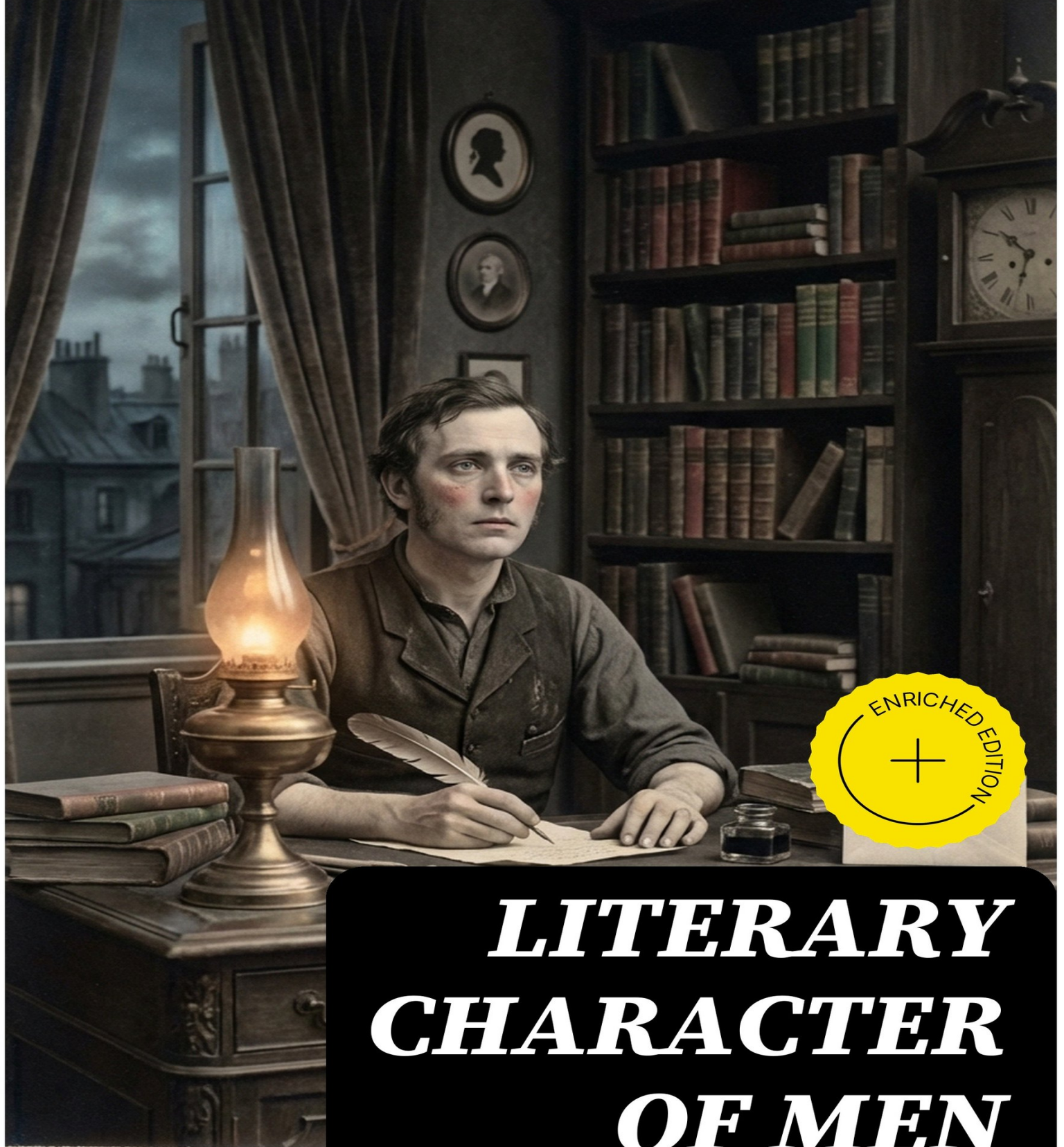


ISAAC DISRAELI



***LITERARY
CHARACTER
OF MEN
OF GENIUS***

Isaac Disraeli

Literary Character of Men of Genius

Enriched edition. Drawn from Their Own Feelings and Confessions

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Kendall Pierce

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Introduction

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Balanced between the exaltation of inspiration and the grind of lifelong study, *The Literary Character of Men of Genius* explores how extraordinary minds are fashioned at the intersection of temperament, habit, and society, where private reverie collides with public expectation, where solitude proves both workshop and prison, and where the promise of glory is shadowed by fatigue, misunderstanding, and the stern arithmetic of time, so that genius appears not as a lightning-stroke miracle but as a precarious equilibrium among discipline, desire, circumstance, and the ever-listening audience that alternately nurtures, scrutinizes, and consumes the very figures it claims to celebrate.

