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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 XIX.

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## LETTER XIX.

THE seventh volume contains SWIFT's epistolary correspondence, from the year 1714 to the year 1737, and, as it is an acknowledged observation, that no part of an author's writings give a greater insight into his natural disposition than his letters, (especially when written with freedom and sincerity) I shall endeavour to point out to you, such circumstances in SWIFT's epistles, and in the answers of his friends, as may afford you materials to form your own conjectures upon the different characters not only of *the Dean*, but of his correspondents. From preceding letters, you are probably become acquainted with Dr. SWIFT, but the manners and opinions of those persons with whom he corresponded, are in every respect so blended with his own, as not to be easily separated, and in such a kind of united view, they will mutually reflect light upon each other.

To a young man just entering into the world as you are, the subject may prove of particular importance, as it may guide him not only in the choice of his correspondents, but in his manner of writing to them.

The freedom of the press is to be watched and defended with the most jealous eye. It is one of the chief articles of that great *Charter* of liberty to which  
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the people of *England* are entitled : but as no human institution can be perfect, even this branch of liberty has its excrescences that might be pruned. I mean particularly that license which of late has too much prevailed of publishing epistolary correspondences. Such a fashion, for I know not what else to call it, is extremely pernicious. At present, it satisfies the curiosity of the public ; but for the future, it will tend to restrain that unsuspecting openness, which is the principal delight of writing to our friends. I am sorry to say by experience, that the letters which contain the most sincere, and perhaps hasty observations upon persons, times, and circumstances, are often reserved as treasures, and hoarded up, as misers hoard gold ; like which, they lie concealed in cabinets and strong boxes for some time, till chancing to fall into the hands of an extravagant heir, or an injudicious executor, they are not only brought into light, but dispersed and exposed, so as to become the property of the whole world. Let me advise you therefore, my HAMILTON, when you give your opinion upon any important subject, to consider it well, before you commit your thoughts to paper. Express yourself with diffidence. Preserve a prudent restraint over the sallies of wit and humour : and be cautious in all declarations of friendship ; as the very common offers of civility, are too often explained into undesigned engagements.

I own, HAM, I find myself under no small difficulty in discussing this volume of SWIFT's letters. General  
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criticisms will be attended with obscurity: and it would be tedious to consider them in their exact order. I shall endeavour therefore, to take a review only of what seems to deserve your attention. Let us begin with the letters that passed between Dr. SWIFT and Mr. POPE. The correspondence had commenced in a very early part of Mr. POPE's life, and was carried on with scarce any interruption from the death of the Queen. If we may judge of Mr. POPE from his works, his chief aim was to be esteemed a man of virtue. His letters are written in that style. His last volumes are all of the moral kind. He has avoided trifles, and consequently has escaped a rock which has proved very injurious to SWIFT's reputation. He has given his imagination full scope, and yet has preserved a perpetual guard upon his conduct. The constitution of his body and mind might early incline him to habits of caution and reserve. The treatment which he met afterwards from an innumerable tribe of adversaries, confirmed those habits, and made him slower than the *Dean* in pronouncing his judgement upon persons and things. His prose writings are little less harmonious than his verse: and his voice in common conversation was so naturally musical, that I remember honest TOM SOUTHERNE used always to call him *The little nightingale*. His manners were delicate, easy, and engaging: and he treated his friends with a politeness that charmed, and a generosity that was much to his honour. Every guest was made happy within his doors. Pleasure dwelt under his roof, and

