

SPIRIT-RAPPING & TABLE-TURNING.

REMARKS

ON

DR. MAITLAND'S

SUPERSTITION AND SCIENCE.

BY

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"Is it not self-evident, that internal improbabilities of all kinds weaken external probable proof? Doubtless."—*Bulter's Anal. of Relig.*

"VOX TABULÆ, VOX DIABOLI."

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PREFACE.

THE following pages were originally written as a critique for a small periodical; but, having grown too large for the publication for which they were intended, have been altered, to appear in their present shape.

The writer has not time to write more fully, or to attend much to the correction of the composition of this pamphlet; but, as he considers its matter sound, and that it furnishes some antidote to the mischief he fears Dr. Maitland's Essay might produce—notwithstanding the worthiness of its author,—he ventures to lay it before the public, with this apology for its imperfections.

January 23rd, 1856.

REMARKS
ON
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AND SCIENCE.

ALL who know (and who does not know?) the learned Dr. Maitland, must have been thoroughly astonished on reading his recent essay on "Superstition and Science." A pamphlet, by almost anyone writing D.D., F.R.S., and F.S.A. after his name, in favour of *Table-turning* and *Spirit-rapping*, and exposing—as the author professes—the fallacies of men like Professor Faraday, Sir David Brewster, and even Dr. Elliotson, in their opposition to these almost bygone delusions, would have been sure to command attention; but when, in addition, the well-known reputation of Dr. Maitland as a learned man and severe critic is considered, the effect of the *brochure*, for good or evil, must be unquestionable.

It is titled, "Superstition and Science: an Essay," and the Introduction, § 1, is headed "Superstition;" yet it opens with, "I do not propose to write a treatise on superstition;" and—who could have believed it?—the next few pages appear written chiefly to announce, very plainly, though with some circumlocution, that Dr. Maitland, the author

of the famous "Essays on the Dark Ages," really does not know what "superstition" means! Moreover, that he does not think that anybody else knows!—Even, if we go to the dictionary, he says, "we shall only be puzzled." To be puzzled, however, one need not go to the dictionary. Any one who reads his first eight lines, will—to use his own expression—be "initiated into a puzzle," if not as to the word itself, at least as to what can have come over the usually clear and logical mind of the learned author.

He says he will not go into definitions and disputes about the word (though he straightway does), but "take it as it is popularly *used and understood*,"—then he pulls up very sharp, when this escapes him, with,—"that is, so far as it is understood, and "how far that may be, I do not pretend to decide." The Doctor does not pretend to decide, whether the word is understood at all, or how far, yet he undertakes to employ it, only as it is understood! On page 3, he recurs to this alleged common ignorance, and tells us, that being asked to write an article on "Superstition" for an Encyclopædia, upon reflection he declined, being convinced that "nine-tenths of the readers for whom the article was "to be prepared, derived no clear idea from the "word, and did not precisely know what they "meant when they called men or things 'superstitious.'" To prove this vagueness of signification, he goes on, "I mean no offence to the

“ reader by asking, whether, when he calls his neighbour ‘superstitious,’ he really means much more than this—that in something which has more or less direct or indirect reference to religion, that neighbour’s belief is more strict than his own ?”

I am greatly mistaken if Dr. Maitland’s readers, without feeling the least offence, do not very generally demur to this assumption that they use the word “superstitious” in this loose and ill-natured way ; but even, if they did, none of them, I imagine, could be so simple as not to know, that in so using it, they were employing it as a rather strong and hyperbolical expression, and using it out of its proper sense. For instance, people, thoughtlessly, talk of a “horrid day,” when they mean it is disagreeably, and may be provokingly, wet or foggy ; but, in doing so, they still know, that rain, or even fog, is not, properly speaking, *horrid* or *horrible*. There may certainly be exceptional cases. Dr. Maitland’s own difficulty, about the meaning of the word “superstitious,” forces one to believe it ; and the literary world has recently seen a remarkable instance of the misunderstanding of a very common phrase—a household word, taken from the language of the Bible—on the part of no less a personage than a writer in the *Quarterly Review*. In a recent article on Radley College, the Reviewer feels grieved and scandalized at the amiable Warden of that institution (who, the same article tells us, is often obliged to keep his room a whole day when

