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IRVING AND HIS "FAVORITE AUTHOR"

By James W. Webb

During the summer of 1849, while Washington Irving was floundering at his labors in writing biographies of George Washingtion and Mahomet and during a respite from poor health, he set about reworking a sketch that he had written of Oliver Goldsmith some twenty-five years before. His work on a biography of Washington was already beginning to seem an endless task, and he felt the need of diversion and funds. G. P. Putnam, his publisher, suggested Goldsmith as a choice subject: and such was Irving's enthusiasm that within a very short time the book was on the market and in the hands of readers. The following account of Irving is reported by Putnam in the Atlantic Monthly for November, 1860:

Sitting at my desk, one day, he was looking at Forster's clever work, which I proposed to reprint. He remarked that it was a favorite theme of his, and he had half a mind to pursue it, and extend into a volume a sketch he had made for an edition of Goldsmith's Works. I expressed a hope that he would do so, and within sixty days the first sheets of Irving's "Goldsmith" were in the printer's hands. The press (as he says) was "dogging at his heels," for in two or three weeks the volume was published.²

¹Pierre M. Irving, The Life and Letters of Washington Irving (4 vols.; New York: G. P. Putnam, 1864), IV, 53.

²G. P. Putnam, "Recollections of Irving," *The Atlantic Monthly*, VI (November, 1860), 605.

The Life of Goldsmith was an immediate success. By November 18, 1849, Putnam had disposed of the first edition of 2,500 copies and was busy on the second printing. In fact, it was doing so well that Putnam sent word to Irving urging him while he was on the crest to hurry along with his biography of Mahomet which was then in progress. Irving suggested that he "stay his stomach with Goldsmith a little longer," since he was "getting on very well" and was not yet in the mood to resume work.

Obviously enough, the biography of Goldsmith, published as the result of Putnam's suggestion, did not spring full grown from the author's mind within the sixty day period mentioned. Irving's interest in Oliver Goldsmith appears to have extended over a period of many years. He professed that his writings "were the delight of my childhood, and have been a source of enjoyment to me throughout life." Over the years he published three accounts of Goldsmith. The third one, published in 1849, has been judged by reputable critics as one of the noteworthy biographies in the English language. A brief history of its development and of its reception by readers and critics is the chief purpose of this paper.

Irving's first biographical account was written for the publishers, John Anthony and William Galignani, in 1825, as one of the volumes in a series of British Classics.⁵ The volume on Goldsmith is the only one of the series that was ever completed. This sketch of only fifty-six pages served as the basis on which Irving wrote his next editions. Bishop Percy had written a brief memoir in 1806. The first full length account was written by James Prior, an Englishman, in 1837. Irving's second edition was published in 1840, and according to Professor Stanley T. Williams, Irving wrote it, as well as the one that followed, primarily to "replenish his purse" and not entirely as the result of "an irresistible desire to retell Goldsmith's story."6 This edition appeared as a part of a set of two volumes entitled The Life of Oliver Goldsmith, with Selections from His Writings. The biographical part was expanded, with material brought to light by Prior, to one hundred and eighty-six pages and was prepared for Harper's Family Library. Professor Williams has referred to it

Pierre Irving, Life and Letters, IV, 59.

^{*}Washington Irving, Oliver Goldsmith, in The Works of Washington Irving (15 vols.; Boston: Peter Fenelon Collier, Publisher, 1897), X, x.

⁵Stanley T. Williams, *The Life of Washington Irving* (2 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1935), II, 221,

⁶Ibid., II. 221-222.

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as a "hodge-podge" work known only to bibliographers. Pierre Irving, Washington Irving's nephew, stated that it was intended merely as a sketch to accompany Goldsmith's writings.8 In 1849, he published the third edition "which is now known as his best and only biography of his favorite author."9 It greatly surpasses the first two editions, even though Irving "had no time to finish it off as he wished."10 To be "knocked off in such an offhand manner"11 and to be little more than a reworking of his other two editions, the biography is truly remarkable. The time was evidently right for it. In addition to his own work Irving had before him James Prior's edition and the more recent biography by John Forster, published in 1848, to whom Irving gives "full credit." Pierre Irving briefly reminds his readers that his uncle had written his original sketch before Prior and Forster entered the field, that it was expanded with materials brought to light by Prior, and that it was further expanded into its present form by additions from Forster's work.¹³ Professor David Masson referred to it as "a compilation from Prior and Forster" by "one who delighted all his life, in acknowledging Goldsmith as his literary master, and has been named, in consequence. 'The American Goldsmith.'"14 To Washington Irving the credit must be given for discovering Goldsmith for American readers.