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elegance presided at his table. Dr. SWIFT was of a different disposition: To his domestics he was passionate and churlish: to his equals and superiors rather an entertaining than a desirable companion. He told a story in an admirable manner: his sentences were short, and perspicuous, his observations were piercing. He had seen the great world, and had profited much by his experience. He had not the least tincture of vanity in his conversation. He was perhaps, as he said himself, too proud to be vain. When he was polite, it was in a manner entirely his own. In his friendships he was constant and undisguised. He was the same in his enmities. He generally spoke as he thought in all companies and at all times. I remember to have heard, that he dined once at a Lord Mayor's feast in *Dublin*, and was attacked, and teized by an opulent, boisterous, half-intoxicated 'Squire, who happened to sit next him: he bore the awkward railery for some time, and then on a sudden called out in a loud voice to the Mayor, "My Lord, here is one of your bears at my shoulder, he has been worrying me this half hour, I desire you will order him to be taken off." In these last particulars he differed widely from his friend POPE, who could stifle resentment, and wait with patience till a more distant, and perhaps a more seasonable hour of revenge. But notwithstanding the dissimilitude of minds, and manners, which was apparent between these two great men, yet the same sort of friendship seems to have subsisted between them, as between VIRGIL and HORACE. The mutual affection

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of the two English poets appears throughout their works: and therefore in this place, I cannot avoid taking notice of a report very industriously spread, and not without some degree of success, "That the friendship between POPE and SWIFT was not so firm and perfect at the latter end as at the beginning of their lives." On Dr. SWIFT's side, I am certain, it ever remained unalterable: nor did it appear less fervent on the side of Mr. POPE. Their letters are the best evidence to determine the doubt. In one of SWIFT's latest letters to me, not long before he was lost to all human comforts, he says, "*When you see my dear friend POPE, tell him I will answer his letter soon; I love him above all the rest of mankind.*" In my long correspondence wirth Mr. POPE, I scarce received the least billet from him, without the kindest mention of Dr. SWIFT: and the tenderest anxiety for his state of health. Judge by the following paragraphs. The first, dated July the 12th, 1737.

*My Lord, The pleasure you gave me, in acquainting me of the Dean's better health, is one so truly great, as might content even your own humanity: and whatever my sincere opinion and respect of your Lordship prompts me to wish from your hands for myself, your love for him makes me as happy. Would to GOD my weight, added to your's, could turn his inclinations to this side, that I might live to enjoy him here thro' your means, and flatter myself 'twas partly thro' my own! But this, I fear, will never be the case; and I think it more probable, his attraction will*

draw me on the other side, which, I protest, nothing less than a probability of dying at sea, considering the weak frame of my breast, would have hindered me from, two years past. In short, whenever I think of him, 'tis with the vexation of all impotent passions that carry us out of ourselves only to spoil our quiet, and make us return to a resignation, which is the most melancholy of all virtues. And in another letter, dated April 2, 1738, he says, I write by the same post that I received your very obliging and humane letter. The consideration you shew towards me, in the just apprehension that any news of the Dean's condition might alarm me, is most kind and generous. The very last post I writ to him a long letter, little suspecting him in that dangerous circumstance. I was so far from fearing his health, that I was proposing schemes, and hoping possibilities for our meeting once more in this world. I am weary of it; and shall have one reason more, and one of the strongest that nature can give me (even when she is shaking my weak frame to pieces) to be willing to leave this world, when our dear friend is on the edge of the other. Yet I hope, I would fain hope, he may yet hover a while on the brink of it, to preserve to this wretched age a relique and example of the last. One more quotation, and I have done. TWITNAM, November 7. When you get to Dublin (whither I direct this, supposing you will see our dear friend as soon as possible) pray put the Dean in mind of me, and tell him I hope he received my last. Tell him how dearly I love, and how greatly I honour him: how greatly I reflect on every testimony of his friendship; how much I resolve to give  
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*the best I can of my esteem for him to posterity; and assure him the world has nothing in it I admire so much, nothing, the loss of which I should regret so much, as his genius and his virtues.*

