



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 XIV.

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

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.

tors. HOMER, says our traveller, "*was the taller, and comelier person of the two: walked very erect for one of his age, and his eyes were the most quick and piercing I ever beheld.*" It is certain, that HOMER has rather gained, than lost vigour by his years. Twenty six centuries have not unbraced his nerves, or given one wrinkle to his brow: and although GULLIVER has bestowed upon him the additional ornament of fine eyes, yet I am apt to think they made the figure of this divine old man less awful: at least I am glad that he wanted his eye sight while he lived, since it is impossible, not to conclude from the productions of HOMER and MILTON, that the *Mind's Eye* becomes more intensely discerning, when it is not interrupted by external objects. It is an old observation, that HOMER has nourished more persons than SYLLA, CÆSAR, and AUGUSTUS; and while their pictures have decayed, not a letter of the Iliad has been lost. The Grecian poet not only preserves his original form, but breathes freely, and looks beautiful in other languages: a happier metempsychosis than PYTHAGORAS ever dreamt of. However, if HOMER was absolutely obliged to wear the different dresses, which have been given to him, he would sometimes, I believe, find the motion of his limbs uneasy and confined: and would prefer his own simple attire even to the birth day suit, which our English bard has given him. The commentators have done less honour to HOMER than the translators. Some of these learned pedants have entirely wasted their observations upon particles and words: others have run into a minute exactness,

actness, in comparing the propriety of his images : while others again, have endeavoured to trace out from the Iliad and Odyssey, all the rudiments of arts and sciences. Some there are, who dwell on such narrow circumstances, as were neglected by HOMER, and can only be suitable to their own confined genius. They are not able to pursue him in his sublime flights, and attempt therefore, to bring him upon a level with themselves. Their low mechanical notions remind me of an absurd problem proposed by the famous Monsieur HUET, whether the Iliad might not be written upon vellum in so small a hand, that the whole might be contained within a nutshell? This important question is said to have engaged the thoughts and attention of the French court, and gives us a true picture of a laborious, tasteless critic upon HOMER. The Dauphin, and his train, are for putting the Iliad into a nutshell, when ALEXANDER, and his courtiers, chose the richest, and most curious cabinet of DARIUS, as the only proper repository for HOMER'S works.

HOMER and ARISTOTLE were as opposite as possible in their characters: but Dr. SWIFT has placed them together, chiefly with a view of shewing their commentators, in that just and ridiculous light, in which those scholiasts ought to appear. When an age is blessed with the productions of an uncommon genius, such as resembles HOMER, it must, in some measure, be punished by bad imitations and comments; in the same manner that you may have observed the sun by its heat and influence raising vapours, and animating insects,

AND WRITINGS OF DR. SWIFT. III

that infect and perhaps corrupt the air, in which he shines with so much lustre. But, when an original admired author, as ARISTOTLE, is really erroneous, and deceives with false specious principles, what a train of errors must arise from commentators on such subjects, who, while they endeavour to pursue and extend a pleasing enchanted prospect, that has no real foundation, deviate into a dark, disagreeable road of briers and thorns?

It is on this account that the Dean has introduced ARISTOTLE in company with HOMER. The description of that philosopher is fine, and in a few words represents the true nature of his works. "*He stooped much, and made use of a staff. His visage was meagre, his hair lank and thin, and his voice hollow.*" By not having the immortal spirit of HOMER, he was unable to keep his body erect: and the staff which weakly supported him, like his commentators, made this defect more conspicuous. He wanted not some useful qualities, but these real ornaments, like his hair, were thin and ungraceful. His style was harsh, and, like his voice, had neither force nor harmony. He was without doubt a man of great genius and penetration, but he did infinitely more prejudice than service to real literature. He studied words more than facts, and delivered his philosophy perplexed with such intricate logical terms, as have laid a foundation for the endless scholastic disputations, which have corrupted and retarded the progress of learning. He waged war with all his predecessors. He never quotes an author, except
with