Isaac D'Israeli's *The Literary Character of Men of Genius* is a work of literary reflection and cultural history from early nineteenth-century Britain, composed in the form of essays and topical chapters rather than a continuous narrative. Emerging amid the broader Romantic-era debate about imagination and authorship, it gathers observations about writers and artists from classical antiquity through early modern and modern Europe, presenting a learned survey of their lives and labors. Neither biography of a single figure nor a theoretical treatise, it belongs to the tradition of civilized, conversational criticism, grounded in anecdote, reading, and the author's alert, bookish curiosity.

Rather than offer a plot, the book invites readers into a cabinet of cases and reflections, each chapter addressing

the conditions that shape creative work: education, routine, sociability, leisure, and the pressures of worldly business. D'Israeli's voice is urbane and companionable, the tone sympathetic yet unillusioned, and the style moves easily between compact generalizations and illustrative vignettes. The reading experience is cumulative and leisurely, suited to browsing as well as sustained attention, and designed to prompt comparison across eras without forcing a system. The result is an essayistic map of the writer's life that feels both intimate and panoramic.

At its heart lies an inquiry into the relationship between talent and toil, asking how inspiration depends on preparation, memory, and the slow accretion of learning. D'Israeli considers how habits of study can refine sensibility without stifling originality, and how solitude, if wisely managed, deepens attention rather than breeding eccentricity. He is attentive to the physiology and psychology of work—sleep, health, concentration—without reducing creativity to mere mechanism. The portrait that emerges is corrective rather than iconoclastic: admiration for genius remains, but myth yields to method, and the sparkle of invention is inseparable from patience, revision, and the steady stewardship of time.

Equally important is the book's social canvas, which traces how writers negotiate audiences, patrons, periodical culture, and the fickle climates of taste. D'Israeli surveys the rewards and hazards of visibility: the stimulus of praise, the sting of censure, the dangers of fashion, and the ambiguous boon of fame. He follows reputations as they migrate from private circles to public judgment, and he weighs what it

means to write for contemporaries while courting posterity. Without rancor, he anatomizes professional rivalries and the economies surrounding publication, illuminating how external circumstances test, distort, or refine the inner vocation that animates serious work.

Although the title reflects the author's period language and focus, the book's method—assembling testimony from letters, memoirs, and prefaces—opens a capacious conversation about creative life that invites readers of any background to recognize themselves. D'Israeli listens for what writers say about their own processes and then arranges those voices into patterns that clarify, rather than flatten, individuality. The composite view respects difference of temperament while extracting practical wisdom about routine, resilience, and the uses of leisure. In this way, the study becomes not a gallery of heroic exceptions but a handbook in perception, encouraging attentive self-knowledge over emulation of legendary exploits.

For contemporary readers navigating creative work amid distraction, metrics, and perpetual display, *The Literary Character of Men of Genius* remains bracingly pertinent. Its insistence that inspiration is cultivated, not merely chanced upon, counters romanticized burnout and invites sustainable ambition. Its portraits of reception anticipate modern cycles of hype and backlash, while its attention to health, time, and habit speaks to concerns about focus and well-being. The book matters now because it translates reverence into responsibility: honoring the life of the mind by showing how it is built, protected, and shared, so that talent may mature into durable, generous achievement.

Synopsis

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In *The Literary Character of Men of Genius*, Isaac D'Israeli undertakes a sustained inquiry into what defines the vocation of the writer and scholar. Building his study from memoirs, letters, and self-portraits by authors across eras, he maps the habits, temptations, and trials that shape intellectual lives. He corrects caricatures of effortless inspiration, presenting literary genius as work sustained by discipline, study, and circumstance. Throughout, he balances portraiture with reflection, tracing how temperament, education, and social conditions combine to form the literary character, while punctuating his survey with measured counsel drawn from evidence rather than conjecture.

