



UNIVERSITÄTS-
BIBLIOTHEK
PADERBORN

Universitätsbibliothek Paderborn

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

Orrery, John Boyle of

London, 1752

Letter IX.

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-49109](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-49109)



L E T T E R IX.

WE are now come, my dear HAMILTON, to the second volume of SWIFT's works. It is filled with poetry: but the poems in general are short and fatirical. The poem of the greatest length, and, I believe, the longest ever composed by Dr. SWIFT, is of a very extraordinary nature, and upon a very extraordinary subject. It is called CADENUS and VANESSA. As a poem, it is excellent in its kind, perfectly correct, and admirably conducted. SWIFT, who had the nicest ear, is remarkably chaste and delicate in his rhymes. A bad rhyme appeared to him one of the capital sins in poetry; and yet it is a sin into which some of our greatest poets have fallen. DRYDEN frequently: POPE sometimes. The former, was embarrassed with a wife and family, and was often under such necessitous circumstances as to be obliged to publish, or to want subsistence. The latter, was in a less confined, and in a much more easy situation: he was naturally judicious, and uncommonly attentive to maintain the dignity of his character. Although his body was weak, his mind was equal to the weight of his laurel crown;

crown ; and he wore it not only with ease, but majesty. Take him as a poet, *we shall not see his like again.* But why do I keep you in suspense ? you are impatient, I dare say, to know some particulars of VANESSA. Her real name was ESTHER VANHOMRICH ^a. She was one of the daughters of BARTHOLOMEW VANHOMRICH, a Dutch merchant of *Amsterdam*, who, upon the revolution, went into *Ireland*, and was appointed, by King WILLIAM, a commissioner of the revenue. Her mother, whose name I forget, was born in *Ireland*, of very mean extraction. The Dutch merchant, by parsimony and prudence, had collected a fortune of about sixteen thousand pounds : he bequeathed an equal division of it to his wife and his four children, of which two were sons, and two were daughters. The sons, after the death of their father, travelled abroad. The eldest died beyond sea, and the youngest, surviving his brother only a short time, the whole patrimony fell to his two sisters, ESTHER and MARY.

With this increase of wealth, and with heads and hearts elated by affluence, and unrestrained by foresight or discretion, the widow VANHOMRICH and her two daughters quitted the illuxurious soil of their native country, for the more elegant pleasures of the English court. During their residence at *London*, they lived in a course of prodigality that stretched itself far beyond the limits of their income, and reduced them to great

^a The name is pronounced VANNUMMERY.

distress ; in the midst of which, the mother died, and the two daughters hastened in all secrecy back to *Ireland*, beginning their journey on a Sunday, to avoid the interruption, and importunities of a certain fierce kind of animals called bailiffs, who are not only sworn foes to wit and gaiety, but whose tyranny, although it could not have reached the deified VANESSA, might have been very fatal to ESTHER VANHOMRIGH. Within two years after their arrival in *Ireland*, MARY the youngest sister died, and the small remains of the shipwreckt fortune centered in VANESSA.

Vanity makes terrible devastation in a female breast. It batters down all restraints of modesty, and carries away every seed of virtue. VANESSA was excessively vain. The character given of her by CADENUS is fine painting, but, in general, fictitious. She was fond of dress : impatient to be admired : very romantic in her turn of mind : superior, in her own opinion, to all her sex : full of pertness, gaiety, and pride : not without some agreeable accomplishments, but far from being either beautiful or genteel : ambitious, at any rate, to be esteemed a wit ; and, with that view, always affecting to keep company with wits : a great reader, and a violent admirer of poetry : happy in the thoughts of being reputed SWIFT's concubine : but still aiming and intending to be his wife. By nature haughty, and disdainful, looking with the pity of contempt upon her inferiors, and with the smiles of self-approbation upon her equals : but upon Dr. SWIFT with the eyes

of

REMARKS ON THE LIFE
AND WRITINGS OF DR. SWIFT. 69

of love. Her love was founded in vanity, or, to use a more fashionable phrase, *in taste*. His own lines are the best proof of my assertion.

CADENUS many things had writ;
VANESSA much esteem'd his wit,
And call'd for his poetic works;
Mean time the boy ^a in secret lurks,
And while the book was in her hand,
The urchin, from his private stand,
Took aim, and shot with all his strength
A dart of such prodigious length;
It pierc'd the feeble volume thro',
And deep transfix'd her bosom too.
Some lines, more moving than the rest,
Stuck to the point that pierc'd her breast;
And born directly to her heart,
With pains unknown increas'd the smart.
VANESSA, not in years a score,
Dreams of a gown of forty four;
Imaginary charms can find,
In eyes, with reading, almost blind:
CADENUS now no more appears
Declin'd in health, advanc'd in years:
She fancies music in his tongue,
Nor further looks, but thinks him young.

The poem itself is dated in the year 1713, when SWIFT was in his meridian altitude; favoured by the

^a CUPID.

F 3

courtiers;

courtiers; flattered, feared, and admired by the greatest men in the nation.

By the verses which I have already recited, it may be presumed, that the lady was first smitten with the fame and character of CADENUS, and afterwards with his person. Her first thoughts pursued a phantom. Her later passion desired a substance. The manner in which she discovered her inclinations, is poetically described in these lines.

