the article of amusement. We change our sentiments concerning it every moment, and the distance between our admiration and extreme contempt, is so very small, that the one is almost a sure presage of the other. The poets, whose business it is to please, if they want to preserve the fame they have once acquired, must very often forfeit their own judgments to this variable temper of the bulk of the readers, and accommodate their writings to this unsettled taste. A fame so fluctuating deserves not to be much valued.

POETRY, like virtue, receives its reward after death. The fame which men pursued in vain, when living, is often bestowed upon them when they are not sensible of it. This neglect of living authors is not altogether to be attributed to that reluctance which men shew in praising and rewarding genius. It often happens, that the man who writes differs greatly from the same man in common life. His foibles, however, are obliterated by death, and his better part, his writings, remain; his character is formed from them, and he that was no extraordinary man in



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his own time, becomes the wonder of succeeding ages.—From this source proceeds our veneration for the dead. Their virtues remain, but the vices, which were once blended with their virtues, have died with themselves.

THIS consideration might induce a man, diffident of his abilities, to ascribe his own compositions to a person, whose remote antiquity and whose situation when alive, might well answer for faults which would be inexcusable in a writer of this age. An ingenious gentleman made this observation before he knew any thing but the name of the epic poem, which is printed in the following collection. When he had read it his sentiments were changed. He found it abounded too much with those ideas, that only belong to the most early state of society, to be the work of a modern poet. Of this, I am persuaded, the public will be as thoroughly convinced, as this gentleman was, when they shall see the poems; and that some will think, notwithstanding the disadvantages with which the works ascribed to Ossian appear, it would be a very uncommon instance of self-denial in me to disown them, were they really of my composition.

I WOULD not have dwelt so long upon this subject, especially as I have answered all reasonable objections to the genuineness of the poems in the Dissertation, were it not on account of the prejudices of the present age against the ancient inhabitants of Britain, who are thought to have been incapable of the generous sentiments to be



met with in the poems of Ossian.—If we err in praising too much the times of our forefathers, it is also as repugnant to good sense, to be altogether blind to the imperfections of our own. If our fathers had not so much wealth they had certainly fewer vices than the present age. Their tables, it is true, were not so well provided, neither were their beds so soft as those of modern times; and this in the eyes of men who place their ultimate happiness in those conveniencies of life, gives us a great advantage over them. I shall not enter farther into this subject, but only observe, that the general poverty of a nation has not the same influence, that the indigence of individuals, in an opulent country, has, upon the manners of the community. The idea of meanness, which is now connected with a narrow fortune, had its rise after commerce had thrown too much property into the hands of a few; for the poorer sort, imitating the vices of the rich, were obliged to have recourse to roguery and circumvention, in order to supply their extravagance, so that they were not without reason, reckoned in more than one sense, the worst of the people.

It is now two years since the first translations from the Gallic language were handed about among people of taste in Scotland. They became at last so much corrupted, through the carelessness of transcribers, that, for my own sake, I was obliged to print the genuine copies. Some other pieces were added to swell the publication into a pamphlet, which was entitled, Fragments



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of Ancient Poetry.—The Fragments, upon their first appearance, were so much approved of, that several people of rank, as well as taste, prevailed with me to make a journey into the Highlands and western isles, in order to recover what remained of the works of the old bards, especially those of Ossian, the son of Fingal, who was the best as well as most ancient of those who are celebrated in tradition for their poetical genius.—I undertook this journey, more from a desire of complying with the request of my friends, than from any hopes I had of answering their expectations. I was not unsuccessful, considering how much the compositions of ancient times have been neglected, for some time past, in the north of Scotland. Several gentlemen in the highlands and isles generously gave me all the assistance in their power; and it was by their means I was enabled to compleat the epic poem. How far it comes up to the rules of the epopee, is the province of criticism to examine. It is only my business to lay it before the reader as I have found it. As it is one of the chief beauties of composition, to be well understood, I shall here give the story of the poem, to prevent that obscurity which the introduction of characters utterly unknown might occasion.

ARTHO, supreme king of Ireland, dying at Temora the royal palace of the Irish kings, was succeeded by Cormac, his son, a minor. Cuchullin the son of Semo, lord of the *Isle of Mist*, one of the Hebrides, being at that time in Ulster,  
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