

**THE AGE OF PRINT: A POEM
DELIVERED BEFORE THE PHI
BETTA KAPPA SOCIETY, AT
CAMBRIDGE, 26 AUGUST, 1830**

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The age of print: a poem delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, 26 August, 1830 by Grenville Mellen

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GRENVILLE MELLEN

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AGE OF PRINT:

A POEM,

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PHI BETA KAPPA SOCIETY,

AT CAMBRIDGE,

28 AUGUST, 1830.

BY GRENVILLE MELLEN.

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1830.

THE AGE OF PRINT.

WHEN Time was young, if we may trust to fame,
Heaven's exil'd monarch to Italia came.
Forth by his own unconquerable Jove,
From skies east crownless o'er the earth to rove,
There first the royal Wanderer found a throne,
And a wide realm luxurious as his own ;
And there, from crime and chaos first arose,
On Man the fabled kingdom of repose.
It was the morning of a better day
Than had yet warm'd him on his pilgrim way ;
The world all slept in beauty, and the years
Stole on unheeded and unstained by tears ;
The clouds in quiet stoop'd, or sail'd above,
And all the slumb'ry air was peace and love.
Up from the land unceasing music roll'd
An anthem to the stars o'er Saturn's Age of Gold.
But ah ! Fate lifts her wand, and empires pass,
Like spectres dim on History's magic glass !
So soon had that stern Roman rule begun,
That all things here should in rotation run.
The King of Gods himself grew tired of men,
So time has prov'd, though poets say not when.
Sated with sunshine, weary of his reign,

The world ran back to wilderness again ;
 Back did the Age to primal chaos swim,
 And mind went riot, while the gold grew dim.
 Shadow and silence on the ruins bode,
 And towering demons through the twilight strode.
 Dulness the chief, in ebon cloak and cowl,
 Fan'd by the pinions of her swooping owl,
 With steps of stealth grop'd on her lonely way,
 Full of the luxury of her drowsy sway ;
 Sleep held her train, and from her lanking hair
 Drop'd the slow tribute of the misty air.
 And thus as o'er some empire of the dead,
 Swept on its cloudy wings the Age of Lead.
 How long this dreamy monster veil'd the earth,
 Before some age less ponderous had its birth,
 We say nor sing not—for confusion waits
 The bard who here may rashly deal in dates.
 Though all may see quite plain—or think they see,
 Still reas'ning heads on Dulness disagree ;
 While some indignant cry, that baser ore
 Was but the type and telegraph of yore,
 Some, no less wise, nor given to thinking ill,
 Swear that the dozy metal marks us still !

Yet over that Dead Sea a change there went,
 Stirring to life each sluggish element ;—
 Then some pale star came twinkling through the waste,
 And the clouds lifted in a heavy haste,
 Till morning glimmer'd—so the legends say,
 And tortur'd twilight struggled into day.
 Some other age less hopeless than the past,

Sprung from the sinking limbo of the last ;
 Perhaps those tearless times—the iron years,
 Whose mention comes familiar to our ears —
 Or 't was, perhaps — as recollection dawns,
 That bolder age which Byron sung, of Bronze !

But not to linger round these thankless days,
 Leave we their sadness on our own to gaze.
 This rambling guess-work of the past is pain ;
 Let Fancy then retire — but Truth remain.
 And let the emblem worth or worthless be,
 That marks the era of complacent we,
 Home to both wise and witless it must come,
 A truth that strikes all disputation dumb,
 Books by the bale proclaim it without stint,
 Era of PAPER, and the AGE OF PRINT.

O who shall track the illimitable mind !
 As free and shoreless as the charter'd wind —
 That sprung from earth by some impulsive spell,
 Bids bounds till yesterday unreach'd, farewell,
 And on the pathway of its tireless flight,
 Bathes in still new and unimagi'd light ;
 Until the risen Future round it pours,
 And floods the panting spirit as it soars !