He considers the formation of taste and the apprenticeship of study. D'Israeli describes how wide reading, close imitation, and gradual self-knowledge prepare a mind for originality. He attends to the economy of time, the value of quiet, and the disciplined use of notebooks and commonplace books as tools for ordering thought. Composition appears as a cycle of collection, incubation, and revision rather than a sudden blaze. He notes the alternation between sustained routine and intense bursts, emphasizing that productive solitude must be balanced with selective intercourse with the world, lest erudition harden into pedantry or inspiration drift into vacancy.

He then examines the author's social position and material conditions. Relations with patrons, publishers, and the reading public structure both opportunity and anxiety, while income from the pen remains precarious. D'Israeli weighs the claims of independence against the demands of livelihood, asking how a writer can guard time for study without withdrawing from the civic sphere that nourishes reputation. He tracks the pressures of public expectation, the risks of haste, and the seductions of fashionable topics, proposing that lasting work arises from steady purpose rather than transient favor, even as he recognizes the compromises often forced by circumstance.

Interpersonal dynamics among men of letters receive sustained attention. D'Israeli surveys friendships, coteries, and rivalries, showing how encouragement, emulation, and detraction shape a writer's courage and style. He scrutinizes the role of critics and the volatility of early judgments, urging patience before the tribunal of time. Debates over originality and plagiarism are sifted with care, distinguishing legitimate influence and learned borrowing from parasitic appropriation. The result is a nuanced account of how conversation, tradition, and controversy can refine genius or distort it, depending on the author's steadiness of mind and the integrity of the communities in which he moves.

The psychological costs and consolations of a literary life form another strand. D'Israeli gathers testimonies about ill health, melancholy, and eccentric habit, yet resists the superstition that genius is an illness by another name. He frames sensibility as a resource that requires governance, treating vanity, procrastination, and the hunger for praise as

moral hazards to be managed. The love of fame appears as both spur and snare, encouraging perseverance while exposing the mind to disappointment. Against these perils he sets regimen, self-knowledge, and the restorative power of friendship and nature, which help recalibrate study's intensities.

Methodologically, the book proceeds by case, pattern, and maxim. D'Israeli threads biographical sketches into broader reflections, abstracting general principles only after multiple instances align. This structure allows him to offer practical counsels—on reading, note-keeping, conversation, and the posture of mind in research—without presuming a single recipe for talent. He also articulates the dignity of letters as a public service, arguing that societies owe learned labor respect and fair dealing. The literary character, in his account, is a role that fuses private discipline with social responsibility, asking its practitioners to marry accuracy, imagination, and steadiness of purpose.

As it concludes, *The Literary Character of Men of Genius* leaves readers with questions that continue to resonate: what sustains creativity over a lifetime, how should society value intellectual toil, and which habits best preserve both mind and work? Without relying on a single theory, D'Israeli assembles a practical ethics of authorship from historical experience. His study endures as a lucid map of the perils and possibilities of the literary life, inviting writers, readers, and institutions to consider the conditions under which genius can be cultivated, protected, and judged with justice.

Historical Context

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Isaac D'Israeli, a London-based man of letters best known for *Curiosities of Literature*, published *The Literary Character, or the History of Men of Genius* in 1818. Appearing in the high tide of Romantic Britain, the book addressed a growing reading public and a lively debate about genius, originality, and the conditions of authorship. D'Israeli assembled examples from classical antiquity to his own day, blending anecdote, quotation, and observation. Issued after his *Calamities of Authors* (1812) and *Quarrels of Authors* (1814), it continued his inquiry into the lives and labors of writers, reflecting a culture fascinated by creative individuality amid an expanding print marketplace.

