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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 XIII.

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lustrious ghosts vanish so quickly, and so abruptly from my sight, many of whom were of the brightest characters in history. In my next letter I shall endeavour to detain them a little longer in *Leicester-fields*, than SWIFT suffered them to stay in the island of Sorcerers.

I am,

My dear HAMILTON,

Your affectionate Father,

O R R E R Y.



LETTER XIII.

My dearest HAMILTON,

I Believe it would be impossible to find out the design of Dr. SWIFT, in summoning up a parcel of apparitions, that from their behaviour, or from any thing they say, are almost of as little consequence, as the ghosts in GAY's farce of the *What d'ye call it*. Perhaps, SWIFT's general design might be, to arraign the conduct of eminent persons after their death, and to convey their names, and images to posterity, deprived of those false colours, in which they formerly appeared.

ed. If these were his intentions, he has missed his aim; or at least, has been so far carried away by his disposition to raillery, that the moral, which ought to arise from such a fable, is buried in obscurity.

The first airy substance introduced is ALEXANDER the Great^a. After a hint from GULLIVER, that we have lost the true Greek idiom, the conqueror of the universe is made to declare upon his honour, “*That he died by excessive drinking, not by poison.*” A trifling and an improper observation, because the apparition is called up as he appeared at the head of his army, just after the battle of *Arbella*. I own my expectations were great, when I found his appearance was to be at such a remarkable juncture: and I particularly wished to see him properly introduced after that battle, as the compassion and generosity which he shewed, to the family of DARIUS, was highly worthy of imitation. There are other circumstances in the historical records of him, that redound to his honour. His tender regard to PINDAR, by sparing the house of that poet (when he rased the city of *Thebes*) seems to demand perpetual gratitude from all succeeding bards. The manner in which he visited the tomb of ACHILLES: the affection and respect paid to him by ARISTOTLE; the undaunted confidence placed in his physician PHILIP, are instances sufficient to shew, that ALEXANDER did not want some virtues of humanity: and when we consider several of his rash actions of inebriety, they convince us, how far the native excellencies of the mind

^a Chap. 7. Page 234.

may be debas'd and changed by passions which too often attend success and luxury,

*Utunque defecere mores
Dedecorant benè nata culpa.*

It is evident, my HAM, that SWIFT had conceived an absolute disgust to ALEXANDER, whose character he aims to destroy, by touching it in so slight a manner, that he puts me in mind of the visit paid by AUGUSTUS CÆSAR, to ALEXANDER's sepulchre at *Alexandria*. Upon the Emperor's arrival, the body of the Macedonian hero was found in its full dimensions, but so tender, notwithstanding all the former embalming, that CÆSAR, by touching only the nose of it, defaced the whole figure immediately.

HANNIBAL^a seems to have been summoned with no other view than to censure LIVY the historian. It is not only improbable, but impossible, that HANNIBAL should have carried a sufficient quantity of vinegar for the purpose related by LIVY: but as vinegar will certainly soften, and dissolve stones, the experiment might have been improved; or so contrived by HANNIBAL, as to appear to make an easy, and expeditious opening through some particular passage, already fitted for the purpose. Such a trial, practis'd in that age of darkness, and properly managed, might have been universally received as a kind of miracle: so that LIVY could scarce have avoided inserting the report as an acknowledged truth: especially when the fact itself seems to

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^a Page 235.

infer that the Romans were invincible, unless from some supernatural cause. SWIFT (no friend to military men) thinks the *Carthaginian* general unworthy of any farther notice: and hastens to call up the senate of *Rome*. This gives him an opportunity of being very severe upon a certain modern assembly, which he treats in a manner more resembling the Cynic in his cell, than the free humoured *Rabelais* in his easy chair.

POMPEY and CÆSAR only appear to grace the entry of BRUTUS, who is SWIFT's favourite patriot: but as CÆSAR generously confessed to GULLIVER, "That the greatest actions of his life, were not, by many degrees, equal to the glory of taking it away," it would have been a proper alleviation of the dictator's crimes, to have acknowledged him the greatest statesmen, orator, and soldier of the age, in which he lived: an age, fertile of eminent men: an age, when ambition was scarce looked upon as a crime: and when the Roman virtue (once the support and preservation of the commonwealth) was long since lost in vice and luxury: at such a time a single master was become necessary, and POMPEY would have seized the reins of government had not CÆSAR interposed. If the conspirators had restored liberty to their country, their act had been completely glorious, and would have shewed, that CÆSAR, not *Rome*, was degenerated. But if we may judge from the consequences, Heaven disapproved of the deed: a particular fate attended the conspirators, not one of whom died a natural death: and even BRUTUS, perhaps recollecting in his last moments the benefits, which he had received

ceived from CÆSAR, was staggered in his thoughts of virtue, and imagining himself deceived by a shadow, broke out into a pathetic expression, signifying, "that he had worshipped virtue as a substance, and had found it only a shadow:" so that he seems to have wanted that fortitude of mind, which constantly attends true virtue to the grave. This defect in the character of BRUTUS, is not improperly expressed in the famous gallery of the great duke of Tuscany, where there is a very fine head of BRUTUS begun by MICHAEL ANGELO, but left unfinished: under it is engraven upon a copper plate, this distic,

*Dum BRUTI effigiem sculptor de marmore ducit,
In mentem sceleris venit, et abstinuit.*