a flogging is impending!) warning the boys in a sermon, that while kind and generous treatment was what they would experience, when open and gentlemanly in their behaviour; on the other hand, if they were mean and deceitful, they would “be ruled with a *rod of iron*.” The Reviewer soberly professes to think, that the Radley boys would think, that the Warden did mean a *bar of iron* would be used, as a rod for chastisement! He even goes so far as to mention, that *birch* and *apple-twigs* are more generally employed as the usual “pickle” (it is to be hoped he will not think this word refers to “chow-chow”!) for naughty boys, in the best conducted English seminaries of learning! I believe, if Radley is behind any other English school in classical reputation, and liable to be, (if Dr. Maitland knows his readers) by some persons accused of being “superstitious,” in some of its peculiarities; still it has one great merit, that its boys—thanks to their careful training—may match with those of any other public institution, for long retaining an uncontaminated freshness and simplicity of mind and disposition. But, notwithstanding this, which some might loosely term “greenness,” I certainly gravely doubt, whether a single one among them—“major” or “minor”—down to “wee Johnny” himself, would have been found so very “verdant,” as to misunderstand, with the Quarterly Reviewer, the gentle Warden’s pulpit eloquence! And, to return to our subject, I also gravely question the existence

of those difficulties, of which Dr. Maitland is persuaded, as to the meaning of the word "superstitious."

Neither do I find, that "the dictionary will only "initiate us into a puzzle" about it. The derivation of the word, if from *super* and *sto* (Lat.), as quoted by the Doctor, is, of itself, so suggestive of a meaning antithetical to another common word, namely, "understanding," as signifying what is *not understood*, or what *stands above* our minds, that—coupled with the ordinary use of it, we need not really go further. *What we don't understand, yet believe in, without good reason*, we believe in "*superstitiously*." No doubt, however, the learned and not unfrequently polemical Doctor might retort, to such an explanation,—But how has this word, which simply means *stands above*, according to its root, come to be applied to such faith only, as you say is believed in "without good reason," and not to *all* faith, which relates to what is above our understanding? To this it might be replied, "'Tis to enquire too nicely," to ask this question. Mere convenience, if there were no other reason, would require some one word, to be applied to *foolish* faith, and the word "faith" itself to be limited to *rational* faith, as a rule. We have not always half such good grounds, for the special use of analogous words, having different shades of meaning.

But as to the word "superstition," this is *not all* the answer and explanation that can be given. Dr.

Maitland is an F.R.S., and is therefore entitled to be severe against Professor Faraday (as he is in his brochure, p. 66), and Sir D. Brewster (p. 76), when he thinks them unscientific;—not that I admit that they are so.—But he is also a D.D.; and he must not blame one with the title of *Clericus*, turning the tables upon him, in what “a clerk” naturally regards his highest character of Doctor of Divinity, and asking him, therefore, ‘Whether in his study of the Queen of Sciences, he has never met with the word superstitious, and considered how it was there used?—Has he forgotten, in the Bible itself, St. Paul’s words (for reasons which will soon appear, I quote them from the Vulgate), “Viri Athenienses “per omnia quasi *superstitiosiores* vos video?”’*—And if this passage did occur to him, was he so settled in his mind that he knew his Latin by heart (though he had forgotten the English meaning), that he neglected to turn to his Latin Dictionary, as well as to his “Johnson” and “Brande,” for the meaning of the word? Yet, if he forgot this passage, and its context—which clearly exhibits St. Paul’s understanding of the word,—still he quotes from Dr. Johnson the Latin equivalent “*superstitio*” (p. 2), though it is but too evident, he did not refer to “Ainsworth.” Why did he not check Johnson? Why assume—for be sure it is hazardous—that that learned lexicographer quoted that equivalent, carelessly?—And, now, let the reader refer to the

* Actus Apost., xvii. 22.