Not light the task of glory to portray
 The large and letter'd picture of the day ;
 Where by his book each hero's part is play'd,
 And all the world is out in masquerade.
 Then let that graceful charity be yours

Which lists, though late — and wearied, yet endures ;
 Though time is short, yet think my theme is long—
 Heed but the text — ye can forgive the song.

We see, alas ! a peaceful age gone blue —
 Mad after lore since dreadful Waterloo ; —
 Those frantic days when o'er the shaking land,
 As fast and fierce as Samiel's whistling sand,
 Bullets and bulletins together sped,
 Joint couriers of the living and the dead.
 How chang'd the face of empires ! — and how dull
 The modern mode to test the strength of skull !
 To paper now the generation runs,
 And polish'd Goths succeed to warlike Huns ;
 Our era finds no helm upon the brow,
 And the brave past to intellect must bow.
 That mark'd the splendid butcheries of mankind—
 Ours the campaigns and victories of mind ;
 That, the mêlée of emperors and dukes,
 Reserv'd for us the battle of the Books.

And first, the leading wonder of the time,
 See harps hung up and poets run from rhyme !
 The minstrel monarchs dash the rising song,
 And leave for earth their mountain Helicon.
 To Irish History goes Anacreon Moore,
 While Walter Scott writes sermons by the score !
 But soon weary of his texts and creeds,
 He turns to gardening — eloquent on seeds.
 Or doffs the cowl and puts the grandpa on,
 In little tales for master Littlejohn —

Napoleon or a novel — 't is the same —
 To both he goes — from both returns in fame !
 Yet 'mid them all, disguise her as you will,
 Ennobling Genius shines transcendent still.
 Behold the deathless stamp of power they bear,
 The royal port of intellect is there !
 O glorious sight ! worlds wonder as they gaze,
 To see the idol-bard that lights our days,
 To the mind's music, which we all can hear,
 Through each department with a grace severe,
 Tread like a king, with sceptre and with ball,
 And shine in each — still peerless through them all !

Yet once again in lands beyond the blue,
 What paper wonders start upon our view !
 Laureates and ladies with alternate sway,
 Gossip and gravity divide the day ;
 A medley stranger than the world e'er saw,
 Books of the Church and Books of the Boudoir !
 Here Lady Morgan chats of taste and town,
 There Lady Byron writes a poet down ; —
 Woman, no longer dedicate to love,
 Assumes with grace the intellectual glove,
¹ And o'er their ashes in a bright command
 Prelates and premiers behold her stand,
 Giving to everlasting print their name —
 They who once shar'd now guardians of their fame !
 Ay, woman ! pride and problem of our age —
 Here, too, she rules the printer and the page ;
 Exerts on laggard man her moral power,
 And shows in letters she will have her hour !

Past are the days of blue. Ye critics, look !
 She writes — and talks — and moves — a living book !
 She scans the times — and weighing all results
 Makes classics for the cradle — and adults ;
 With wide material at her quick command
 To new forms springing from her plastic hand,
 In each event incalculably brisk,
² Now builds a Monthly, now an Obelisk ;
 And with a glowing ardor panting still
 Fights for new victory on Bunker Hill !
 Where, in that work of ages, just begun,
 Each father's daughter beats each father's son ;
 And where to *take* that minstrel we begin, ✓
 Who erst in moral melody did sing,
 ' Sermons in stones, and good in everything ' —
 Since, strange to tell, so tongues and titles vary,
 E'en Quincy granite preaches — and is literary !

Next wander on, with clos'd voluptuous eye,
 To those dear books we read, but never buy ;
 There see, in linen backs, romances, tales,
 Flood half the land, and circulate by bales —
 In such expansion that you well might deem
 There 's no condenser of your moral steam.
 Lo ! fancy here on high endeavor goes,
 Spurns the sad poem and runs mad in prose ;
 No longer stalks your grave and metre'd bard
 Whose heroes all talk passion by the yard,
 In a thin, thankless pamphlet at the best,
 Rant half its worth and scenery the rest ;
 But the smart novel in two volumes, comes,