Irving possessed a remarkable ability for reworking old material. Like Goldsmith, he had the happy faculty of being able to select, abridge, and revise the material of other writers to produce a work in a clear, pleasing, and somewhat sophisticated style of his own. Furthermore, he was somehow fortunate or shrewd or well mannered enough to stay out of the bitter controversies that arose among other biographers of Goldsmith in his time. In his preface to the 1849 edition, Irving commends Prior for his "unwearied research and scrupulous fidelity" and then justifies his own work by stating that Prior's work is "too cumbrous and overlaid with details and

⁷Ibid, II, 222.

⁸Pierre Irving, Life and Letters, IV, 53.

⁹Ibid., III. 156.

¹⁰ Ibid., IV, 53.

¹¹Ibid., IV, 59.

¹²Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁴David Masson, The Miscellaneous Works of Oliver Goldsmith with Biographical Introduction (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1925), p. ix.

¹⁵ Irving, Oliver Goldsmith, X, ix.

disquisitions, and matters uninteresting to the general reader." ¹⁶ He has only praise for John Forster's account of Goldsmith, which was published in 1848, stating that it was "executed with a spirit, a feeling, a grace and eloquence, that leave nothing to be desired." ¹⁷ In justification of his own work, Irving could only say that he was "committed by my previous sketch" and that he has written his work in "as graphic a style as I could command." ¹⁸ In the course of Prior's attack on Forster and Forster's scathing reply in the preface to his 1854 edition of Goldsmith, Irving escaped with only the slightest rap from Forster who made the following comment in his next biography of Goldsmith, a heavy two-volume edition:

If anyone then had warned me of the impending wrath of Mr. Prior, it would have appeared to me simply ridiculous. With some reason, perhaps, any new biographer may demand a brief interval for public judgment before a successor shall occupy his ground, but even this in courtesy only; and it never occurred to me to question Mr. Washington Irving's perfect right to avail himself to the uttermost of the present work, though he did so within as many weeks as I had waited years before encroaching on Mr. Prior's.¹⁹

The practice of borrowing and reworking old materials is apparent over and over in Irving's biographies. While in Spain writing the *Life of Columbus*, he had access to Navarette's account of the voyages of Columbus. Many of Irving's passages are little more than translations. Professor Henry Pochmann has made a thorough study of his use of the German folk tale in "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," which reveals wholesale borrowings. Somewhat in the manner of Shakespeare with the subject matter of many of his plays, Irving made use of his own "magic needle," in his borrowings. In improving by his embellishments and his light, urbane style, he appealed to the reading tastes of his time. His biographies, including the one of his favorite author, are read by few people today. Professor Hellman suggests that "his is too quiet a flavor."²⁰

¹⁸Thid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

¹⁹John Forster, *The Life and Times of Oliver Goldsmith* (2d ed.; London: Bradbury and Evans, 854), p.xviii.

²⁰George S. Hellman, Washington Irving, Esquire, Ambassador at Large from the New World to the Old (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), p. 175.

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At the risk of laboring the point, it may be stated that Irving produced here a biography that was in complete harmony with the character of the subject and at the same time was able to avoid the barbs of other biographers and critics. It is rather ironic to note that Prior and Forster, the two men who did most of the heavy spade work and who labored so diligently to produce what they hoped to be definitive treatments, became bitter rivals, while Irving, drawing on the material of both, produced a work that gained wide acceptance in America and England.