*She own'd the wand'ring of her thoughts,
 But he must answer for her faults.
 She well remember'd, to her cost,
 That all his lessons were not lost.
 Two maxims she cou'd still produce,
 And sad experience taught their use:
 That virtue, pleas'd by being shown,
 Knows nothing which it dare not own:
 Can make us, without fear, disclose
 Our inmost secrets to our foes:
 That common forms were not design'd
 Directors to a noble mind.
 Now, said the nymph, to let you see,
 My actions with your rules agree;
 That I can vulgar forms despise,
 And have no secrets to disguise,
 I knew, by what you said and writ,
 How dang'rous things were men of wit;*

AND WRITINGS OF DR. SWIFT. 71

*You caution'd me against their charms,
But never gave me equal arms :
Your lessons found the weakest part,
Aim'd at the head, and reach'd the heart.*

Supposing this account to be true, and I own to you, my HAM, I can scarce think it otherwise, it is evident, that the fair VANESSA had made a surprizing progress in the philosophic doctrines, which she had received from her preceptor. His rules were certainly of a most extraordinary kind. He taught her, that vice, as soon as it defied shame, was immediately changed into virtue. That vulgar forms were not binding upon certain *choice spirits*, to whom either the writings, or the persons of men of wit were acceptable. She heard the lesson with attention, and imbibed the philosophy with eagerness. The maxims suited her exalted turn of mind. She imagined that if the theory appeared so charming, the practice must be much more delightful. The close connection of soul and body seemed to require, in the eye of a female philosopher, that each should succeed the other in all pleasurable enjoyments. The former had been sufficiently regaled, why must the latter remain unsatisfied? "Nature, said VANESSA, "abhors a *vacuum*, and nature ought always to be "obeyed." She communicated these sentiments to her tutor, but he seemed not to comprehend her meaning, nor to conceive the *distinctio rationis* that had taken rise in his own school. He answered her in the non-

essential modes. He talked of friendship, of the delights of reason, of gratitude, respect and esteem. He almost preached upon virtue, and he muttered some indistinct phrases concerning chastity.

So unaccountable a conduct in CADENUS may be thought rather to proceed from defects in nature, than from the scrupulous difficulties of a tender conscience. Such a supposition will still appear more strong, if we recollect the distant manner in which SWIFT cohabited with STELLA, colder, if possible, after, than before, she was his wife: and I now recollect some of his own lines that seem to confirm the surmise, as they contain an insinuation against VANESSA, not perhaps so much intended to wound her reputation, as to save his own.

*But what success VANESSA met
Is to the world a secret yet.
Whether the nymph, to please her swain,
Talks in a high romantic strain;
Or whether he at last descends,
To act with less seraphic ends;
Or to compound the business, whether
They temper love and books together,
Must never to mankind be told,
Nor shall the conscious muse unfold.*

It is impossible to read this cruel hint without great indignation against the *conscious muse*, especially as it is the finishing stroke of a picture, which was already drawn

AND WRITINGS OF DR. SWIFT. 73

drawn in too loose a garment, and too unguarded a posture. In this instance, I am afraid the Dean must remain inexcusable.

VANESSA, in some time after the death of her sister, retired to *Selbridge*, a small house and estate that had been purchased by her father, within ten or twelve miles of *Dublin*. Spleen and disappointment were the companions of her solitude. The narrowness of her income, the coldness of her lover, the loss of her reputation, all contributed to make her miserable, and to increase the frenzied disposition of her mind. In this melancholy situation she remained several years, during which time CADENUS visited her frequently. Their particular conversation, as it passed without witnesses, must for ever remain unknown: but, in general, it is certain, that she often pressed him to marry her. His answers were rather turns of wit than positive denials; till at last, being unable to sustain her weight of misery any longer, she wrote a very tender epistle to CADENUS, insisting peremptorily upon as serious an answer, and an immediate acceptance, or absolute refusal of her, as his wife. His reply was delivered by his own hand. He brought it with him when he made his final visit at *Selbridge*: and throwing down the letter upon her table, with great passion hastened back to his horse, carrying in his countenance the frowns of anger and indignation.

Dr. SWIFT had a natural severity of face, which even his smiles could scarce soften, or his utmost gaiety render

render placid and serene : but when that sternness of visage was encreased by rage, it is scarce possible to imagine looks, or features, that carried in them more terror and austerity. VANESSA had seen him in all tempers, and from his outward appearance she guessed at the inward contents of his letter. She read it with as much resolution as the present cruelty of her fate, and the raging pride of her heart, would permit. She found herself entirely discarded from his friendship and conversation. Her offers were treated with insolence and disdain. She met with reproaches instead of love, and with tyranny instead of affection. She had long thrown away the gentle lenitives of virtue ; which, upon this occasion, might have proved healing ingredients to so deep, and so dangerous a wound. She had preferred wit to religion, she had utterly destroyed her character, and her conscience : and she was now fallen a prey to the horror of her own thoughts.

*Tum vero infelix satis exterrita Dido
Mortem orat : tædet cæli convexa tueri.*

She did not survive many days the letter delivered to her by CADENUS, but, during that short interval, she was sufficiently composed, to cancel a will made in SWIFT's favour, and to make another, wherein she left her fortune (which, by long retirement, was in some measure retrieved) to her two executors, Dr. BERKLEY, the present Bishop of *Cloyne*, and Mr. MARSHAL, one
of

AND WRITINGS OF DR. SWIFT. 75

of the King's Serjeants at law. She had chosen Mr. MARSHALL, not only as he had an excellent character, but as he was her relation. She had little personal acquaintance with Dr. BERKLEY: his virtues, and his genius, were universally known: yet other motives perhaps induced her to appoint him a joint executor: in such an appointment, she probably designed to mortify the pride of Dr. SWIFT, by letting him see, that, in her last thoughts, she preferred a stranger before him.

Thus perished, at *Selbridge*, under all the agonies of despair, Mrs. ESTHER VANHOMRIGH; a miserable example of an ill-spent life, fantastic wit, visionary schemes, and female weakness.

My paper scarce allows room for the affectionate name of

O R R E R Y.

L E T.