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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 XX.

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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.

of attention, as it seems to furnish more materials of his life and principles, than any other of his epistolary writings. The letter breathes an air of sincerity and freedom, and is addressed to a particular friend, at a time when the views of ambition were at an end. It may therefore be considered as a confession of one departing from this world, who only is desirous to vindicate his own character, and is anxious that his ashes may rest in peace.

It was written immediately after the arbitrary conduct of a judge in *Ireland*, who endeavoured to destroy the freedom of juries, and consequently the very essence of that liberty and safety, which we have a right to possess by the constitution of our state. SWIFT very generously declares himself averse to all rigorous proceedings against persons suspected of problematical guilt. "By such strict enquiries, says he, a gate is left open to the whole tribe of informers, the most accursed, prostitute, and abandoned race that GOD ever permitted to plague mankind." Upon this subject I cannot avoid recollecting some particulars from a book, which has lately given me great delight and instruction, and which I recommend very warmly to your perusal. I mean *L'Esprit des Loix*. The author of that book, MONSIEUR DE MONTESQUIEU observes, "that informers have been chiefly encouraged under the most tyrannical governments. In the reign of TIBERIUS triumphal ornaments were conferred upon them, and statues erected to their honour. In the reign of
" NERO,

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“ NERO, upon the discovery and punishment of a pretended conspiracy, triumphal dignities were allotted to TURPILIANUS, COCCEIUS NERVA, and TIGILLINUS.” In another part of his book, the BARON DE MONTESQUIEU takes notice, “ that in *Turkey*, where little regard is shewn to the honour, lives, or estates of the subject, all causes are determined by the presiding Bashaw: and in *Rome*, the judges had no more to do than to declare, that the person accused was guilty of a particular crime, and then the punishment was found in the laws.” From these and other examples of arbitrary government, this elegant author takes a particular pleasure in distinguishing, and admiring the civil constitution of *England*, where, he says, “ the jury determine, whether the fact, brought under their cognizance, be proved or not; if it be proved, the judge pronounces the punishment inflicted by the law for such a particular fact: and for this, adds the BARON, he need only open his eyes.” But if MONSIEUR DE MONTESQUIEU had read SWIFT’S letter, or indeed had recollected many notorious facts of our history, he must have observed, that the judges have been often deaf to the repeated voice of the jury, and have not only shut their eyes, against our excellent laws, but have assumed “ that terrible and menacing air, which COMMODUS ordered to be given to his statues.”

The method of trials by juries, is generally looked upon as one of the most excellent branches of our constitution. In theory it certainly appears in that light.

According to the original establishment, the jurors are to be men of competent fortunes in the neighbourhood; and are to be so avowedly indifferent between the parties concerned, that no reasonable exception can be made to them on either side. In treason the person accused has a right to challenge five and thirty, and in felony twenty, without shewing cause of challenge. Nothing can be more equitable. No prisoner can desire a fairer field. But the misfortune is, that our juries are often composed of men of mean estates, and low understandings, and many difficult points of law are brought before them, and submitted to their verdict, when perhaps they are not capable of determining, properly and judiciously, such nice matters of justice, although the judges of the court explain the nature of the case, and the law which arises upon it. But, if they are not defective in knowledge, they are sometimes, I fear, from their station and indigence, liable to corruption. This indeed is an objection more to the privilege lodged with juries, than to the institution itself. The point, most liable to objection, is the power, which any one, or more of the twelve, have to starve the rest into a compliance with their opinion; so that the verdict may possibly be given by strength of constitution, not by conviction of conscience: "*and wretches hang that jurymen may dine.*" All this by the by. Now let us return to SWIFT's letter of the tenth of *January*.

In it, is most evidently displayed his immutable attachment to *Ireland*. Such a kind of patriotism, must have

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have proceeded from a true love of liberty; for he hated individuals, and despised most of the men of property and power in that kingdom: he owed them no obligations, and while by his writings he laboured to make their posterity happy, he forced from themselves an involuntary, but universal applause. His conduct was so uniform, and constant in the cause of *Ireland*, that he not only gained the praise, but the confidence of that whole nation, who are a people seldom, if ever, inclined to study and pursue their own interest, and who are always exceedingly apt to suspect any advice that is contrary, or in defiance to a ministerial direction.

SWIFT'S principles of government seem to have been founded upon that excellent maxim, *Salus populi suprema est lex*. He begins by clearing himself from Jacobinism. He speaks of the revolution as a necessary but dangerous expedient, which has since been attended with unavoidable bad consequences. He declares his mortal antipathy to standing armies in time of peace. He adores the wisdom of that institution which rendered our parliaments annual. He prefers the landed to the monied interest, and expresses a noble abhorrence to the suspension of those laws, upon which the liberty of the subject depends. When these articles of his political tenets are examined, they will leave no room for any one particular party to assume the honour of having had him in their alliance. He was neither Whig nor Tory, neither Jacobite nor Republican. He was DOCTOR SWIFT.