My excuse, for I stand in need of one, by having inserted these scraps of letters, is my real desire of convincing you, that the affection of SWIFT and POPE subsisted as entire and uninterrupted as their friends could wish, or their enemies regret. It must be owned, that we as seldom see a mutual attachment between poets, as between statesmen. "True friendship, as TULLY observes, proceeds from a reciprocal esteem, and a virtuous resemblance of manners." When such is the basis, the variety in certain tenets and opinions is of no ill consequence to the union: and will scarce ever unloose the social ties of love, veneration, and esteem. Thus the friendship between ATTICUS and HORTENSIVS, although they were of different sects, one a Stoic, and the other an Epicurean, subsisted like Mr. POPE's and Dr. SWIFT's, firm and constant to the last, when that of ANTHONY, LEPIDUS, and AUGUSTUS, continued no longer than while it was subservient to their views of interest. CATILINE says, *Idem velle, ac idem nolle, ea demum amicitia est.* This often attends a vitious conspiracy; and perhaps an agreement so perfectly mutual, is scarce to be met with in any other instance. Emulation generally breaks the chain of friendship between poets. They are running with the utmost eagerness to the same goal; no

wonder, if, in the race, they endeavour to trip up each others heels.

As I have often reverted in my mind certain particulars relating to my two poetical friends, I have always thought, that the circumstance of their pursuing different roads in poetry, and living in different kingdoms, was probably one of the happiest incidents in their lives. Such a separation prevented all personal dissentions, and fixt them in a correspondence, that constantly tended to establish their endearments; when, perhaps, a residence near each other, might have had a very contrary effect. It is much easier to rectify any mistake, or to cool any animosity that may have arisen, in a letter, than to recal a passionate verbal answer, especially if uttered with all the actions, and vehemence of anger. The impression of such a scene remains long upon the mind of the person offended, and the old adage is transposed, *Vox audita manet, litera scripta perit*. Few men can submit to contradiction. SWIFT was certainly not of the number, and therefore I am persuaded, that his distance from his English friends, proved a strong incitement to their mutual affection. But, I must again repeat, that throughout the long series of letters which have been published, not the least altercations appear to have happened between SWIFT and POPE.

In all SWIFT's writings, you will find his own peculiar vein of humour. The same liberty of expression would have been improper and absurd in any other writer, but it produced the consequences which he desired.

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His seeming arrogance gained him more favour, than the humility and affected benevolence of others. His railery and freedom of censure, are conveyed in a manner more prevalent, and perhaps often more agreeable than flattery. He seldom praised, but where merit was conspicuous. A single stroke of his pen pleased more, and gave more honour, than a long flattering dedication from any other author. His style was masterly, correct, and strong: never diffusive, yet always clear; and, if we consider it in comparison with his predecessors, he has outdone them all, and is one, perhaps the chief, of those few select English writers, who have excelled in elegance and propriety of language.

Lord BACON is the first author, who has attempted any style that can be relishable to the present age, for I must own to you, that I think SWIFT, and his contemporaries, have brought our language to the utmost degree of perfection, without the help of a LONGINUS, a QUINTILIAN, or even of a dictionary, or a grammar. Lord BACON has written with an infinite fund of knowledge: every science that he treats upon, is discussed by him with the greatest learning and dignity, and he shews himself at once a philosopher, an historian, a politician, and a divine: but his dialect (for, that demands our present attention) is quibbling and pedantic; and never more so than when he condescends to flatter his royal master, and the minions of that court.

Consider the prosaical works of MILTON, you will find them more nervous than elegant; more distinguished by the strength of reason, than by the rules of rhetoric;

toric; his diction is harsh, his periods tedious; and when he becomes a prose-writer, the majesty, that attends his poetry, vanishes, and is entirely lost: yet, with all his faults, and exclusive of his character as a poet, he must ever remain the only learned author of that tasteless age in which he flourished: and it is probable, that his great attention to the Latin language, might have rendered him less correct, than he otherwise would have been, in his native tongue.

HARRINGTON has his admirers, he may possibly have his merits, but they *flow not* in his style. A later writer, of the same republican principles, has far excelled him; I mean ALGERNON SYDNEY, whose discourses concerning government are admirably written, and contain great historical knowledge, and a remarkable propriety of diction; so that his name, in my opinion, ought to be much higher established in the temple of literature, than I have hitherto found it placed.

