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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

Letter XI.

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

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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

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places just, are carried into so universal a severity, that not only all human actions, but human nature itself, is placed in the worst light. Perfection in every attribute is not indeed allotted to particular men: but, among the whole species, we discover such an assemblage of all the great, and amiable virtues, as may convince us, that the original order of nature contains in it the greatest beauty. It is directed in a right line, but it deviates into curves and irregular motions, by various attractions, and disturbing causes. Different qualifications shine out in different men. BACON and NEWTON (not to mention BOYLE) shew the divine extent of the human mind: of which power SWIFT could not be insensible; but as I have often told you, his disappointments rendered him splenetic, and angry with the whole world,

Education, habit, and constitution, give a surprising variety of characters; and, while they produce some particular qualities, are apt to check others. Fortitude of mind seldom attends a sedentary life: nor is the man, whose ambitious views are crossed, scarce ever afterwards indued with benevolence of heart. The same mind, that is capable of exerting the greatest virtue, by some defect in the first steps of education, often degenerates into the greatest vice. These effects take their source from causes almost mechanical. The soul, in our present situation, is blended and enclosed with corporeal substance, and the matter of which our body

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is composed, produces strange impulses upon the mind: but the instances that might illustrate, and explain the different effects arising from this formation, are too digressively extensive for my present plan.

To correct vice, by shewing her deformity in opposition to the beauty of virtue, and to amend the false systems of philosophy, by pointing out the errors, and applying salutary means to avoid them, is a noble design. This was the general intent, I would fain flatter myself, of my hieroglyphic friend.

GULLIVER'S travels are chiefly to be looked upon as an irregular essay of SWIFT'S peculiar wit and humour. Let us take a view of the two first parts together. The inhabitants of *Lilliput* are represented, as if reflected from a convex mirrour, by which every object is reduced to a despicable minuteness. The inhabitants of *Brobdingnag*, by a contrary mirrour, are enlarged to a shocking deformity. In *Lilliput* we behold a set of puny insects, or animalcules in human shape, ridiculously engaged in affairs of importance. In *Brobdingnag* the monsters of enormous size are employed in trifles.

LEMUEL GULLIVER has observed great exactness in the just proportion, and appearances of the several objects thus lessened and magnified: but he dwells too much upon these optical deceptions. The mind is tired with a repetition of them, especially as he points out no beauty, nor use in such amazing discoveries, which
might

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might have been so continued as to have afforded improvement, at the same time that they gave astonishment. Upon the whole, he too often shews an indelicacy that is not agreeable, and exerts his vein of humour most improperly in some places, where (I am afraid) he glances at religion.

In his description of *Lilliput*, he seems to have had *England* more immediately in view. In his description of *Blefuscu* he seems to intend the people and kingdom of *France*: yet the allegory between these nations is frequently interrupted, and scarce any where compleat. Several just strokes of satyr are scattered here and there upon errors in the conduct of our government: and, in the sixth chapter of his voyage to *Brobdingnag*, he gives an account of the political state of *Europe*: his observations are delivered with his usual spirit of humour and severity. He appears most particularly affected with the proceedings of the courts of judicature, and complains of being almost ruined by a Chancery suit, which was *determined in his favour with costs*. It must be confessed, that instances of this kind are too frequent in our courts of justice, and they leave us no room to boast of the execution of our present laws, however excellent the laws, in their own original foundation, may have been. *Judgement, when turned into worm-wood, is bitter*, but delays, as Lord BACON observes, turn it into vinegar: it becomes sharp, and corroding: and certainly it is more eligible to die immediately by the wound

wound of an enemy, than to decay lingering by poison, administered from a seeming friend.

The seventh chapter of the voyage of *Broddingnag* contains such sarcasms on the structure of the human body, as too plainly shew us, that the author was unwilling to lose any opportunity of debasing and ridiculing his own species.

Here a reflection naturally occurs, which, without any superstition, leads me tacitly to admire, and confess the ways of Providence: for this great genius, this mighty wit, who seemed to scoff, and scorn at all mankind, lived not only to be an example to punish his own pride, and to terrify ours, but underwent some of the greatest miseries to which human nature is liable. The particulars of this assertion will appear, by copying a letter which one of his relations sent to me, in answer to my enquiries after his situation.

My

Dublin, November 22, 1742.

My LORD,

THE easy manner, in which you reproach me for not acquainting you with the poor Dean's situation, lays a fresh obligation upon me; yet mean as an excuse is for a fault, I shall attempt one to your Lordship, and only for this reason, that you may not think me capable of neglecting any thing you could command me. I told you in my last letter, the Dean's understanding was quite gone, and I feared the farther particulars would only shock the tenderness of your nature, and the melancholy scene make your heart ach, as it has often done mine. I was the last person whom he knew, and when that part of his memory failed, he was so outrageous at seeing any body, that I was forced to leave him, nor could he rest for a night or two after seeing any person: so that all the attendance which I could pay him was calling twice a week to enquire after his health, and to observe that proper care was taken of him, and durst only look at him while his back was towards me, fearing to discompose him. He walked ten hours a day, would not eat or drink if his servant stayed in the room. His meat was served up ready cut, and sometimes it would lie an hour on the table before he would touch it, and then eat it walking. About six weeks ago, in one night's time, his left eye swelled as large as an egg, and the lid Mr. NICHOLS (his surgeon) thought would mortify, and many large boils appeared upon his arms and body. The torture he was in, is not to be described.

scribed. Five persons could scarce hold him for a week from tearing out his own eyes: and, for near a month, he did not sleep two hours in twenty four: yet a moderate appetite continued; and what is more to be wondered at, the last day of his illness, he knew me perfectly well, took me by the hand, called me by my name, and shewed the same pleasure as usual in seeing me. I asked him, if he would give me a dinner? He said, to be sure, my old friend. Thus he continued that day, and knew the Doctor and Surgeon, and all his family so well, that Mr. NICHOLS thought it possible he might return to a share of understanding, so as to be able to call for what he wanted, and to bear some of his old friends to amuse him. But alas! this pleasure to me was but of short duration; for the next day or two it was all over, and proved to be only pain that had roused him. He is now free from torture: his eye almost well; very quiet, and begins to sleep, but cannot, without great difficulty, be prevailed on to walk a turn about his room: and yet in this way the Physicians think he may hold out for some time. I am, my Lord,

Your Lordship's most obedient

humble servant,

M. WHITEWAY.

What a shocking, what a melancholy account is this; of how small estimation must the greatest genius appear in the sight of God!