As already noted, Irving's interest in Goldsmith extended over a period of many years. An entry in his journal, dated March 22, 1824, indicates that he was writing away at Goldsmith's Life for a collection of British Classics to be published by the Galignini brothers. Later these same editors, who were evidently pleased with the work, asked this "understanding New Yorker," rather than an Edinburgh or London critic, to write a sketch of the recently deceased Byron for the "only Continental journal printed in the English language."21 This proposed sketch was never written, although Irving was very much interested in Byron about this time. The sketch of Goldsmith and the 1840 edition were later "expanded" in 1849 for Putnam. Irving, however, enhanced the account with his own light, genial style which was completely harmonious with that of Goldsmith's life, particularly in matters that lent themselves to sentiment and good-humored satire. The attitude of Irving clearly indicates sympathy for his subject. Accounts of some of the incidents are slightly changed by rearrangement in the telling and by filling in with imaginary details. Irving retells the entire account. Regarding the matter of anecdotes, Pierre Irving has left the following comments in his own account of his uncle:

Speaking to Mr. Irving of his biography of Goldsmith, soon after its appearance, I asked him if he had introduced any anecdotes not in Prior's or Forster's life of him. "No," playfully: "I could not invent any new ones; but I have altered the setting, and have introduced — not in their biography — Madame Darblay's anecdote about Boswell and Johnson, which is capital. I have also made more of the Jessamy Bride, by adverting to the dates in the tailor's bill, and fixing thereby the date of certain visits to her."22

²¹ Thid.

²²Pierre Irving, Life and Letters, IV, 58-59.

Irving's account of the "Jessamy Bride's" securing a lock of the deceased Goldsmith's hair and preserving it in her locket to the end of her life is reminiscent of the story told of Irving and Matilda Hoffman.

Irving's account of Goldsmith is told chronologically from birth in 1728 to his burial in 1774 in Westminster Abbey. He lists Lord Shelbourne, Lord Lowth, Sir Joshua Reynolds, the Hon. Mr. Beauclerc, Mr. Edmund Burke, and Mr. David Garrick as pallbearers. Irving includes the best known episodes about Goldsmith. Particular attention is given the events in Goldsmith's life that he later drew upon for such literary productions as "The Deserted Village," "She Stoops to Conquer," and *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Irving himself writes that

An acquaintance with the private biography of Goldsmith lets us into the secret of his gifted pages. We there discover them to be little more than transcripts of his own heart and picturing of his fortunes. There he shows himself the same kind, artless, good-humored, excursive, sensible, whimsical, intelligent being that he appears in his writings. Scarcely an adventure or character is given in his works that may not be traced to his own parti-colored story. Many of his most ludicrous scenes and ridiculous incidents have been drawn from his own blunders and mischances, and he seems really to have been buffeted into almost every maxim imparted by him for the instruction of his reader.²³

Goldsmith's sentimental and satirical tendencies were never far apart; and when his charitable heart was brought into direct contact with the vagabond world of his travels, he paid a high price for learning which was often accompanied by bitterness. Nevertheless, he possessed the ability to look back on his experiences and chuckle and use them in his writings. Despite his being buffeted about the world, this sensitive pock-marked man seems to have remained the sentimental victim of every rascal who wished to impose on his charitable nature. Yet Goldsmith was quite capable on occasions of entertaining satirical, and even cynical, aspects of human existence. One can detect this bitterness in the following

²³Irving, Oliver Goldsmith, X, 11-12.

quotation from a letter to his brother Henry, advising him concerning the education of his son:

Above all things, let him never touch a romance or a novel: these paint beauty in colors more charming than nature, and describe happiness that man never tastes. How delusive, how destructive are those pictures of consummate bliss! They teach the youthful mind to sigh after beauty and happiness that never existed; to despise the little good which fortune has mixed in our cup, by expecting more than she ever gave: and, in general, take the word of a man who has seen the world, and who has studied human nature more by experience than precept; take my word for it, I say, that books teach us very little of the world. The greatest merit in a state of poverty would only serve to make the possessor ridiculous - may distress, but cannot relieve him. ... I had learned from books to be disinterested and generous, before I was taught from experience the necessity of being prudent. I had contracted the habits and notions of a philosopher, by being, even with my narrow finances, charitable to excess, I forgot the rules of justice, and placed myself in the very situation of the wretch who thanked me for my bounty.24

Appropriately enough Irving concludes the biography with the words, "Poor Goldsmith."