Latin vocabulary. We shall find "*superstitio* : superstition, foolish religion, vain fear, &c. ; *superstitiosè* : superstitiously, by way of divination," &c. and—*vital question for pamphleteers !—WHAT NEXT ?* "*superstito* : to live after others," &c. ; which at once suggests how the word "superstitious" came to be peculiarly applied to believers in ghosts, divination, &c. ; and also shows how peculiarly it is still applicable to believers in spirit-rapping and other modern forms of "superstition;" for, notwithstanding Dr. Maitland's confession of faith, I must say the believers in table-turning and spirit-rapping are quite behind the age—they truly "live after others"—if they still believe in these things, after Faraday's and a thousand other *exposés* of trick upon trick and plan upon plan for deceiving people, and making a profit of the deceptions.*

This now brings us to the subject of the principal part of Dr. Maitland's pamphlet. I will, however, limit myself to a very few words about it—so many pages having been occupied in merely clearing the ground of the unnecessary dust Dr. Maitland has thrown around it, by his careful attempt to weaken the force of the word "superstitious," which he evidently anticipates will now be applied to himself. His arguments appear worse in that respect, than even this mare's-nest-difficulty as to the meaning of a very common English word.

There was a common—the most common—mode

* See Note A, p. 19.

of "turning tables," by "merely touching without pushing,"—"willing only," &c. &c. &c. in vogue two or three years ago, which everybody was bothered with. It became a serious nuisance at last; and even some few men of reputation, like Dr. Maitland, got bitten with the mania, and believed in it and avowed their belief, just as Earl Talbot committed himself, even in the newspapers and House of Lords, to the infernal long range—and long bow, as it turned out—of Capt. Warner. Dr. Faraday then condescended to give his attention to the matter, not for his own sake, but that of others who believed what almost "everybody began to say;" and by a very simple expedient he effectually disproved what was so pertinaciously asserted. I say he effectually disproved the then theory of table-turning, and, moreover, he stopped the tables: *the same people* who believed and declared that they turned them by a simple touch, failed, by the mere application of his apparatus, to do so, unless when they shut their eyes, and got rid of the correcting influence of his simple detector.—Now, why does Dr. Maitland not confine his argument to that point, and prove any thing from it, if he can? What is it to the purpose, let him say—as a wise man and logician—to write that Faraday does not explain some other, new and less common mode of doing the table-trick? Dr. Maitland knows, or admits, that this is really the point. He says, "It [Professor Faraday's test] met "the facts which were known at the time;"—but, he

adds *mal à propos*, “*subsequent* facts soon altered the “case,” &c. (Exactly like the Warner long range—one trial fails, but we have no peace till the thing is tried again, with its newest modifications!) But if Dr. Maitland admits this—as he says he does (p. 26)—pray let him explain his remark, “It was a pretty little “key, but it did not fit the lock.” It did fit *the lock*. If it does not fit *another* lock, subsequently forged, has he written anything *ad rem*? Is Mr. Faraday (like Parliament) always to be held bound to examine every empty bladder, because it is blown up hard and sworn to be solid?*

The public well remembers the Doctor’s severity upon authors who made similar slips—I had almost written *blunders*—in his admirable Essays on the Dark Ages. He must bear, therefore, and take in good part these remarks. I still respect him most thoroughly, as in duty bound; and, indeed, have such a high estimation of his intellectual conformation, that I quite covet to hear his own laughter and soliloquizing, when reflecting upon this his own recent *ignorantia elenchi*! He actually sends us back to the Colt and Chubb controversy! Chubb, for England, challenges the world to open his lock. Suppose a clever fellow makes “a pretty little key” and opens it; the Doctor—prating of public *morals* the while!—then comes out and throws in his weight against the man’s receiving his reward, because his “pretty little key” won’t fit the afterwards-invented *trans-*

* See Note B, p. 20.

mutation-wards of a lock from America! Really it is too bad. But it is also really too serious a matter to pursue longer in this vein.

