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Remarks On The Life and Writings Of Dr. Jonathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin

Orrery, John Boyle of

London, 1752

The character of Dr. Sheridan.

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AND WRITINGS OF DR. SWIFT. 53

SWIFT was naturally fond of seeing his works in print, and he was encouraged in this fondness by his friend Dr. SHERIDAN, who had the *cacoethes scribendi* to the greatest degree, and was continually letting off squibs, rockets, and all sorts of little fireworks from the press, by which means he offended many particular persons, who, although they stood in awe of SWIFT, held SHERIDAN at defiance. The truth is, the poor Doctor, by nature the most peaceable, inoffensive man alive, was in a continual state of warfare with the minor poets, and they revenged themselves, or, in the style of Mr. BAYS, often gave him *flash for flash*, and *singed his feathers*. The affection between THESEUS and PERITHOUS was not greater than the affection between SWIFT and SHERIDAN: but the friendship that cemented the two ancient heroes probably commenced upon motives very different from those which united the two modern divines. As in a former letter, I drew a picture of SWIFT's wife^a, let me here give you some sketches of SWIFT's friend.

Dr. SHERIDAN was a schoolmaster, and, in many instances, perfectly well adapted for that station. He was deeply versed in the Greek and Roman languages; and in their customs and antiquities. He had that kind of good-nature, which absence of mind, indolence of body, and carelessness of fortune produce; and although

^a Letter II. page 14.

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not over strict in his own conduct, yet he took care of the morality of his scholars, whom he sent to the University remarkably well founded in all classical learning, and not ill instructed in the social duties of life. He was slovenly, indigent, and chearful. He knew books much better than men : and he knew the value of money least of all. In this situation, and with this disposition, SWIFT fastened upon him, as upon a prey with which he intended to regale himself, whenever his appetite should prompt him. SHERIDAN therefore was kept constantly within his reach : and the only time he was permitted to go beyond the limits of his chain, was to take possession of a living in the county of *Corke*, which had been bestowed upon him by the then Lord Lieutenant of *Ireland*, the present Earl of *Granville*. SHERIDAN, in one fatal moment, or by one fatal text, effected his own ruin. You will find the story told by SWIFT himself, in the fourth volume of his works^b : so that here I need only tell you, that this ill-starred, good-natured, improvident man returned to *Dublin*, unhinged from all favour at court, and even banished from the castle. But still he remained a punster, a quibbler, a fiddler, and a wit. Not a day passed without a rebus, an anagram, or a madrigal. His pen and his fiddle-stick were in continual motion ; and yet

^b Page 289. In a pamphlet entitled, A Vindication of his Excellency JOHN Lord CARTERET from the charge of favouring none but Tories, High Churchmen, and Jacobites.

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to little or no purpose, if we may give credit to the following verses, which shall serve as the conclusion of his poetical character,

With music and poetry equally blest'd,
 A bard thus APOLLO most humbly address'd,
 Great author of poetry, music, and light,
 Instructed by thee I both fiddle and write:
 Yet unheeded I scrape, or I scribble all day,
 My tunes are neglected, my verse flung away.
 Thy substitute here VICE-APOLLO^c disdains,
 To vouch for my numbers, or list to my strains.
 Thy manual sign he refuses to put
 To the airs I produce from the pen, or the gut.
 Be thou then propitious, great PHOEBUS, and grant
 Relief; or reward to my merit, or want.
 Tho' the DEAN and DELANY^d transcendently shine,
 O! brighten one solo, or sonnet of mine.
 Make one work immortal; 'tis all I request;
 APOLLO look'd pleas'd, and resolving to jest,
 Replied, honest friend, I've consider'd your case,
 Nor dislike your unmeaning and innocent face.
 Your petition I grant, the boon is not great,
 Your works shall continue, and here's the receipt,
 On^e *Roundos* hereafter your fiddle-strings spend,
 Write verses in circles, they never shall end.

^c Dr. SWIFT.

^d Now Dean of *Downe*.

^e A song, or peculiar kind of poetry, which returns to the beginning of the first verse, and so continues in a perpetual rotation.

In the course of my correspondence, my dear HAM, you may possibly observe some seeming contradictions, as I am pursuing the Dean through the mazy turnings of his character. But, they will easily be reconciled, when you consider, that, of all mankind, SWIFT perhaps had the greatest contrasts in his temper. He often put me in mind of that wild opinion, which PLUTARCH says was entertained by the sages of old, "That we
 " are subject to the influence of two principles, or
 " deities, who are in constant opposition to each other:
 " the one directing us to the right hand, and through
 " the right road, the other driving us astray, and op-
 " posing us from pursuing the track pointed out by his
 " adversary." The Manichean heresy, you know, has been built upon this hypothesis: and it is not impossible (as the doctrine itself was propagated before the time of MANES) that some antient speculative philosopher may have invented such a kind of mythology, merely to solve the various contradictions which he found fluctuating within his own breast.

You will possibly expect from me a collection of apophthegms, which the Dean may have uttered upon various occasions. But, the witty records of table-talk in my mind seem too minute and over curious; at least I must wish to treat with you upon subjects of more importance. I mean such subjects as will teach you to follow some moral virtue, or to shun some moral evil.

Forgive me too, if I am now and then guilty of repetitions. In reviewing the same person so often, the
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