



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 X.

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



LETTER X.

My dear HAMILTON,

I Have received yours of the 24th instant. You seem so much pleased with the commentaries relating to VANESSA, and you have expressed so much satisfaction in my account of STELLA, that probably you wish SWIFT to have had as many wives and mistresses as SOLOMON, in order to furnish me with perpetual materials for the history of a Lady. It is true, my friend the Dean kept company with many of the fair sex, but they were rather his amusement than his admiration. He trifled away many hours in their conversation, he filled many pages in their praise, and by the power of his head, he gained the character of a lover, without the least assistance from his heart. To this particular kind of pride, supported by the bent of his genius, and joined by the excessive coldness of his nature, VANESSA owed the ruin of her reputation, and from the same causes, STELLA remained an unacknowledged wife. If we consider SWIFT'S behaviour, so far only as it relates to women, we shall find, that he looked upon them rather as bufs, than as whole figures. In his panegyrical descriptions,

descriptions, he has seldom descended lower than the center of their hearts: or if ever he has designed a compleat statue, it has been generally cast in a dirty, or in a disagreeable mould: as if the statuary had not conceived, or had not experienced, that justness of proportion, that delicacy of limb, and those pleasing, and graceful attitudes which have constituted the sex to be the most beautiful part of the creation. If you review his several poems to STELLA, you will find them fuller of affection than desire, and more expressive of friendship, than of love. For example,

*Thou, STELLA, wert no longer young,
When first for thee my harp I strung;
Without one word of CUPID'S darts,
Of killing eyes, or bleeding hearts:
With friendship and esteem possesst,
I ne'er admitted Love a guest.*

Most of the poems, which are absolutely addressed to STELLA, or which describe her in a variety of attitudes, turn upon her age: a kind of excuse perhaps for SWIFT'S want of love.

I began one of my former letters, my dear HAMILTON, by a declaration that it was impossible for me to pass a very minute comment upon the various pieces that he has written; and I must renew the same declaration in regard to his poems. They are not only mingled improperly, in points of dates, and subjects, but many, very many of them, are temporary, trifling, and

and I had almost said puerile. Several of them are personal, and consequently scarce amusing; or at least, they leave a very small impression upon our minds. Such indeed as are likely to draw your attention, are exquisite, and so peculiarly his own, that whoever has dared to imitate him in these, or in any of his works, has constantly failed in the attempt. Upon a general view of his poetry, we shall find him, as in his other performances, an uncommon, surprizing, heteroclitic genius: luxurious in his fancy, lively in his ideas, humorous in his descriptions, and bitter, exceeding bitter in his satyr. The restlessness of his imagination, and the disappointment of his ambition, have both contributed to hinder him from undertaking any poetical work of length or importance. His wit was sufficient to every labour: no flight could have wearied the strength of his pinions: perhaps if the extensive views of his nature had been fully satisfied, his airy motions had been more regular, and less sudden. But, he now appears, like an eagle that is sometimes chained, and at that particular time, for want of nobler, and more proper food, diverts his confinement, and appeases his hunger, by destroying the gnats, butterflies, and other wretched insects, that unluckily happen to buzz, or flutter within his reach.

While I have been reading over this volume of his poetry, I have considered him as an *Ægyptian* hieroglyphic, which, though it had an unnatural, and frequently an indecent appearance, yet it always contained some secret marks of wisdom, and sometimes of

deep

deep morality. The subjects of his poems are often nauseous, and the performances beautifully disagreeable.

The Lady's Dressing Room has been universally condemn'd, as deficient in point of delicacy, even to the highest degree. The best apology that can be made in its favour, is to suppose, that the author exhibited his *CELIA* in the most hideous colours he could find, lest she might be mistaken as a goddess, when she was only a mortal. External beauty is very alluring to youth and inexperience; and SWIFT, by pulling off the borrowed plumes of his harpy, discovers at once a frightful bird of prey, and by making her offensive, renders her less dangerous and inviting. Such, I hope, was his design; but let his views and motives have been ever so beneficial, his general want of delicacy and decorum, must not hope even to find the shadow of an excuse; for it is impossible not to own, that he too frequently forgets that politeness and tenderness of manners, which are undoubtedly due to human kind. From his early, and repeated disappointments, he became a misanthrope. If his mind had been more equal and content, I am willing to believe, that he would have viewed the works of nature with a more benign aspect. And perhaps, under a less constant rotation of anxiety, he might have preserved his senses to the last scene of life, and might have enjoyed that calm *exit* from the stage, for which his friend HORACE so earnestly supplicates APOLLO.

Frui paratis et valido mihi

Latoe donec, et precor, integrâ

Cum mentè: nec turpem senectam

Degere, nec citbarâ carentem.

I have already told you, that his pride was so great as scarce to admit any body to the least share of his friendship, except such who could amuse him, or such who could do him honour. To these two different classes, we owe many of his poems. His companions and humble followers find themselves immortalized by the insertion of their names in addresses to STELLA, or in other miscellaneous pieces written in an easy, although not in a careless manner. His more exalted friends, whose stations and characters did him honour, are treated in a different style: and you will perceive a real dignity, and a most delicate kind of wit in all his poems to Lord OXFORD, Lord PETERBOROUGH, Lord CARTERET ^a, Mr. PULTNEY ^b, and I think I may particularly add, in a poem to the Countess of WINCHELSEA ^c, and another to Mrs. BIDDY FLOYDE. These names abetted him in his pursuit of fame. They reflected back the glory which he gave. But, still I cannot recollect one poem, nay, scarce a couplet, to his

^a Now Earl of GRANVILLE.