If BRUTUS erred, it was from a wrong notion of virtue. The character of CÆSAR is perhaps more amiable, but less perfect: his faults were great; however, many of them were foils to his virtues. A modern eminent writer, has represented him as a glutton: he tells us, that when CÆSAR went to the public feasts, he constantly took a vomit in the morning, with a design to indulge himself with more keeness, and to increase his appetite for the ensuing feast. The fact is true, but I would willingly believe the inference unjust. It is more than probable, that he practised this custom by the advice of his physicians, who might direct such a regimen, as the most certain, and immediate preservation against epileptic fits, to which the Dictator was often liable.

liable. Your grandfather, my honoured father, (who was excelled by few physicians in the theory of physic) has often told me, that those kind of convulsions were of such a nature as generally to come on after eating, and more violently if the stomach was overloaded. CÆSAR was so careful in observing a decent dignity in his behaviour, that he dreaded the shame of exposing publicly this weakness in his constitution, and therefore guarded against it in a prudent manner, which has since been construed into a reproach. This surmise, my HAM, rests upon the stronger foundation, as all authors agree, that he was most strictly, and remarkably abstemious.

In his public character, CÆSAR appears a strong example, how far the greatest natural, and acquired accomplishments may lose their lustre, when made subservient to false glory, and an immoderate thirst of power; as on the other hand, the history of BRUTUS may instruct us, what unhappy effects the rigid exercise of superiour virtue, when misapplied and carried too far, may produce in the most stedfast mind, or the soundest judgement.

GULLIVER has given to BRUTUS five companions, JUN. BRUTUS, SOCRATES, EPAMINONDAS, CATO the censor, and Sir THOMAS MOORE. Such a sextumvirate is not easily to be encreased: yet, let me hope, that the reflexion is too severely critical, when he adds, "*that all the ages of the world cannot furnish out a seventh.*" Every age has produced men of virtue, and abilities in
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the highest degree. The race of mankind, since their first creation, have been always the same. The greatest characters have been blended with the greatest faults. Poets and historians have singled out particular persons for fame and immortality: they have adorned them with accomplishments, which perhaps they never possessed, while other men equally meritorious, have been silently buried in oblivion, with only the self-consciousness of deserving a rank among the companions of BRUTUS in the Elyfian fields.

In this illustrious sextumvirate, SOCRATES and SIR THOMAS MOORE undoubtedly deserve the pre-eminence. The extravagant virtue of JUNIUS BRUTUS is shocking to every parent, and every good-natured mind. The important services of the father, might justly have claimed from the public, the pardon of his sons: and when his paternal piety had saved their lives, his precepts and example might so effectually have reclaimed their errors, as to have made them become useful members of the commonwealth. I am fully persuaded, that if Dr. SWIFT had been a father, we should not have found the name of JUNIUS BRUTUS where it is now placed.

In EPAMINONDAS the Theban glory first appeared: and died. His own merit, in overcoming the greatest difficulties, entirely fixed his reputation. A happy concurrence of circumstances has often given fame to others; but EPAMINONDAS was indebted for his superior character, only to himself.

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I am in some doubt, whether CATO the *Censor* can fairly claim a rank among so choice a groope of ghosts. He justly indeed condemned the luxury of the Romans, and he punished their vices with an impartial severity: but herein he seems to have indulged his own natural temper rather than to have acted absolutely from a love of virtue: he was a declared enemy to poetry, painting, and all the politer arts: he was proud, vain, and morose: but above all, he was so extremely avaritious, that RHADAMANTHUS in the Archbishop of CAMBRAY'S dialogues of the dead, after expressing some regard to his merits, tells him, as he was an usurer he could not be admitted into the Elysian fields: and therefore orders him to keep the gate as porter: in which situation, he might gratify the censoriousness of his disposition, by examining every ghost that attempted to come into *Elysium*, and by shutting the door against all those, who were not qualified for admittance. RHADAMANTHUS then gives him money to pay CHARON for such passengers, who were not able to pay for themselves, and at the same time declares, that he will punish him as a robber, if he offers to lend out that money upon usury. How very different, you will say, are the sentiments of Archbishop FENELON, and of Dr. SWIFT in their judgement of CATO. The one, thinks him unworthy of a place among millions in *Elysium*, while the other, distinguishes him among the greatest men of antiquity. From this dissention of opinions may be traced, perhaps, the particular temper both of the Archbishop and of the

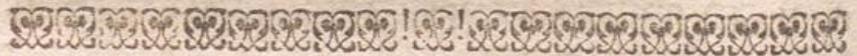
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Dean, and from thence may be deduced the reason, why the *Censor* was esteemed by the latter, and condemned by the former.

GULLIVER, after having taken a transient view of numberless illustrious persons, whom he does not name, closes the chapter, and gives me an opportunity of finishing my letter. Late, very late, may you become a ghost! And when one, may you equal any of SWIFT's *sextumvirate*, and may his ghost (grown less cynical and better instructed) rejoice to admit you into the company, from which he has so arbitrarily excluded all future generations. So wishes, so prays,

Your affectionate Father,

O R R E R Y.



LETTER XIV.

GULLIVER, tired of heroes, changes the scene in the eighth chapter of his voyage to *Laputa*, and becomes curious to know the situation of poets and philosophers, who, in their turn, have as eagerly contended for fame, as CÆSAR for power, or BRUTUS for liberty. He desires, that HOMER and ARISTOTLE may make their appearance at the head of their commentators.