

**ENCHIRIDION OF CRITICISM.
THE BEST CRITICISMS
ON THE BEST AUTHORS OF
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

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Enchiridion of criticism. The best criticisms on the best authors of the nineteenth century by
William Shepard Shepard

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WILLIAM SHEPARD SHEPARD

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Preface.

THE sub-title which the publishers have prefixed to this volume assumes—a little blatantly perhaps—that my aim in editing it has been accomplished. But it does at least indicate my aim. So far as the limits of the book would allow I have tried to give the best criticisms on the best authors of the nineteenth century,—using the latter term in its largest and most inclusive sense. And although the best criticisms should mean those which sum up most justly the merits and demerits of their subjects, I have also admitted within the definition such criticisms as are of special interest and special importance on account of the standing of their promulgators. It is interesting—in a sense it is even important—to know what great intellectual leaders have thought of each other, even

though their opinions may err on the side of clemency or of severity. I have endeavored to neutralize any such excess in praise or blame by adding the comments, wherever procurable, of some judicious outsider; but under no circumstances have I deemed it wise to intrude the compiler into the controversy. I have myself suffered so keenly from the depressing platitudes which worthy and respectable but more or less addle-headed gentlemen frequently thrust into the text they have undertaken to edit that I do not wish to incur the possibility of inflicting similar torture upon any reader of this volume. The only other explanation that occurs to me as being called for in a preface is that the criticisms here selected deal only with the artists of literature, the representatives of belles-lettres, and not with the mere scientists and philosophers.

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WILLIAM SHEPARD.



Enchiridion of Criticism.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan. 1751—1816.

Sheridan has been justly called "a dramatic star of the first magnitude;" and indeed, among the comic writers of the last century, he "shines like Hesperus among the lesser lights." He has left four several dramas behind him, all different, or of different kinds, and all excellent in their way: "The School for Scandal," "The Rivals," "The Duenna," and "The Critic." The attraction of this last piece is, however, less in the mock tragedy rehearsed, than in the dialogue of the comic scenes and in the character of *Sir Fretful Plagiary*, which is supposed to have been intended for Cumberland. If some of the characters in "The School for Scandal" were contained in Murphy's comedy of "Know Your Own Mind," yet they were buried in it for want of grouping and relief, like the colors of a well-drawn picture

6 RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN.

sunk in the canvas. Sheridan brought them out and exhibited them in all their glory. If that gem, the character of *Joseph Surface*, was Murphy's, the splendid and more valuable setting was Sheridan's. He took Murphy's *Malvil* from his lurking-place in the closet, and "dragged the struggling monster into day" upon the stage; that is, he gave interest, life, and action—or, in other words, its dramatic form—to the mere conception and written specimens of a character. This is the merit of Sheridan's comedies, that everything in them tells,—there is no labor in vain. His "comic muse" does not go prying about into obscure corners, or collecting idle curiosities, but shows her laughing face, and points to her rich treasure,—the follies of mankind. She is garlanded and crowned with roses and vine-leaves; her eyes sparkle with delight, and her heart runs over with good-natured malice; her step is light, and her ornaments consummate.—*Hazlitt*.

"Whatever Sheridan has done or chosen to do," said Byron, "has been, *par excellence*, the best of its kind. He has written the best comedy ('*School for Scandal*'), the best drama ('*The Duenna*,' to my mind far beyond that *St. Giles*

lampoon, the 'Beggar's Opera'), the best farce ('The Critic,' it is only too good for a farce), and the best address ('Monologue on Garrick'); and, to crown all, delivered the very best oration (the famous Begum speech) ever conceived or heard of in this country." This is absurdly overlaudatory; but Sheridan was certainly a man of brilliant abilities, and, with all his love of dissipation, could labor strenuously when he had made up his mind to achieve any design. His comedies are a continual running fire of wit; not true to nature and utterly destitute of that highest kind of humor which approaches pathos, but full of happy turns of expression and admirably constructed with a view to stage representation. He is the last of our play-writers who have produced works both excellent as literature and also good acting dramas.--*J. Nichol.*

Mrs. Anna Lætitia Barbauld. 1743—1825.

It is noteworthy that few of Mrs. Barbauld's earlier productions equalled what she wrote at the very end of her life. She seems to have been one of those who ripened with age, growing wider in spirit with increasing years. Perhaps, too, she may have been influenced by the change