Reviews and letters that followed the 1849 edition of Goldsmith were quite favorable. A few days after its publication, Irving received a note from Mr. George Ripley, head of the literary department of the New York Tribune and later one of the editors of the New American Cyclopaedia, saying, "Everything combines to make this one of the most fascinating pieces of biography in the English language." In the same note, Ripley goes on to call attention to Irving's ability to give the subject fresh interest and to give the correct emphasis and charm to Goldsmith's simplicity and weaknesses. Also, he points out the fact that "Irving was in possession of abun-

²⁴Ibid., X, 93-94.

²⁵Pierre Irving, Life and Letters, IV, 54.

dant materials to do justice to the subject," and that "He had only to insert his exquisite magnetic needle into the mass, to give a choice and shapely form to all that was valuable in the labors of previous biographers."²⁶ William Cullen Bryant was greatly impressed with the work, saying, "For my part, I know nothing like it. I have read no biographical memoir which carries forward the reader so delightfully and with so little tediousness of recital or reflection. I never take it up without being tempted to wish Irving had written more works of the kind."²⁷ This statement carries greater significance when one is aware that Bryant made less flattering remarks about *The Life of Columbus* which was to come off the press later on, calling attention to the "deadening defect" in much of Irving's work, and describing it as having an "elaborate uniformity of style—a certain prismatic coloring in passages where absolute simplicity would be better."²⁸

Bryant's praise of Irving's *Life of Goldsmith*, however, echoes down the years. G. P. Putnam, the publisher, commented that "Irving's most rapidly written book was the one often pronounced his most spirited one, and a model as a biography."²⁹ In April, 1850, Professor George W. Greene, in the *Christian Review*, wrote:

If there is anybody of whom it could be said that it was his duty to write the Life of Goldsmith, it is Washington Irving; and, often as we have had occasion to thank him for happy hours, we do not know that we ever felt so grateful to him for anything as for this. . . . None but a man of genial nature should ever attempt to write the Life of Goldsmith: one who knows how much wisdom can be extracted from folly; how much better for the heart it is to trust than to doubt; how much nobler is a generous impulse than a cautious reserve; how much truer a wisdom there is in benevolence, than in all the shrewd devices of worldly craft.

²⁶ Ibid.

[&]quot;William Cullen Bryant, The Life and Works of William Cullen Bryant, ed. Parke Godwin (6 vols.; New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1884), II, 359.

²⁸Ibid., pp. 353-354.

²⁹G. P. Putnam, "Recollections of Irving," pp. 601-602.

Now Mr. Irving is just the man to feel all this, and to make you feel it too.³⁰

Charles Dudley Warner, who wrote a biography of Irving, published in 1882, commented that

It is an exquisite, sympathetic piece of work, without pretension of any subtle verbal analysis, but on the whole an excellent interpretation of character. Author and subject had much in common: Irving had at least a kindly sympathy for the vagabondish inclination of his predecessor, and with his humorous and cheerful regard to the world; perhaps it is significant of a deeper unity in character that both, at times, fancied they could please an intolerant world by attempting to play the flute.³¹

In 1921, Miss Katherine Tappert, a student of biographical writing, stated that *The Life of Goldsmith* has been referred to as "one of the best biographies in the whole range of English literature."³²

Despite the earlier praise, scant attention is given to any of Irving's serious biographical works today although by far the greater portion of his work consists of biographical productions and much of his fiction is pseudo-biographical. Professor Stanley T. Williams, in a more recent treatment of Irving in the *Literary History of the United States*, makes a single and rather melancholy comment on the Goldsmith biography, which was written during Irving's last years at Sunnyside.

Reestablished there, in the last decade of his life, he wearily replundered the old notebooks until Longfellow, who owed so much to the inspiration of *The Sketchbook*, protested at this deterioration. These articles for the *Knickerbocker*, the miscellanies, such as *Wolfert's Roost*, or the third-rate biographies of Goldsmith and of Mahomet hardly bear analysis; little remained but

²⁰George W. Greene, A Review of Washington Irving's Works in The Christian Review, XV (April, 1850), 211-213.