In Britain the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw a transition from aristocratic patronage to a commercial literary economy controlled by booksellers, reviewers, and circulating libraries. The Statute of Anne (1710) created statutory copyright, while *Donaldson v. Beckett* (1774) ended claims to perpetual literary property. Parliament's 1814 Copyright Act extended protection, yet authors still faced uncertain pay and negotiation with the trade. Subscription publication, translation, and serial essays multiplied outlets as literacy widened. D'Israeli's portraits dwell on precarious livelihoods, the discipline of study, and the pursuit of fame, implicitly critiquing how market forces and professional intermediaries shaped the lives of "men of genius."

Periodical literature structured early nineteenth-century literary life. The *Edinburgh Review* (founded 1802) and the *Quarterly Review* (1809), soon joined by *Blackwood's Magazine* (1817), set reputations, rewarded polemic, and enlarged the audience for literary debate. Newspapers adopted steam-powered presses from 1814, accelerating circulation. Within this combative arena, rivalries, satire, and anonymous reviewing were common, with praise and censure carrying material consequences for authors' prospects. D'Israeli's treatment of sensibility, vanity, and the hazards of publicity speaks to this review culture, balancing admiration for intellectual ambition with warnings about criticism's caprice and the social frictions that accompanied literary celebrity in a rapidly expanding public sphere.

Education and learned institutions framed contemporary understandings of intellectual labor. Oxford and Cambridge still emphasized classical languages and theology, while the Royal Society (chartered 1662) and the Royal Academy (1768) lent prestige to scientific and artistic inquiry. The British Museum, founded in 1753, gathered manuscripts and printed books useful to scholars. Yet the period also questioned rote erudition: Romantic writers prized originality over rule-bound imitation. D'Israeli distinguishes "men of genius" from mere "men of learning," assembling case histories that contrast inventive insight with academic pedantry. His survey mirrors an age negotiating between institutional authority and the ideal of inspired, self-directed creativity.

Britain's political atmosphere from the 1790s through the 1810s was volatile. War with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France (1793–1815) intertwined with domestic fears of radicalism. Governments prosecuted seditious and blasphemous libel, tightened meeting laws in 1817, and taxed the press; writers such as Leigh Hunt (imprisoned in 1813) and the satirist William Hone (tried and acquitted in 1817) became causes célèbres. Although D'Israeli's book is literary rather than partisan, its counsel about prudence, reputation, and the risks of publicity resonates with a culture in which print carried legal and social hazards, and the writer's public persona could become inseparable from professional fortune.

Contemporaries increasingly medicalized the strains of study and creativity. Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* had long framed scholarship's psychological costs, and physicians such as Samuel-Auguste Tissot, in *De la santé des gens de lettres* (1768), warned of "nervous" maladies among the learned. Anecdotes about insomnia, seclusion, and precarious health circulated alongside advice on regimen and work habits. D'Israeli collects confessions and self-portraits that explore discipline, inspiration, and fatigue, emphasizing the moral economy of time and attention. His compilation reflects a period that sought physiological explanations for intellectual extremes while still celebrating the exalted sensibility associated with genius.

The book belongs to a transnational culture of moral biography and literary history. From Plutarch's *Lives* to Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779–81), exemplary narratives taught craft and character. Rousseau's

Confessions (published 1782–89) popularized introspection as evidence. D'Israeli, whose subtitle invokes “feelings and confessions,” mines letters, prefaces, and memoirs from English, French, Italian, and classical sources, including figures such as Milton, Bacon, Montaigne, and Pascal. Translation and reprint networks enabled such comparative reading despite wartime interruptions. By arranging these testimonies thematically, he joins Enlightenment habits of compilation to Romantic interest in the sovereign self, proposing patterns in genius without reducing individuality.

Published when D'Israeli stood at the center of London's book world yet outside many conventional affiliations, the work also bears contemporary biographical frames. Born to a Sephardic family linked to the Bevis Marks synagogue, he quarreled with its authorities in 1813; his children, including Benjamin Disraeli, were baptized in 1817. Around these years he suffered severe eye trouble later relieved by surgery in 1821. Such contemporaneous circumstances formed the backdrop to a meticulous survey of writers' vocations. Attentive to status, solitude, and worldly dependence, the book assesses how modern Britain valued intellect, ultimately critiquing fashions that prized notoriety while neglecting sustained labor.

LITERARY CHARACTER OF MEN OF GENIUS

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PREFACE.