His judgment, in relation to the visible decay of literature and good sense, is perfectly just. He attributes this national calamity to the prevailing luxury of the times, which he instances in the encouragement of factions, and of several public diversions, all tending to the encrease of folly, ignorance, and vice. His sentiments are delivered more with the air of a philosopher than of a divine: and the conclusion of the letter is so proper, and so excellent a defence of his own manner of acting and thinking, that, in regard to his memory, I must be at the trouble of transcribing it.

“^a All I can reasonably hope for, says SWIFT, by this letter, is to convince my friends and others, who are pleased to wish me well, that I have neither been so ill a subject, nor so stupid an author, as I have been represented by the virulence of libellers, where malice hath taken the same train in both, by fathering dangerous principles in government upon me, which I never maintained, and insipid productions, which I am not capable of writing. For, however I may have been sowered by personal ill treatment, or by melancholy prospects for the public, I am too much a politician to expose my own safety by offensive words, and, if my genius and spirit be sunk by encreasing years, I have at least enough discretion left, not to mistake the measure of my own abilities, by attempting subjects where those talents are necessary, which perhaps I may have lost with my youth.”

^a Vol. VII. Page 26.

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I have chosen out this particular letter, as one of the most serious, and best performances that he has given us in the epistolary way. But, if I am to declare my opinion of the whole collection in the seventh volume, I own to you, it has not answered my expectation. The index at the beginning will make you hope for great treasures, from the illustrious names that are there inserted: but, in your pursuit, you will scarce find any remarkable instructions of morality, or even the common reasonings and refinements that might naturally arise from so high a class of men, in the ordinary current of their thoughts. What is more surprising, you will seldom discover any keen strokes of satyr, or any instantaneous sallies of vivacity. I have often heard SWIFT say, "*When I sit down to write a letter, I never lean upon my elbow, till I have finished it.*" By which expression he meant, that he never studied for particular phrases, or polished paragraphs: his letters therefore are the truer representations of his mind. They are written in the warmth of his affections, and when they are considered in the light of kindness and sincerity, they illustrate his character to a very high degree. Throughout his various correspondence you will discover very strong marks of an anxious, benevolent friend: and, to my great pleasure, I find the misanthrope often lost in the good-natured man. Read his letters to Mr. GAY, and you will be of my sentiment; read those to Dr. SHERIDAN, in the eighth volume^a, and you will be farther confirmed in

^a Beginning at page 384.

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that opinion; we may compound therefore to lose satyr and raillery, when we gain humanity and tenderness in their stead: yet, even in some of his highest scenes of benevolence, his expressions are delivered in such a manner, as to seem rather the effects of haughtiness than of good-nature: but you must never look upon him as a traveller in the common road. He must be viewed by a *camera obscura* that turns all objects the contrary way. When he appears most angry, he is most pleased ^b; when most humble, he is most assuming ^c. Such was the man, and in such variegated colours must he be painted.

The letters from Lord BOLINGBROKE, which are inserted in this collection, are written with an elegance and politeness that distinguish them from all the rest. We see they were not intended for the press; but how valuable are the most careless strokes of such a pen?

GAY's letters have nothing in them striking or commendatory. His sentiments are those of an honest, indolent, good-natured man. He loved SWIFT to a degree of veneration: and the friendship was returned with great sincerity. SWIFT writes to him in the same strain as he would have written to a son; and seems to distinguish him as the correspondent to whom he has not the least grain of reserve. In the several accounts which he gives of his situation at *Dublin*, and the idle manner of

^b See his letters to GAY, and to the Duchess of *Queensborough*, in Vol. VII.

^c See his letter to Lord PALMERSTON, Vol. VIII. page 373.

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his passing his time there, he writes sometimes in an ironical, and sometimes in a contrary style. But, in one of his letters, dated *August 28, 1731*^a, he tells GAY, "that the most arrant trifles of his former writings are "serious philosophical lucubrations, in comparison to "what he now busies himself about;" and his conclusive words are, "*As the world may one day see.*" By this desire of *letting the world see* what other men of less wit, and more discretion, would carefully have concealed, he has placed himself open to the censure of his enemies, and beyond the reach of any defence from his friends. He has not only committed to the press a most despicable heap of writings, but has publicly recorded the lowest amusements of his private scenes of life, without having once suspected, that persons, whose stations, or abilities, have fixed them in a conspicuous attitude, are looked upon by the rest of mankind with a very critical, and a very envious eye. AUGUSTUS, as I remember, was a little ashamed to be discovered at a game of cobnuts; and even DOMITIAN was cunning enough to withdraw into his closet to catch flies. Great minds, you will say, require to be often unbent. I allow it; but those relaxations might be chosen, so as to make idleness appear in a beautiful light: and SWIFT would have forfeited a less degree of fame by playing many years at push-pin (the records of which he could not have printed), than by composing various kinds of *nonsense*, which, by his own option, have been honoured with a place in his works.

