



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

Swift unacquainted with mathematics.

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



L E T T E R X I I .

My dear HAMILTON,

TH E third part of GULLIVER'S travels is in general written against chymists, mathematicians, mechanics, and projectors of all kinds.

SWIFT was little acquainted with mathematical knowledge, and was prejudiced against it, by observing the strange effects it produced in those, who applied themselves entirely to that science. No part of human literature has given greater strength to the mind, or has produced greater benefits to mankind, than the several branches of learning that may pass under the general denomination of mathematics. But the abuses of this study, the idle, thin, immechanical refinements of it, are just subjects of satyr. The real use of knowledge is to invigorate, not to enervate the faculties of reason. Learning degenerates into a species of madness, when it is not superior to what it possesseth. The scientific powers are most evident, when, they are capable

pable of exerting themselves in the social duties of life: when, they wear no chains, but can freely disengage themselves, and like a sound constitution of body, rise chearful, and more vigorous by the food they have acquired, being neither oppressed, nor rendered stupid by the labours of digestion.

Lord BACON has justly exposed the vain pursuits of ostentatious pedants in the different parts of learning; and their unaccountable temerity in deducing general rules from arbitrary maxims, or few experiments: he has likewise fixed upon a sure and certain basis, the procedure and limits of the human understanding. SWIFT has pursued the same plan in a different manner, and has placed the imaginary schemes of all pretenders, in a more ludicrous, and therefore in a more proper light.

Ridiculum acri

Fortius ac melius magnas plerumque secat res.

He cannot be supposed to condemn useful experiments, or the right application of them: but he ridicules the vain attempts, and irregular productions of those rash men, who, like Ixion, embracing a cloud instead of a goddess, plagued the world with centaurs, whilst JUPITER, from the embraces of a JUNO, and an ALCMENA, blessed the earth with an HEBE, and an HERCULES.

However

AND WRITINGS OF DR. SWIFT. 97

However wild the description of the *flying island*, and the manners, and various projects of the philosophers of *Lagado* may appear, yet it is a real picture embellish'd with much latent wit and humour. It is a fatyr upon those astronomers and mathematicians, who have so entirely dedicated their time to the planets, that they have been careles of their family and country, and have been chiefly anxious, about the œconomy and welfare of the upper worlds. But if we consider SWIFT's romance in a serious light, we shall find him of opinion, that those determinations in philosophy, which at present seem to the most knowing men to be perfectly well founded and understood, are in reality unsettled, or uncertain, and may perhaps some ages hence be as much decried, as the axioms of ARISTOTLE are at this day. SIR ISAAC NEWTON and his notions may hereafter be out of fashion. There is a kind of mode in philosophy, as well as in other things: and such modes often change more from the humour and caprice of men, than either from the unreasonable, or the ill-founded conclusions of the philosophy itself. The reasonings of some philosophers have undoubtedly better foundations than those of others: but I am of opinion (and SWIFT seems to be in the same way of thinking) that the most applauded philosophy hitherto extant has not fully, clearly, and certainly explained many difficulties in the phænomena of nature. I am induc'd to believe, that God may have absolutely denied us the perfect knowledge of many points in phi-

H losophy,