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The following Preface is of interest for the expression of the author's own view of these works.

This volume comprises my writings on subjects chiefly of our vernacular literature. Now collected together, they offer an unity of design, and afford to the general reader and to the student of classical antiquity some initiation into our national Literature. It is presumed also, that they present materials for thinking not solely on literary topics; authors and books are not alone here treated of,—a comprehensive view of human nature necessarily enters into the subject from the diversity of the characters portrayed, through the gradations of their faculties, the influence of their tastes, and those incidents of their lives prompted by their fortunes or their passions. This present volume, with its brother "CURIOSITIES OF LITERATURE," now constitute a body of reading which may awaken knowledge in minds only seeking amusement, and refresh the deeper studies of the learned by matters not unworthy of their curiosity.

The LITERARY CHARACTER has been an old favourite with many of my contemporaries departed or now living, who have found it respond to their own emotions.

THE MISCELLANIES are literary amenities, should they be found to deserve the title, constructed on that principle early adopted by me, of interspersing facts with speculation.

THE INQUIRY INTO THE LITERARY AND POLITICAL CHARACTER OF JAMES THE FIRST has surely corrected some general misconceptions, and thrown light on some obscure points in the history of that anomalous personage. It is a satisfaction to me to observe, since the publication of this tract, that while some competent judges have considered the "evidence irresistible," a material change has occurred in the tone of most writers. The subject presented an occasion to exhibit a minute picture of that age of transition in our national history.

The titles of CALAMITIES OF AUTHORS and QUARRELS OF AUTHORS do not wholly designate the works, which include a considerable portion of literary history.

Public favour has encouraged the republication of these various works, which often referred to, have long been difficult to procure. It has been deferred from time to time with the intention of giving the subjects a more enlarged investigation; but I have delayed the task till it cannot be performed. One of the Calamities of Authors falls to my lot, the delicate organ of vision with me has suffered a singular disorder,[A]—a disorder which no oculist by his touch can heal, and no physician by his experience can expound; so much remains concerning the frame of man unrevealed to man!

In the midst of my library I am as it were distant from it. My unfinished labours, frustrated designs, remain paralysed. In a joyous heat I wander no longer through the wide circuit before me. The "strucken deer" has the sad privilege to weep when he lies down, perhaps no more to course amid those far-distant woods where once he sought to range.

[Footnote A: I record my literary calamity as a warning to my sedentary brothers. When my eyes dwell on any object, or whenever they are closed, there appear on a bluish film a number of mathematical squares, which are the reflection of the fine network of the retina, succeeded by blotches which subside into printed characters, apparently forming distinct words, arranged in straight lines as in a printed book; the monosyllables are often legible. This is the process of a few seconds. It is remarkable that the usual power of the eye is not injured or diminished for distant objects, while those near are clouded over.]

Although thus compelled to refrain in a great measure from all mental labour, and incapacitated from the use of the pen and the book, these works, notwithstanding, have received many important corrections, having been read over to me with critical precision.

Amid this partial darkness I am not left without a distant hope, nor a present consolation; and to HER who has so often lent to me the light of her eyes, the intelligence of her voice, and the careful work of her hand, the author must ever owe "the debt immense" of paternal gratitude.

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CHAPTER XXII.

76 Refers to Gilles Ménage (commonly called Ménage), a 17th-century French scholar and literary figure known for his wit and contributions to French letters, often involved in Parisian literary circles.

77 Title of a Molière farce usually translated as 'The Doctor in Spite of Himself,' first performed in the 17th century and featuring a layman forced into the role of a physician for comic effect.

78 A celebrated 17th-century French religious community and Jansenist educational foundation near Paris, noted for its schools, theological writings, and influence on French letters.

79 Famous late 17th-century French tragic actress (often simply called Champmeslé) who was closely associated with the performances of Racine's plays and admired for her recitative and stage presence.

80 French name for the Carthusian monastic order, a Roman Catholic contemplative order founded in the 11th-12th centuries noted for strict asceticism and solitary life.

81 Françoise d'Aubigné, Marquise de Maintenon, the influential second wife or consort of King Louis XIV of France who played a significant role at the royal court and patronized educational and religious projects in the late 17th-early 18th centuries.