³¹Charles Dudley Warner, Washington Irving ("American Men of Letters Series"; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1882), p. 172.

³²Katherine Tappert (ed.), Viewpoints in Biography (Chicago: American Library Association, 1921), p. 28.

the wornout themes and the perfunctory grace of the master's style. 33

In another work on Irving, Professor Williams praises and condemns the biography in a single paragraph, remarking that while discarding the lumber of his earlier editions, he wrote "a long essay, skillfully wrought and subdued into one soft color as in Irving's best writing."³⁴ Then Professor Williams refers to Irving's irresponsible handling of facts to make a plausible story, and to "thefts" from Forster, and to unauthorized interpretations of facts.³⁵

But for the fact that Irving's Goldsmith has fared better over the years, one might heed Professor Williams' suggestion to dismiss serious consideration of the work. Irving and Goldsmith had much in common, and doubtless this is one of the reasons that the 1849 edition of *The Life of Goldsmith* is the "most delightful of Irving's biographical works." As late as 1924, Professor George S. Hellman stated that

Oliver Goldsmith was, in his generousness, his whimsicality, his point of view towards human nature and in his sentimentality, very much the lovable kind of being that we find Irving to have been. Though the American was the steadier and the wiser of the two, even in their faults of indolence and of improvidence, they were akin. As authors, also, they were alike in charm and simplicity of style, and in their appeal of genial humour, and in the mellowness of their rarer phases of melancholy. The writer who is inherently in sympathy with his subject has the most essential equipment of the biographer; small wonder, then, that Irving's life of Oliver Goldsmith (the most quickly written of all his works), though it brings forward little that is new concerning the author of "Vicar of Wakefield," is by far the most enjoyable of Irving's biographies.87

⁸³Robert E. Spiller, et al. (eds.), Literary History of the United States ⁸⁴Williams, Life of Irving, II, 222.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁸ Hellman, Washington Irving, Esquire, p. 30.

⁸⁷Ibid.

Irving's family background was one of greater wealth than Goldsmith's. After dilly-dallying around in his youth, he settled on a law career as a road to professional respectability by reading law in the office of Josiah Ogden Hoffman. Also, he played around the edges of politics and even spent a short time in Washington. Although Irving never appeared to be greatly interested in the rough and tumble or the more subtle aspects of politics, he was able, through the influence of people in high political office, to spend much time in Great Britain and Europe at United States Government expense, a circumstance that gave him opportunity to delve into the literatures of Great Britain, Germany, and Spain. Goldsmith, after floundering around during his early youth, settled on a medical career; however, he gave it up after a short time for a life of wandering and writing. Both men possessed the proclivities of a vagabond and drifted into literary careers. Both writers did a sizable amount of hack work when they were at times hard pressed for funds. Both had close family ties. Both were good-natured, genial, gregarious, and excellent conversationalists, and both men had friends in literary and political circles. Their styles of writing were somewhat similar-cultivated, genial, sentimental, and on occasions satirical. They were products of the eighteenth century classical tradition while embracing romantic traits of individualism, sentimentalism, optimism, and love for adventure. The eighteenth century is reflected largely in their style. By Irving's own testimony. Goldsmith's life and writings exerted a profound influence on him, and he confessed that Goldsmith was his favorite author. In his preface to the Life of Goldsmith, one finds the following comment:

For my own part, I can only regret my short-comings in what to me is a labor of love; for it is a tribute of gratitude to the memory of an author whose writings were the delight of my child-hood, and have been a source of enjoyment to me throughout life; and to whom, of all others, I may address the beautiful apostrophe of Dante to Virgil:

"Tu se' lo mio maestro, e 'l mio autore: Tu se' solo colui, da cu, io tolsi Lo bello stile, ch m' ha fato onore." Sunnyside, Aug., 1, 1849.38

²⁸Irving, Oliver Goldsmith, X, x.

Translated by Pierre Irving, these lines read:
Thou art my master, and my teacher thou:
It was from thee, and thee alone, I took
That noble style for which men honor me.³⁹

Concerning these lines and the comment they caused, Pierre asked his uncle about them.