with a view to refute his opinion. Like the Ottoman Emperor, he could not reign in safety, till he had first destroyed his brethren. He was as ambitious in science, as his pupil ALEXANDER was in arms. He aimed to be a despotic original: and not only to be the Prince, but the Tyrant of philosophy. What then can be expected from the commentators of his works, who were devoid of his ingenuity, and possessed of all his intricate follies? RAMUS with his covert ignorance, and SCOTUS and AQUINAS with their subdivisions, and imaginary nothings, must make a contemptible figure in the Elysian fields, which are the supposed mansions of cheerfulness, truth, and candour, and consequently must be a very improper situation for that tribe of philosophers.

*“ I then desired, says GULLIVER, that DESCARTES
 “ and GASSENDI might be called up: with whom I
 “ prevailed to explain their systems to ARISTOTLE. This
 “ great philosopher freely acknowledged his own mistakes
 “ in natural philosophy, because he proceeded in many things
 “ upon conjecture, as all men must do; and he found that
 “ GASSENDI, who had made the doctrine of EPICURUS
 “ as palatable as he could, and the vortices of DESCAR-
 “ TES, were equally to be exploded.”* I believe you will find, my dear HAMILTON, that ARISTOTLE is still to be preferred to EPICURUS. The former made some useful experiments and discoveries, and was engaged in a real pursuit of knowledge, although his manner is much perplexed. The latter was full of vanity and ambition. He was an impostor, and only aimed at de-

deceiving. He seemed not to believe the principles which he has asserted. He committed the government of all things to chance. His natural philosophy is absurd. His moral philosophy wants its proper basis, the fear of God. Monsieur BAYLE, one of his warmest advocates, is of this last opinion, where he says, "*On ne scauroit pas dire assez de bien de l'honnêteté de ses mœurs, ni assez de mal de ses opinions sur la religion.*" His general maxim, that happiness consisted in pleasure was too much unguarded, and must lay a foundation of a most destructive practice: although from his temper and constitution, he made his actions sufficiently pleasurable to himself, and agreeable to the rules of true philosophy. His fortune exempted him from care and sollicitude. His valetudinarian habit of body from intemperance. He passed the greatest part of his time in his garden, where he enjoyed all the elegant amusements of life. There he studied. There he taught his philosophy. This particular happy situation greatly contributed to that tranquility of mind, and indolence of body which he made his chief ends. He had not however resolution sufficient to meet the gradual approaches of death, and wanted that constancy which Sir WILLIAM TEMPLE ascribes to him: for in his last moments, when he found that his condition was desperate, he took such large draughts of wine, that he was absolutely intoxicated, and deprived of his senses; so that he died more like a bacchanal, than a philosopher: to which the epigram alludes,

I

Hint

Hinc Stygias ebrius hausit aquas.

I should not have ventured into this criticism and censure upon these antient philosophers, not even to you, my dearest HAM, if my opinion was not in a great measure supported by Lord BACON, who, as he was certainly the most accurate judge of this subject, might be perhaps, from that pre-eminence, too severe a critic. It must be owned, that EPICURUS in particular has many followers and admirers among the antients, and among the moderns. CICERO commends him for cultivating his friendships in the most exquisite manner. The book lyes open before me, and I will transcribe the words, *De quâ [amicitiâ] EPICURUS quidem ita dicit omnium rerum quas ad beatè vivendum sapientia comparaverit, nihil esse majus amicitia, nihil uberior, nihil jucundius, neque verò hoc oratione solum, sed multo magis vita et factis, et moribus comprobavit.* DIOGENES LAERTIUS praises his virtue and learning. In the Augustan age the greatest names are inserted among his followers. CÆSAR, ATTICUS, MECÆNAS, LUCRETIUS, VIRGIL, and HORACE embraced his philosophy, and gave a lustre to his sect, and doctrines. Sir WILLIAM TEMPLE says, “ that he wonders, why
“ such sharp invectives were so generally made against
“ EPICURUS, by the ages that followed him: especially
“ as his admirable wit, felicity of expression, excellence
“ of nature, sweetness of conversation, temperance of life,
“ and constancy of death, made him so much beloved by
“ his