^b Now Earl of BATH.

^c Under the name of ARDELIA.

noble

AND WRITINGS OF DR. SWIFT. 81

noble patron LORD BOLINGBROKE. In that instance he has been as silent, as VIRGIL has been to HORACE, and yet he certainly had not a grain of envy in his composition.

I think I can discern a third kind of style in his poems addressed to MR. POPE, MR. GAY, DR. DELANY, and DR. YOUNG. When he writes to them, there is a mixture of ease, dignity, familiarity, and affection. They were his intimate friends, whom he loved sincerely, and whom he wished to accompany into the poetical regions of eternity.

I have just now cast my eye over a poem called *Death and Daphne*, which makes me recollect an odd incident relating to that nymph. SWIFT, soon after our acquaintance, introduced me to her, as to one of his female favourites. I had scarce been half an hour in her company, before she asked me, if I had seen the DEAN'S poem upon *Death and Daphne*. As I told her I had not, she immediately unlocked a cabinet, and bringing out the manuscript, read it to me with a seeming satisfaction, of which, at that time, I doubted the sincerity. While she was reading, the Dean was perpetually correcting her for bad pronunciation, and for placing a wrong emphasis upon particular words. As soon as she had gone thorough the composition, she assured me smilingly, that the portrait of DAPHNE was drawn for herself: I begged to be excused from believing it, and protested that I could not see one feature that had the least resemblance, but the Dean immediately burst into a fit of laughter. "You fancy, says he, that you are very polite, but you are

G

" much

“ much mistaken. That Lady had rather be a DAPHNE
 “ drawn by me, than a SACHARISSA by any other pen-
 “ cil.” She confirmed what he had said, with great
 earnestness, so that I had no other method of retrieving
 my error, than by whispering in her ear, as I was con-
 ducting her down stairs to dinner, that indeed I found

“ *Her hand as dry and cold as lead.*”

You see the command which SWIFT had over all his
 females; and you would have smiled to have found his
 house, a constant seraglio of very virtuous women, who
 attended him from morning till night, with an obedi-
 ence, an awe, and an assiduity, that are seldom paid to
 the richest, or the most powerful lovers; no, not even
 to the Grand Signor himself.

To these Ladies, SWIFT owed the publication of
 many pieces, which ought never to have been delivered
 to the press. He communicated every composition as
 soon as finished, to his female senate, who, not only
 passed their judgement on the performance, but con-
 stantly asked, and almost as constantly obtained, a copy
 of it. You cannot be surprized that it was immediately
 afterwards seen in print: and when printed, became
 a part of his works. He lived much at home, and
 was continually writing, when alone. Not any of his
 Senators presumed to approach him when he signified
 his pleasure to remain in private, and without interrup-
 tion. His nightgown and slippers were not easier put
 on or off, than his attendants. No Prince ever met
 with more flattery to his own person, or more devotion

AND WRITINGS OF DR. SWIFT. 83

to his own mandates. This despotic power not only blinded him, but gave a loose to passions that ought to have been kept under a proper restraint. I am sorry to say, that whole nations are sometimes sacrificed to his resentment. Reflections of that sort appear to me the least justifiable of any kind of satyr. You will read his *Acerrima* with indignation; and his *Minutiæ* with regret. Yet I must add, that since he has descended so low as to write, and, still so much lower, as to print riddles, he is excellent even in that kind of versification. The lines are smoother, the expressions are neater, and the thought is closer pursued than in any other *riddle-writer* whatever. But, SWIFT composing riddles, is TITIAN painting draught-boards, which must have been inexcusable, while there remained a sign-post painter in the world.

At the latter end of the volume, you will find two Latin poems. The first, *An Epistle to Dr. SHERIDAN*; the last, *A description of the rocks at Carbery in Ireland*. The Dean was extremely solicitous, that they should be printed among his works: and what is no less true than amazing, he assumed to himself more vanity upon these two Latin poems, than upon many of his best English performances. It is said, that MILTON in his own judgement preferred the *Paradise regained* to the *Paradise lost*. There possibly might be found some excuse for such a preference, but in SWIFT's case there can be none. He understood the Latin language perfectly well, and he read it constantly, but he was no Latin poet. And if the *Carberiæ rupes*, and the *Epistola ad THOMAM*

84 REMARKS ON THE LIFE

SHERIDAN, had been the produce of any other author, they must have undergone a severe censure from Dr. SWIFT.

Here I shall dismiss this volume of his poems, which has drawn me into a greater length of letter than I intended. Adieu, my HAM, believe me ever,

Your affectionate Father,

O R R E R Y.



LETTER XI.

My dear HAMILTON,

THE third volume of SWIFT'S works contains *The travels of LEMUEL GULLIVER into several remote nations of the world.* They are divided into four parts; the first, a voyage to *Lilliput*; the second, a voyage to *Brobdingnag*; the third, to *Laputa* and other islands; the fourth, and most extraordinary, to the country of the *Houyhnhnms*. These voyages are intended as a moral political romance, in which SWIFT seems to have exerted the strongest efforts of a fine irregular genius. But while his imagination and his wit delight, the venomous strokes of his satyr, although in some places