He smiled; said he meant only to express his affectionate admiration of Goldsmith, but it would never do for an author to acknowledge anything. Was never conscious of an attempt to write after any model. No man of genius ever did. From his earliest attempts, everything fell naturally. His style, he believed, was as much his own as though Goldsmith had never written—as much as his own voice.

This was not the language of self-eulogy, but of quiet self-vindication. He had never meant to warrant such perversion of his quotation, any more than Dante meant to confess himself an imitation of Virgil. There were undoubtedly qualities of style as well as mental and moral characteristics in which he resembled both Goldsmith and Addison, the two with whom he is most frequently compared, while in others it would be impossible to confound them.⁴⁰

A more recent authority on Irving, in calling attention to his sojourn in Paris in 1805 writes that he

refers to his "sometimes being assailed by homesickness," he writes, "this however I hope will wear away in time as I become more 'a citizen of the world!" The final phrase is the first indirect reference to Oliver Goldsmith, whose Life was later to be Irving's finest achievement in the field of biography and whose character bore many resemblances to Irving's own.⁴¹

³⁰Pierre Irving, Life and Letters, IV, 60.

⁴ºIbid., IV, 60-61.

⁴¹ Hellman, Washington Irving, Esquire, pp. 38-39.

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Another literary critic, Van Wyck Brooks, had called attention to Irving's account of Goldsmith, which he has referred to as a "charming biography" and he has called attention to the similarity of the quality of the fame of the two men. Then almost damning with faint praise, he wrote that "Irving too was destined to outlive many authors of higher power because of his tempered sweetness, geniality and grace; and while almost everyone remarked that Irving was 'much overrated,' still everyone continued to read him."⁴²

In summing up literary influence, Professor Williams has said:

In respect to Goldsmith one is tempted, first of all, to face the ghost of Irving's debt, to lay it or to accept it, and perhaps, to proclaim the biography to the final proof that the author of Salmagundi and The Sketch Book was the stepson of the creator of The Citizen of the World and the Vicar of Wakefield. Oliver Goldsmith, from its first appearance, has been regarded as tribute from pupil to master, as the climax of an influence profoundly affecting the writings of Irving for nearly fifty years.⁴³

Quite obviously the degree of Goldsmith's influence on Irving cannot be settled. Nevertheless, his influence is obvious. Quite frequently, Irving reworked the material of others and produced, often by condensing and rephrasing in his own style, a work that is much more readable than the source. He never missed an opportunity to be gently satirical and urbane. One of the most style-conscious of English writers, Thomas Babington Macaulay, who also wrote an account of Goldsmith, commented that "the diligence of Mr. Prior deserves great praise; the style of Mr. Washington Irving is always pleasing; but the highest place must in justice be assigned to the immensely interesting work of Mr. Forster." Before Macaulay made this comment just quoted, the Reverend George Gilfillan, in his own sketch states that there are no new facts added "to those which have been laboriously collected by Prior and Forster, and gracefully narrated by Washington Irving."

⁴²Van Wyck Brooks, *The World of Washington Irving* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1944). p. 359.

⁴⁸Williams, Life of Irving, II, 219.

[&]quot;The Poetical Works of Goldsmith and Gray with a Memoir of Each (2 vols. in one; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., n.d.), p. xxxiii.

⁴⁵George Gilfillan (ed.), The Poetical Works of Goldsmith, Collins, and T. Warton (Edinburgh: J. Nichol, 1854), p. xiii.

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Irving and His "Favorite Author"

Although by far the greater portion of Irving's work is biographical, no exhaustive study of him as a biographer has been made. His fame rests securely on his satirical tales and the *Knickerbocker History*. Today, he is remembered chiefly as a gentleman litterateur rather than as a professional historian and biographer. As a biographer he has been superseded by more recent and better equipped biographers of the subjects that he treated. Nevertheless, in his best fictional material he employs biographical, or rather pseudo-biographical, method. "My only aim," he professes in one of his works of fiction, "is to paint characters and manners."⁴⁶ In his biography of Oliver Goldsmith, he accomplished these objec-

⁴⁰Irving, Bracebridge Hall, in The Works of Washington Irving (15 vols.; New York: Peter Fenelon Collier, Publisher, 1897), Xi, 364. tives.