82 Refers to Lodovico Antonio Muratori (1672-1750), an Italian historian and scholar famous for editing and publishing large collections of Italian historical sources and for influential works such as his *Annali d'Italia*.

83 A multi-volume collection of medieval and early modern Italian chronicles, letters, and documents compiled

and edited by Lodovico Antonio Muratori in the 18th century as a source-book for Italian history.

84 Girolamo Tiraboschi (1731–1794), an Italian literary historian best known for his multi-volume *Storia della Letteratura Italiana* (History of Italian Literature), one of the earliest comprehensive national literary histories.

85 Most likely Thomas Warton (1728–1790), an English literary scholar and poet who produced *The History of English Poetry*; his work on early English poetry was influential and remained unfinished in some respects at his death.

86 Thomas Coryat (c.1577–1617), an English traveller and writer noted for his eccentricity and his travelogue *Coryat's Crudities* (1611); he is historically associated with introducing or popularizing certain Continental table manners, including use of a fork, in England.

87 The Congregation of St. Maur (the Maurists) was a French Benedictine congregation founded in the 17th century, renowned for scholarly editions and historical research; the group is also noted in sources for conservative attitudes toward some household or monastic practices.

88 Refers to Gilbert Burnet (1643–1715), a Scottish historian and bishop whose multi-volume history and biographies of the Stuart period were influential in shaping later views of James I and the Stuarts.

89 A French term meaning 'do-nothings' or lazy rulers; here used to describe ineffectual sovereigns, originally applied in reference to certain French kings and adopted as a critical epithet.

90 Likely Alfonso V of Aragon (c.1396–1458), a medieval king famed for his patronage of literature and arts; the text alludes to his emblem of an open book as a sign of devotion to study.

91 A Latin legal phrase meaning 'to be unwilling to pursue' and used to indicate that a prosecutor declines to pursue criminal charges or a case further.

92 A petition presented c.1603 by Puritan ministers asking James I for ecclesiastical reforms; it led to the Hampton Court Conference where some grievances were discussed but few changes were enacted.

93 Refers to Conrad Vorstius (1569–1622), a Dutch theologian whose perceived Arminian views provoked controversy and diplomatic protest in the early 17th century.

94 Supporters of Jacobus Arminius's theological positions in the Dutch Republic (often called Arminians), who issued a formal 'Remonstrance' in 1610 opposing strict Calvinist doctrine and prompting political and ecclesiastical conflict.

95 Refers here to Haddock, a man described in the text who feigned delivering sermons while asleep; the episode was used to illustrate how James I exposed religious imposture at court.

96 A figure from English folklore—an impish sprite or household spirit associated with mischief—famously appearing in plays such as Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and here invoked to suggest attempts to rouse the sleeping Haddock.

97 A Latin phrase italicized in the text (literally 'I would wish not to know letters') used to describe Nero's affected

ignorance; here it denotes a professed reluctance to learn or to take on the duties of rulership.

98 A Latin expression meaning ‘tribunes of the people’ (Roman officials who represented commoners); in the passage it denotes leaders or demagogues aspiring to popular authority in a democratic or popular government.

99 A royal declaration (first issued under James I and later revived) enumerating recreations and pastimes allowed on Sundays and holidays; it provoked strong opposition from Puritan critics and became a focal point of early-17th-century religious controversy.

100 A Latin legal phrase meaning ‘slander of magnates’ or defamatory attacks on high-ranking nobles; historically it referred to a public offense of maligning great men and appears here to label certain libellous court chronicles.

101 A French phrase used in the text meaning ‘what is said’ or gossip/hearsay; the author uses it to describe rumours and unverified reports that circulated at court.

102 Refers to Sir Giles Mompesson, an early 17th-century courtier and owner of controversial monopolies who was widely accused of corruption and was censured by Parliament for his abuses around 1621.

103 Diego Sarmiento de Acuña, Count of Gondomar, was the Spanish ambassador at James I’s court (roughly 1613–1622) noted for his political influence and for cultivating friendships with English courtiers.

104 The Court of Wards and Liveries was a royal office that managed the guardianship and estates of heirs who were minors, collecting revenues and wardship fees; it was