About

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About a year and a half afterwards, I received a letter from another of his relations, DEANE SWIFT, Esq; in answer to a report, which I had mentioned to him, of Dr. SWIFT's having viewed himself (as he was led across the room) in a glass, and crying out, "O poor old man!" The letter is written long after the Dean had been totally deprived of reason.

Dublin, April 4, 1744.

My LORD,

AS to the story of O poor old man! I enquired into it. The Dean did say something upon his seeing himself in the glass, but neither Mrs. RIDGEWAY, nor the lower servants could tell me what it was he said. I desired them to recollect it, by the time when I should come again to the deanery. I have been there since, they cannot recollect it. A thousand stories have been invented of him within these two years, and imposed upon the world. I thought this might have been one of them: and yet I am now inclined to think, there may be some truth in it: for on Sunday the 17th of March, as he sat in his chair, upon the housekeeper's moving a knife from him as he was going to catch at it, he shrugged his shoulders, and, rocking himself, said, I am what I am, I am what I am: and, about six minutes afterwards, repeated the same words two or three times over.

His servant shaves his cheeks, and all his face as low as the tip of his chin, once a week: but under the chin, and about

about the throat, when the hair grows long, it is cut with scissars.

Sometimes he will not utter a syllable: at other times he will speak incoherent words: but he never yet, as far as I could hear, talked nonsense, or said a foolish thing.

About four months ago he gave me great trouble: he seemed to have a mind to talk to me. In order to try what he would say, I told him, I came to dine with him, and immediately his housekeeper, Mrs. RIDGEWAY, said, Won't you give Mr. SWIFT a glass of wine, Sir? he shrugged his shoulders, just as he used to do when he had a mind that a friend should spend the evening with him. Shrugging his shoulders, your Lordship may remember, was as much as to say, "You'll ruin me in wine." I own, I was scarce able to bear the sight. Soon after, he again endeavoured, with a good deal of pain, to find words to speak to me: at last, not being able, after many efforts, he gave a heavy sigh, and, I think, was afterwards silent. This puts me in mind of what he said about five days ago. He endeavoured several times to speak to his servant (now and then he calls him by his name) at last, not finding words to express what he would be at, after some uneasiness, he said, "I am a fool." Not long ago, the servant took up his watch that lay upon the table to see what o'clock it was, he said, "Bring it here:" and when it was brought, he looked very attentively at it: some time ago, the servant was breaking a large stubborn coal, he said, That's "a stone, you blockhead."

In a few days, or some very short time, after guardians had been appointed for him, I went into his dining room, where

where he was walking, I said something to him very insignificant, I know not what; but instead of making any kind of answer to it, he said, "Go, go," pointing with his hand to the door, and immediately afterwards, raising his hand to his head, he said, "My best understanding," and so broke off abruptly, and walked away. I am, my Lord,

Your Lordship's most obedient,

and most humble servant,

DEANE SWIFT.

These two letters will not probably occasion in you very chearful speculations. Let us return back therefore to the *Lilliputians*, and the *Brobdingnaggians*; where you will find many ridiculous adventures, even such as must have excited mirth from HERACLITUS. Where indelicacies do not intervene, the narrative is very entertaining and humorous. Several just strokes of satyr are scattered up and down upon political errors in government. In some parts, GULLIVER seems to have had particular incidents, if not particular persons, in his view. His observations on education are useful: and so are his improvements on the institutions of LYCURGUS. Upon reading over the two first parts of these travels, I think that I can discover a very great resemblance between certain passages in GULLIVER'S voyage to *Lilliput*, and the voyage of CYRANO DE BERGERAC to the sun and moon.

CYRANO DE BERGERAC is a French author of a singular character, who had a very peculiar turn of wit and humour, in many respects resembling that of SWIFT.

He wanted the advantages of learning, and a regular education: his imagination was less guarded, and correct, but more agreeably extravagant. He has introduced into his philosophical romance, the system of DESCARTES (which was then much admired) intermixt with several fine strokes of just satyr on the wild, and immechanical enquiries of the philosophers, and astronomers of that age: and in many parts he has evidently directed the plan, which the Dean of St. PATRICK'S has pursued.

I am sorry, and yet, in candour, I ought to observe, that GULLIVER, in his voyage to *Lilliput*, dares even to exert his vein of humour so liberally, as to place the resurrection (one of the most encouraging principles of the Christian religion) in a ridiculous, and contemptible light ^a. Why should that appointment be denied to man, or appear so very extraordinary in the human kind, which the Author of nature has illustrated in the vegetable species, where the seed dies and corrupts, before it can rise again to new beauty and glory? But I am writing out of my province; and that I may be tempted no farther, here let me end the criticism upon the two first parts of GULLIVER'S travels, the conclusion of which, I mean GULLIVER'S escape from BROB-DINGNAG, is humorous, satyrical, and decent. I am, my dearest HAM, by duty and inclination,

Your best Friend,

and most affectionate Father,

^a Page 55.

O R R E R Y.