^a Vol. VII. Letter LIII. page 185.

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I should have been much pleased, in finding some of Dr. ARBUTHNOT's letters among this collection. Although he was justly celebrated for wit and learning, there was an excellence in his character more amiable than all his other qualifications: I mean the excellence of his heart. He has shewed himself equal to any of his cotemporaries in humour and vivacity: and he was superior to most men in acts of humanity and benevolence: his very sarcasms are the satirical strokes of good-nature; they are like slaps on the face given in jest, the effects of which may raise blushes, but no blackness will appear after the blows. He laughs as jovially as an attendant upon BACCHUS, but continues as sober and considerate as a disciple of SOCRATES. He is seldom serious, except in his attacks upon vice; and then his spirit rises with a manly strength, and a noble indignation. His epitaph upon CHARTRES ^a (allowing one small alteration, the word *permitted*, instead of *connived at*) is a complete, and a masterly composition in its kind. No man exceeded him in the moral duties of life: a merit still more to his honour, as the ambitious powers of wit and genius are seldom submissive enough to confine themselves within the limitations of morality. In his letter to Mr. POPE ^b, written, as it were, upon his death-bed, he discovers such a noble fortitude of mind at the approach of his

^a See POPE's Works, by WARBURTON, Vol. III, page 219.

^b See again POPE by WARBURTON, Vol. VIII. Letter XLVII.

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dissolution, as could only be inspired by a clear conscience, and the calm retrospect of an uninterrupted series of virtue. The DEAN^a laments the loss of him with a pathetic sincerity, "*The death of Mr. GAY and the Doctor*^b (says he to Mr. POPE) *have been terrible wounds near my heart. Their living would have been a great comfort to me, although I should never have seen them; like a sum of money in a bank, from which I should receive at least annual interest, as I do from you, and have done from Lord BOLINGBROKE.*" I have chosen this last quotation, not more in honour of SWIFT's tenderness and affection to those whom he esteemed, than with a design of specifying to you as fine a group of friends^c, as have appeared since the Augustan age. As their letters were not intended for the public, perhaps I was unreasonable in looking for medals, and not being contented with the common current species. In our prejudices of favour or aversion we are apt to be deceived by names; nor can it be doubted, that such writers might have furnished us with familiar letters, very different from those, which have been collected in this seventh volume. They are filled indeed (especially in the correspondence between SWIFT and POPE) with the strongest expressions of mutual esteem; but those expressions are repeated too often. When friendship has subsisted so long, that time can-

^a SWIFT'S Works, Vol. VII, Letter LXX.

^b ARBUTHNOT.

^c Lord BOLINGBROKE, SWIFT, POPE, ARBUTHNOT, GAY.

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not encrease, nor words improve it, the commerce of affection between friends, ought to be carried on in a style that neither sinks below politeness, nor rises into forced compliments. I cannot avoid observing the epistolary conciseness that was in fashion among the antients, especially their conclusive sentences, [*vale*. Or again, *Si valeas, bene est, valeo*.:] which I own seems preferable to our method of loading every letter with compliments, not only to wives and children, but to uncles, aunts, and cousins: and of consequence, every relation, that is not particularly named, is particularly affronted. It will appear too minute a criticism to affirm, that the English language is not well adapted for epistolary writings: be that as it may, it is certainly inferior to the French, which engages, and perhaps improves us by a successive flow of phrases that are peculiar to that nation. MADAME DE SEVIGNE has filled four volumes of letters, all addressed to her daughter: they contain nothing, except different scenes of maternal fondness; yet, like a classic, the oftener they are read, the more they are relished. MONSIEUR DE PELISSON has published three volumes of letters, which he calls *Lettres Historiques*, and which are little else than materials for a gazette: they inform us at what time the *grand Monarque* arose; when he went to bed; at what hour he dined; and what he said while he was at supper: yet all these trifles are told in so agreeable a manner, and appear so natural and easy, that I can scarce think the skill of OVID greater, who, in his *Fasti*, has turned the Roman Calendar into elegant poetry, and has versified a set of old Almanacs. I need not men-

