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# MEMOIRS

OF

# GOËTHE:

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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**BURGER** (Gottfried Augustus) one of the most celebrated modern poets of Germany. He was born at Wolmerswende, in the principality of Halberstadt, on the 1st of January, 1748. The developement of his faculties, both mental and physical, was so extremely slow, that his parents entertained but little hope of him. At the age of ten, reading and writing were his only acquisitions. He, however, gave proofs of an excellent memory. He was fond of solitude from his earliest childhood, and loved to indulge in those feelings produced by the gloom of forests and desert places. His first study was the composition of verses. He early evinced a great dislike to Latin. At the expiration of two years' application in spite of all his efforts, which were no doubt weakened, instead of being excited by the severe punishments he received, he had scarcely mastered the first declension. He was sent to school at Aschersleben, under the protection of his grandfather, where he made little progress in Latin, but continued to exercise himself in the com-

position of poetry. From that time he began to incur dislike through the satirical spirit of his epigrams. One of these compositions brought upon him so severe a punishment, that his grandfather withdrew him from the school, and in 1762 sent him to the Pædagogium of Halle. Burger's satirical vein was, however, wholly devoid of ill-nature. In obedience to the wishes of his grandfather, in 1765, he studied theology, for which, however, he himself had no taste. His love for pleasure drew upon him his grandfather's resentment, who recalled him from Halle. A reconciliation having afterwards taken place, Burger obtained permission in 1768 to go to Gottingen, and to substitute the study of jurisprudence for that of theology. But for want of due attention and perseverance, he learnt very little with the help of masters and books. Thus he was himself astonished at the knowledge he acquired without knowing how. His connexion with a woman of light character, his dissipation, and the debts he contracted, set his grandfather a second time at variance with him. His taste for poetry, however, and the society of young persons possessed of talent and inspired with enthusiasm for the literary glory of Germany, again roused his activity. Excited by the

example of his friends, Boie, Bister, Spren-  
gel, Hölty, Miller, Voss, the two Counts  
Stollberg, Karl, Friedrich Cramer, and Leise-  
witz, he applied himself to the study of the  
classics. Thenceforward he was very success-  
ful in that style of burlesque poetry, those  
sallies of wit and gaiety which ensured popu-  
larity to a vast number of his compositions.  
The celebrated song *Bachus is a jolly fel-  
low*, &c. was written about this time. The  
works of the great English, French, Italian,  
and Spanish poets, were the favourite study  
of Burger and his friends. To Boie, Burger  
was most indebted for his improvement. It  
was he who taught him to study attentively  
correctness and elegance of style. Percy's  
Reliques of ancient English Poetry was his  
favourite book. Burger had hitherto been  
obliged to struggle against want; but his  
friend Boje procured him, in 1772, a situation  
in the principality of Calenberg. His return  
to a more regular course of life induced his  
grandfather to pay his debts, and to supply  
him with a handsome sum by bills, a great part  
of which he lost through a false friend, to whom  
the money provided had been entrusted. This  
misfortune involved him in embarrassment for  
the remainder of his life. About this time he



wrote his famous romance of *Lenora*, which was attended with prodigious success. He married in 1774, but his unfortunate passion for a younger sister of his wife, rendered him long unhappy. He hired a farm at Appenrode in the hope of improving his fortune; but in this hope he was deceived. He returned to Gottingen to continue the publication of the *Almanach of the Muses*, which he had undertaken in 1778. At Gottingen he gave a course of lectures on æsthetics and on literary style. Having lost his wife in 1784, he married in the following year his beloved Molly, whom he has so often celebrated. He, however, lost her a short time after the birth of a daughter, and, in consequence of this misfortune, grief for some time exhausted the health and faculties of Burger. He endeavoured to rouse himself by occupation. He studied Kant's Philosophy, upon which he delivered lectures which were much esteemed. He was now appointed extraordinary professor at Gottingen, though without the receipt of any emolument. Burger had formed the determination of marrying again, in order to provide a mother for his three children, when a young lady of Stuttgard, who had been captivated by his poetry, made him an offer of

her heart and hand, in a poem which she addressed to him. At first Burger could not persuade himself that this proposal was serious. However he made some enquiries respecting his fair admirer, who was represented to him under the most favourable point of view; and the poetic reply he made to her established a literary correspondence between them, which terminated in their union. But this marriage soon proved a source of bitter vexation to Burger, and it is supposed to have contributed not a little to accelerate his death. He survived only two years after his separation from this third wife. His death took place on the 8th of June, 1794.

Neither Burger's character nor conduct are faultless; but his heart was ever kind and benevolent, even in the midst of misfortune. A generous or noble action always excited his enthusiasm; and though he had been frequently deceived by those in whom he reposed confidence, yet so far from thinking mankind generally bad, he formed the most favourable opinion of human nature. With a full consciousness of his own merit as a poet, he was perfectly modest. He was free from all ambition and pretension, and spoke but little in company; and though he did not possess

the manners of an accomplished man of the world, yet he knew how to render himself agreeable to the fair sex, whose favour he was always anxious to gain. He was sincerely attached to his family and friends, and as he was incapable of any feeling of envy, the success of his literary competitors afforded him as much pleasure as though approbation had been bestowed on himself.

Burger's writings are of various kinds. He composed songs, (many of which may be ranked in the class of odes,) pathetic and comic romances, ballads, tales full of humour and originality, sonnets, erotic poems, epigrams, &c. He restored to favour the sonnet style of composition, which had long been neglected and despised in Germany.

A complete collection of Burger's poems was published by Dr. Charles Reinhard, at Gottingen, in the years 1776, and 1797, in two volumes octavo, embellished with a portrait of the author, and several other engravings.

The most celebrated of Burger's poems are the following:—a free imitation of the *Pervigilium Veneris*, under the title of the *Festival of Venus*; *Adeline*, from Parnell; *Leonardo and Blandine*; the popular romance of

*Leonora*, of which there are six different English translations; a poem *To Agatha*, a lady who was admired and celebrated by Gemmingen, Zacharia, and Burger; a burlesque poem founded on the story of *Europa*; *Knight Charles of Eichenhorst*, and the fair *Gertrude of Hochburg*; the *Daughter of the Rector of Taubenhain*, &c. &c.

In the years 1797 and 1798, Dr. Reinhard also published Burger's miscellaneous works. This collection contains, among other things, several cantos of the *Iliad*, translated into iambic verse; versified translations of several of Ossian's poems; some fragments of the *Æneid*, and a translation of *Macbeth*. This last production appeared in 1784. There is also a poetic translation of this tragedy by Schiller.

Burger has likewise left behind him some prose translations, and critical writings, which are highly esteemed. He wrote for several public journals, and from the year 1779, until the period of his death, which happened in 1794, he edited the *Almanach of the Muses* at Gottingen.

If Burger did not fulfil the ideal character of a poet, according to the fastidious notions of perfection conceived by Schiller, yet he

is nevertheless esteemed as one of the first modern poets of Germany for energy and richness of imagination, delicate humour, and correct and beautiful versification. He claims the very highest rank for nature and truth in the ballad style of composition. No one ever knew better how to conciliate poetic talent with a style conformable to the taste of the multitude. He is the most popular poet amongst the Germans: it was his object to render himself such, and he has completely succeeded. His countrymen are fully aware of the sacrifices he incurred by this sort of celebrity, which was long the ardent object of his wishes. He now and then descends into absurd triviality; and he is not exempt from exaggeration and bombast. But his merits more than counterbalance his defects; and Burger enjoys, in an eminent *dégré*, the approbation of literary judges and the favour of the multitude.