AND WRITINGS OF DR. SWIFT. 115

“ his friends, admired by his scholars, and honoured by
“ the Athenians.” Sir WILLIAM TEMPLE imputes this
injustice “ to the envy, and malignity of the Stoics, and
“ to some gross pretenders, who assumed the denomination
“ of that sect : who mistook his favourite principle”
(THAT ALL HAPPINESS CONSISTED IN PLEASURE) “ by
“ confining it to sensual pleasure only. To these succeeded
“ the Christians, who esteemed his principles of natural
“ philosophy more opposite to those of our religion than either
“ the Platonists, the Peripatetics, or even the Stoics them-
“ selves.” This is the opinion, and these are almost
the exact words of the great Sir WILLIAM TEMPLE.

SWIFT equally explodes EPICURUS, and the more
modern philosophers DESCARTES and GASSENDI.

DESCARTES was a knight errant in philosophy, per-
petually mistaking windmills for giants ; yet by the
strength of a warm imagination he started some opini-
ons, which probably put Sir ISAAC NEWTON, and
others, on making many experiments that produced
most useful discoveries.

GASSENDI was esteemed one of the greatest orna-
ments of FRANCE. He was a doctor of divinity, and
royal professor of mathematics. He was born in *Pro-
vence* in 1592, and died in 1655. With great industry
he collected whatever related to the person, and to the
philosophy of EPICURUS, the latter of which, he has
reduced into a compleat system.

I have now, my HAMILTON, cursorily gone thro-
ugh the characters of such ghosts, as are nominally
I 2 specified

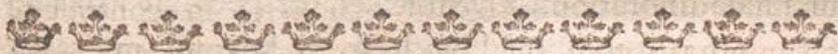
specified by GULLIVER. I may be wrong either in my account, or in my observations: and I shall rejoice to be confuted by you in any point of learning whatever.

The description of the STRULDBRUGGS, in the tenth chapter, is an instructive piece of morality: for, if we consider it in a serious light, it tends to reconcile us to our final dissolution. Death, when set in contrast to the immortality of the STRULDBRUGGS, is no longer the King of Terrors: he loses his sting: he appears to us as a friend: and we cheerfully obey his summons, because it brings certain relief to the greatest miseries. It is in this description, that SWIFT shines in a particular manner. He probably felt in himself the effects of approaching age, and tacitly dreaded that period of life, in which he might become a representative of those *miserable immortals*. His apprehensions were unfortunately fulfilled. He lived to be the most melancholy sight that was ever beheld: yet, even in that condition, he continued to instruct, by appearing a providential instance to mortify the vanity, which is too apt to arise in the human breast. Our life cannot be pronounced happy, till the last scene is closed with ease and resignation: the mind still continuing to preserve its usual dignity, and falling into the arms of death, as a wearied traveller sinks into rest. This is that *Euthanasia* which AUGUSTUS often desired, which ANTONINUS PIUS enjoyed, and for which every wise man will pray.

pray. GOD Almighty's providence protect and guide you, my HAM, whatever fate of life, or fortune attends

Your affectionate Father,

O R R E R Y,



LETTER XV.

IT is with great reluctance, I shall make some remarks on GULLIVER'S voyage to the *Houyhnhnms*. In this last part of his imaginary travels, SWIFT has indulged a misanthropy that is intolerable. The representation which he has given us of human nature, must terrify, and even debase the mind of the reader who views it. His sallies of wit and humour lose all their force, nothing remaining but a melancholy, and disagreeable impression: and, as I have said to you, on other parts of his works, we are disgusted, not entertained; we are shocked, not instructed by the fable. I should therefore chuse to take no notice of his YAHOOs, did I not think it necessary to assert the vindication of human nature, and thereby, in some measure, to pay my duty to the great author of our species, who has created us in a very fearful, and a very wonderful manner.