I do not think it necessary to answer Dr. Maitland's somewhat sarcastic criticism of Professor Faraday's observations as to faith in things heavenly, as distinguished from faith in earthly things. It is not worthy of Dr. Maitland: he does not truly take up what Mr. Faraday says; and it is surely astounding to hear a learned divine place in the same category, the faith which a man may have in natural things, by the natural "spirit that is in him," and the faith which he has in things spiritual, "by the Spirit of God," and which is grounded—not upon experiments or natural analogies—but upon the revelation of God's word. Dr. Maitland passes for a high churchman. I would beg to commend to his notice two sermons by Dr. Pusey, recently published, entitled *All Faith the Gift of God* (meaning "*religious* faith"), and would ask, Is Dr. Pusey or he orthodox on this subject? Mr. Faraday seems very much in accordance with the Oxford divine.

It is no business of mine to clear the *Zoist* (the promoter, as I fear, of many modern superstitions, grounded on some few facts of mesmerism) from Dr. Maitland's various charges. When I read that that organ says (quoted by the Doctor, p. 31), "We have felt it an imperative duty boldly to raise our voice in condemnation of this vile and unblushing imposture" (spirit-rapping), I could not

help the proverb, "two of a trade, &c.," coming into my mind, though it may not really be deserved,—for I rejoice to see the *Zoist* rejects so strongly (and it rather gives itself to such investigations) what Dr. Maitland comes forth as boldly to plead for. But I must say the Doctor is not happy as against the *Zoist*—I mean not logical. An article of the *Zoist* ("embellished with cuts," as Dr. Maitland is careful to inform us, and which he thinks it right to copy into his Essay,) refers to a mode, which is the usual mode, of doing the trick of table-rapping; and the writer of it says that certain cautions he gives will enable one to expose that mode, so that the table won't talk, "*UNLESS she [the medium] have a confederate.*" In all Dr. Maitland's arguments in refutation and ridicule of this article, he invariably overlooks the "*UNLESS*"!—and, of course, "the key does not fit." I wish the Doctor would see Professor Anderson on this subject, who by the bye challenges in an unmistakeable way, (which Dr. Maitland is bound to have taken up by a rapping,) any and all spirit-rappers to deceive him. The public would then surely be spared those not very wise counsels, to believe all that is potently enough asserted as witnessed, and potently believed in exceptionally by respectable individuals, in this present sceptical yet credulous age.

As to clairvoyants reading the numbers of bank notes locked up in boxes, &c., since the Doctor is so earnest and anxious, why does he not solve the

doubts and difficulties as to whether *bona fide* offers of money have in such cases been ever made, by himself ~~offering a £5 or £10-note to any medium~~. Dr. Elliotson can bring to read its number when in his pocket book ?* I believe both he and Dr. Elliotson to be most trustworthy and credible men, though peculiar in their ideas, one as to ~~mesmerism~~, the other both as to that and table spinning, &c. Let them settle, at least, this point between them. If Dr. Maitland is convinced,—if he loses his money; though I cannot say I will even then believe, or pin my faith to him, yet this I will pledge myself to do—to repeat the experiment, to risk also a £5-note on the same venture, for my own satisfaction ! Such faith I have still in Dr. Maitland ! This is a fair challenge, a fair suggestion of a fair test. Will the Doctor accept it ?

And now, I shall conclude with a story ; and would like to know how it affected the Doctor's opinion, for I suppose he must have heard it before.

* Such challenges were certainly published six or eight years ago ; and Dr. Maitland might have had some grounds for *his* sweeping charges of "falsehood" (p. 24), had he *then* failed to learn all particulars. But in 1854, during an absorbing war, two years even after the *Zoist* professed to dispose of a challenge made in 1846 (Sup. and Science, p. 86), suddenly to demand a *post mortem* examination of the subject, and ask for details through the *Christian Observer* and *Notes and Queries*,—and now complain petulantly that nobody cared to answer him,—is to be sadly behind the age,—“to outlive” both persons and things. *Solus superstito* should be the motto of his next edition !