LORD CLARENDON, is an historian whose dignity of expression has justly given him the preference to any of our biographical authors. But his periods are the *periods of a mile*. His parentheses embarrass the sense of his narration, and certain inaccuracies, appearing throughout his works, are delivered with a formality that renders them still more conspicuous.

Among our English writers, few men have gained a greater character for elegance and correctness, than SPRAT, Bishop of *Rocheſter*, and few men have deserved it less. When I have read his works, I have always

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wondered from whence such a piece of good fortune might have arisen, and could only attribute it to Mr. COWLEY, who, in a very delicate copy of verses, has celebrated his friend Dr. SPRAT for eloquence, wit, and a certain *candid style*, which the poet compares to the river *Thames*, gliding with an even current, and displaying the most beautiful appearances of nature. Poets and painters have their favourites, whom they transmit to posterity in what colours and attitudes they please: but I am mistaken, if, upon a review of SPRAT'S works, his language will not sooner give you an idea of one of the insignificant tottering boats upon the *Thames*, than of the smooth noble current of the river itself.

SIR WILLIAM TEMPLE is an easy, careless, incorrect writer, elegantly negligent, politely learned, and engagingly familiar.

Thus, my dear HAM, I have cursorily mentioned some of the brightest sons of fame among our English authors, only to point out to you the preference due to Dr. SWIFT: but he is not entitled alone to the olive garland: he has had his coadjutors in the victory. The triumvirate, to whom we owe an elegance and propriety unknown to our forefathers, are SWIFT, ADDISON, and BOLINGBROKE. At the sight of such names, no dispute can arise in preferring the English moderns to the English antients. The present century, and indeed all future generations may be congratulated upon the acquisition of three such men.

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But to return more closely to SWIFT. He has perfectly studied the drama of human life, and particularly the tendency and irregularities of its different characters. He has chosen, (as I dare say I have mentioned in former letters) to recommend virtue, by representing vice in a disagreeable and ridiculous light. As his temper was naturally full of acrimony, a certain innate severity runs throughout all his letters. You will find him, in the advice, which he offers to his friends, and in the general account which he gives of his own conduct, too close an œconomist. This parsimony proceeded from a desire of being independent: and since that was the cause, he will be forgiven, or, at least, excused by all honest men.

Mr. POPE had different talents from his friend SWIFT: his imagination was fine and delicate: his fancy was ever on the wing. In his earlier time of life, his way of thinking was diffusive, and consequently his judgement was unconfined. As that judgement ripened with years, he shewed the full strength of it in his *Ethic Epistles*, and his *Essay on Man*. There the poet has almost yielded to the philosopher; and his moral system has charmed more by the force of truth and reason, than even by the numbers with which he adorned it.

I cannot avoid thinking, that, in this particular branch of learning, Mr. POPE owed the exertion of his talents to Lord BOLINGBROKE, who had studied the procedure, and limits of the human understanding, as exactly as SWIFT had considered the irregularities of  
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the passions in different characters of the human species. Lord BOLINGBROKE had early made himself master of books and men: but, in his first career of life, being immersed at once in business and pleasure, he ran thorough a variety of scenes in a surprizing and exten-  
 tric manner. When his passions subsided by years and disappointments, and when he improved his rational faculties by more grave studies and reflection, he shone out in his retirement with a lustre peculiar to himself; though not seen by vulgar eyes. The gay statesman was changed into a philosopher equal to any of the sages of antiquity. The wisdom of SOCRATES, the dignity and ease of PLINY, and the wit of HORACE, appeared in all his writings and conversation.

But my letter is growing to an intolerable length. It is time to finish it; and believe me, HAMILTON, were my letters to fill reams of paper, they would be written only with a view of repeating the dictates of my heart, which, in its last beating moments, will throb towards you, and those other dear objects, to whom I am

*An affectionate Father,*

O R R E R Y.



## LETTER XX.

I Have been reading this morning a long letter from Dr. SWIFT to Mr. POPE, dated at *Dublin, January 10, 1721*, and I have been confined to a greater share

\* Volume VII. Page 12.