

**Excerpt from *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), ch. 9<sup>1</sup>**

By Frances Trollope

Notes by Adam McCune

*Note: Frances Trollope (1780-1863) was a British author (her son Anthony Trollope was also a famous novelist) who traveled in America (mostly in Cincinnati, which was then on the frontier) and wrote a book about her travels which was published in England and became a bestseller. Because it did not paint Americans in a very good light, it caused an uproar among American readers.*

On one occasion... I passed an evening in company with a gentleman said to be a scholar and a man of reading; he was also what is called a serious gentleman, and he appeared to have pleasure in feeling that his claim to distinction was acknowledged in both capacities....

Our poor Lord Byron,<sup>2</sup> as may be supposed, was the bull's-eye against which every dart in his black little quiver was aimed. I had never heard any serious gentleman talk of Lord Byron at full length before, and I listened attentively. It was evident that the noble passages which are graven on the hearts of the genuine lovers of poetry had altogether escaped the serious gentleman's attention; and it was equally evident that he knew by rote all those that they wish the mighty master had never written. I told him so, and I shall not soon forget the look he gave me.

Of other authors his knowledge was very imperfect, but his criticisms very amusing. Of Pope,<sup>3</sup> he said, "He is so entirely gone by, that in our country it is considered quite fustian<sup>4</sup> to speak of him."

But I persevered, and named *The Rape of the Lock*<sup>5</sup> as evincing some little talent, and being in a tone that might still hope for admittance in the drawing-room; but, on the mention of this poem, the serious gentleman became almost as strongly agitated as when he talked of *Don Juan*;<sup>6</sup> and I was unfeignedly at a loss to comprehend the nature of his feelings, till he muttered, with an indignant shake of the handkerchief, "The very title!"

At the name of Dryden<sup>7</sup> he smiled, and the smile spoke as plainly as a smile could speak, "How the old woman twaddles!"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sources for text:

Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/10345/pg10345.html>)

Paul Fussell. *The Norton Book of Travel*. New York, 1987. 295, 305-307.

<sup>2</sup> George Gordon Byron, 6<sup>th</sup> Baron Byron (1788-1824), a British poet known for short lyric poems (e.g., "She Walks in Beauty"), poems about other countries (e.g., *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*), and racy satirical poems (e.g., *Don Juan*).

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Pope (1688-1744), British poet.

<sup>4</sup> "Fustian," pompous, pretentious.

<sup>5</sup> *The Rape of the Lock*, a mock-heroic poem by Alexander Pope (see note above). The poem describes a man cutting a lock of a woman's hair without her permission, thus offending her family; the title mocks the family's overreaction.

<sup>6</sup> *Don Juan*, a poem by Lord Byron which many condemned as immoral (see note above).

<sup>7</sup> John Dryden (1631-1700), British poet and playwright.

<sup>8</sup> "Twaddle," talk nonsense.

“We only know Dryden by quotations, Madam, and these, indeed, are found only in books that have long since had their day.”

“And Shakespeare,<sup>9</sup> sir?”

“Shakespeare, Madam, is obscene, and, thank God, WE are sufficiently advanced to have found it out! If we must have the abomination of stage plays, let them at least be marked by the refinement of the age in which we live.”

This was certainly being *au courant du jour*.<sup>10</sup>

Of Massinger<sup>11</sup> he knew nothing. Of Ford<sup>12</sup> he had never heard. Gray<sup>13</sup> had had his day. Prior<sup>14</sup> he had never read, but understood he was a very childish writer. Chaucer<sup>15</sup> and Spenser<sup>16</sup> he tied in a couple, and dismissed by saying, that he thought it was neither more nor less than affectation to talk of authors who wrote in a tongue no longer intelligible.

This was the most literary conversation I was ever present at in Cincinnati.

In truth, there are many reasons which render a very general diffusion of literature impossible in America. I can scarcely class the universal reading of newspapers as an exception to this remark; if I could, my statement would be exactly the reverse, and I should say that America beat the world in letters. The fact is, that throughout all ranks of society, from the successful merchant, which is the highest, to the domestic serving man, which is the lowest, they are all too actively employed to read, except at such broken moments as may suffice for a peep at a newspaper. It is for this reason, I presume, that every American newspaper is more or less a magazine, wherein the merchant may scan while he holds out his hand for an invoice, “Stanzas by Mrs. Hemans,”<sup>17</sup> or a garbled extract from Moore’s *Life of Byron*;<sup>18</sup> the lawyer may study his brief faithfully, and yet contrive to pick up the valuable dictum of some American critic, that “Bulwer’s<sup>19</sup> novels are decidedly superior to Sir Walter Scott’s;”<sup>20</sup> nay, even the auctioneer may find time, as he bustles to his tub, or his tribune, to support his pretensions to polite learning, by glancing his quick eye over the columns, and reading that “Miss Mitford’s<sup>21</sup> descriptions are indescribable.” If you buy a yard of ribbon, the shopkeeper lays down his newspaper, perhaps two or three, to measure it. I

<sup>9</sup> William Shakespeare (1564-1616), British poet and playwright.

<sup>10</sup> “Up to date” (French).

<sup>11</sup> Philip Massinger (1583-1640), British playwright.

<sup>12</sup> John Ford (1586 - c. 1639), British playwright.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Gray (1716-1771), British poet.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Prior (1664-1721), British poet.

<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343-1400), called the “Father of English literature” – a medieval British poet who wrote in Middle English (e.g., “Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote”).

<sup>16</sup> Edmund Spenser (c. 1552-1599), British poet. Though contemporary with Shakespeare, Spenser imitated older poets and deliberately used words that were old-fashioned even in his day.

<sup>17</sup> Felicia Hemans (1793-1835), British poet.

<sup>18</sup> A biography of the British poet Lord Byron (see note above).

<sup>19</sup> Edward Bulwer, later Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Lytton (1803-1873), British novelist.

<sup>20</sup> Sir Walter Scott, 1<sup>st</sup> Baronet (1771-1832), British (specifically Scottish) poet, playwright, and novelist.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Russell Mitford (1787-1855), British author best known for *Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery*.

have seen a brewer's drayman perched on the shaft of his dray and reading one newspaper, while another was tucked under his arm; and I once went into the cottage of a country shoemaker, of the name of Harris, where I saw a newspaper half full of "original" poetry, directed to Madison F. Harris. To be sure of the fact, I asked the man if his name were Madison. "Yes, Madam, Madison Franklin Harris is my name." The last<sup>22</sup> and the lyre<sup>23</sup> divided his time, I fear too equally, for he looked pale and poor.

This, I presume, is what is meant by the general diffusion of knowledge, so boasted of in the United States; such as it is, the diffusion of it is general enough, certainly; but I greatly doubt its being advantageous to the population.

The only reading men I met with were those who made letters their profession; and of these, there were some who would hold a higher rank in the great Republic (not of America, but of letters), did they write for persons less given to the study of magazines and newspapers; and they might hold a higher rank still, did they write for the few and not for the many. I was always drawing a parallel, perhaps a childish one, between the external and internal deficiency of polish and of elegance in the native volumes of the country. Their compositions have not that condensation of thought, or that elaborate finish, which the consciousness of writing for the scholar and the man of taste is calculated to give; nor have their dirty blue paper and slovenly types the polished elegance that fits a volume for the hand or the eye of the fastidious epicure in literary enjoyment.

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<sup>22</sup> "Last," model of a foot used to make shoes.

<sup>23</sup> "Lyre," ancient stringed instrument; here, a symbol of poetry (hence "lyrics" and "lyric poetry").