In this enlightened age (A.D. 1853 or 1854) a house in Chelsea was said to be haunted. A ghost was heard within, and though a ghost, it made an audible physical noise—"demonstrations" fully as loud, from all accounts, as those referred to in page 39 of Dr. Maitland's "*Superstition and Science*." Policemen, called in, fainted at the dreadful sounds; and at last some wise men of the age—"enlightened men"—"men of progress" (though I happen to think very "superstitious," and, in highest matters, behind the age—"living after others"!) one of them ROBERT OWEN—invoked a spirit, called, not "from the vasty deep," where superstitious men of a "dark age" used to look for *bogies*, but from under or inside a *table*, and asked it, What this abnormal manifestation of a *quasi* spirit at Chelsea meant? The answer was published in the newspapers of the day: *loquitur* the Ghost of Shelley, if I remember rightly; and it was, that this noisy spirit, the Chelsea Ghost, had manifested itself so unmistakably (as even to have half-killed one or two modern Dogberrys!) in order that the unbelievers in spirit-rapping might be converted. The sequel, however—let us call it *the key*—is, that afterwards—after Shelley's spirit spoke by slapping the table—the *trick* of the Chelsea ghost was confessed or discovered, certainly exposed, and this also was published in the newspapers.

Now what have you to say to this, Robert Owen? and what you, also, Dr. Maitland?

Are we bound, notwithstanding, to believe the next *quasi* ghost story, or spiritual-rapist "fact," that comes to our ears, at the peril of shipwrecking our faith, or even morals if we don't?

Until Dr. Maitland adduces one ghost story that is true, we shall be right to disbelieve the next we hear told, without examination; not thinking our belief that it is merely another "fraud," in the least "injurious to the morals and happiness of the human race," or that such incredulity goes, in the very least, "to destroy the faith of mankind in God or in one another." (Sup. and Scien. p. 41.) We had better believe the very reverse: that to give ready ear to "old wives' fables," or to "worship ignorantly," is to destroy or injure the true faith in God, and to damage the very testimony of the Saints, as to supernatural wonders, truly wrought with the finger of the Most High.

NOTES.

Note A, referred to page 11.

Most probably the Latin substantive *superstitio* is derived mediately from the adjective *superstes*, which (from *super* and *sto*) means, (1) literally, standing above or over, (2) standing while others are fallen in battle, standing alive among the dead (*like a ghost in a grave-yard*), (3) remaining alive after others. Hence, also, the verb *superstito*, to live after others, to be behind the age (*like Dr. Maitland*).

The sudden appearance of a man supposed to have been killed in battle, all pale and ghastly and with "gory locks," easily suggests materials for the first ghost story; and to believe in persons being seen *as if alive after death*, is of the essence of such "dread tales" of *superstition*.

This explanation of the probable steps in the derivation of the word *superstitio*, and its original signification as peculiarly applicable to ghost stories, is perhaps to be preferred to the less literal one hinted in the text; and it leaves the word still quite applicable to belief in "spirit-rapping." For, although the visible appearance is wanting in modern raising of spirits, such "manifestations" are intended to make-believe, *as if the dead were present and alive*. To profess, also, to convey a kind of life and spirit into a wooden table, so as, by a mere touch, to make it glide round or hop about, (and why a *table* always? might not a chair exclaim, *Am not I wood? Have not I legs? &c.,*) is so literally *to make life stand out among things that are dead*, that no words could be invented more applicable, than *superstes* and *superstitio*, to the thing itself and all connected with it.

Note B, referred to page 13.

There is, of course, no objection to Dr. Maitland's testing, as they appear, all the new phases of table-turning and table-tapping. Indeed, considering the ground he takes, he is bound at least to test some of them, which he never seems to have done. But it is surely intolerable, to find a learned man, after a long silence, reviving and furbishing up a worn-out subject ; making very full use of his great reputation, to assume an immensely superior tone, and sneer not a little at "men of science" and their "funny philosophy"; singling out men like FARADAY and BREWSTER by name ; and all to throw this *onus* upon them, in a very elaborate "Essay," which I venture to say, will be dropt from the next List of "Works by the same author," (as I am glad to see his Essay upon "Mesmerism" has been,) and be only hereafter remembered as a pre-eminent specimen of paralogy.

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