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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 XXII.

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pressions were often so full of humour and sarcasm, that, to this day, they are recorded as pieces of wit. Such was the famous reply of ARCHY to King JAMES the first, when his Majesty, amidst all his wisdom, was sufficiently inspired with folly, to send his only son into Spain. But, fools at present are no longer admired in courts, or, if they are, they appear there without their cap and bells.

And now, my dear HAMILTON, to quit reflections, that tend in general rather to terrify, than to improve your understanding, let me observe, in honour of my friend SWIFT, that his establishment of an hospital for idiots and lunatics, is remarkably generous: as the unhappy persons, who receive the benefit, must, for ever, remain insensible of their benefactor.

*I am your affectionate Father,*

O R R E R Y.



## LETTER XXII.

*T*HE *Directions to Servants*, which is the tract immediately following SWIFT's *Will*, is imperfect and unfinished. The editor tells us, that a preface and a dedication were to have been added to it. I think it was not published till after the Dean's death; but I remember the manuscript handed about, and much applauded,

in his life-time. To say the most that can be offered in its favour, the tract is written in so facetious a kind of low humour, that it must please many readers: nor is it without some degree of merit, by pointing out with an amazing exactness (and what in a less trivial case must have been called judgment) the faults, blunders, tricks, lyes, and various knaveries, of domestic servants. How much time must have been employed in putting together such a work? What an intenseness of thought must have been bestowed upon the lowest, and most slavish scenes of life? It is one of those compositions, that the utmost strength of wit can scarce sustain from sinking. A man of SWIFT'S exalted genius, ought constantly to have soared into higher regions. He ought to have looked upon persons of inferior abilities, as children, whom nature had appointed him to instruct, encourage, and improve. Superior talents seem to have been intended by Providence as public benefits, and the person, who possesses such blessings, is certainly answerable to Heaven for those endowments, which he enjoys above the rest of mankind. Let him jest with dignity, and let him be ironical upon useful subjects: leaving poor slaves to *beat their porridge, or drink their small beer*, in such vessels as they shall find proper <sup>a</sup>. The Dean, it seems, had not this way of thinking: and having long indulged his passions, at last perhaps mistook them for his duty. The mistake, my dear HAMILTON, is neither extraordinary nor surprising. In points of religion it has carried men into

<sup>a</sup> See Vol. VIII, page 8.

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great extravagancies; in those of morality, into no less; but in politics, into the greatest of all. Our inclinations are so apt to hurry us into inconsiderate actions, that we are afterwards inclined to flatter ourselves they are right, only because they have proceeded from our own thoughts and directions. Thus SWIFT, when he had once established the rule of *Vive la bagatelle*, was resolved to pursue it at all hazards. I wish his thoughts had taken another turn. The lower classes of mankind pass on unnoticed; the great only are censured. They ought to be particularly attentive to every step they take. The Dean of St. PATRICK'S should have known himself, as *Rex idem hominum, Phœbique sacerdos*, and should have remembered, that kings and priests are extremely liable to be censured. Poor SWIFT! why did he sink below himself before he was deprived of reason? Forgive him that error, my HAMILTON, and draw a veil of oblivion over certain excrescencies of wit and humour, you will then admire him, as an honour to the public, and a scourge to all the knaves and fools of his time.

Three pamphlets, relating to *Ireland*, successively follow the *Directions to Servants*. The first is entitled, *Reasons humbly offered to the Parliament of Ireland, for repealing the Sacramental Test in favour of the Catholics*: The second, *Some Reasons against the Bill for settling the Tythe of Hemp, Flax, &c. by a Modus*: The third, *Some farther Reasons against the Bill for settling the Tythe of Hemp, Flax, &c.* The subject-matter of these pamphlets may perhaps be little worth your consideration; but their style will always command your attention.

They are very much misplaced, and, in any more methodical edition of the Dean's works, ought to appear with such other pieces, as have been composed by him against the dissenters. The first tract is written under the assumed character of a Roman catholic, by which means the author attacks his adversaries with a great advantage. He freely acknowledges the several atrocious crimes of the papists; but at the same time palliates them so skilfully, that, from that very acknowledgment, he enables himself to aim the heavier blows at the presbyterians. A paragraph extracted from the pamphlet will exemplify my meaning. "*We allow, says he, the CATHOLICS to be BRETHREN of the Dissenters; some people, indeed (which we cannot allow), would have them to be our children, because we both dissent from the church established, and both agree in abolishing this persecuting sacramental test; by which NEGATIVE DISCOURAGEMENT we are both rendered incapable of civil and military employments. However, we cannot but wonder at the bold familiarity of these schismatics, in calling the members of the national church their BRETHREN and FELLOW-PROTESTANTS. It is true, that all these sects (except the CATHOLICS) are BRETHREN to each other in faction, ignorance, iniquity, perverseness, pride, and (if we except the QUAKERS) in rebellion. But, how the churchmen can be styled their FELLOW-PROTESTANTS, we cannot comprehend. Because, when the whole BABEL of sectaries joined against the Church, the King, and the Nobility, for twenty years, in a MATCH AT FOOT-BALL; where the proverb expressly tells us,*" that

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“that ALL ARE FELLOWS; while the three kingdoms  
 “were tossed to and fro, the churches and cities, and royal  
 “palaces, shattered to pieces by their BALLS, their BUF-  
 “FETS, and their KICKS; the victors would allow no  
 “more FELLOWS AT FOOT-BALL: but murdered, seque-  
 “stered, plundered, deprived, banished to the plantations,  
 “or enslaved, all their opposers who had LOST THE  
 “GAME.” The greatest art, and the keenest strokes of  
 irony, display themselves throughout the whole composi-  
 tion: and the conclusion of it is drawn up with a mix-  
 ture of serious and ironical arguments that seem to defy  
 all kinds of refutation.

The two next pamphlets for settling the Tythe of Hemp,  
 &c. by a Modus, are entirely adapted to the clergy of  
 Ireland; but I cannot avoid observing in those papers, a  
 greater fund of calmness, not a less degree of spirit, than  
 in many other of SWIFT'S political writings.

The remainder of this volume is like a garden over-  
 run with docks and thistles, among which some rose-  
 trees accidentally make their appearance. The scythe  
 of time, or the weeding-knife of a judicious editor, will  
 cut down the docks and thistles, but the beauty of the  
 roses will particularly appear in some sermons that are  
 curious; and curious for such reasons, as would make  
 other works despicable. They were written in a careless,  
 hurrying manner, and were the offspring of necessity, not  
 of choice: so that you will see the original force of his  
 genius more in these compositions, that were the legiti-  
 mate sons of duty, than in other pieces, that were the na-  
 tural sons of love. They were held in such low esteem

in his own thoughts, that some years before he died, he gave away the whole collection to Dr. SHERIDAN, with the utmost indifference: "*Here, says he, are a bundle of my old sermons; you may have them if you please: they may be of use to you, they have never been of any to me.*" The parcel given to Dr. SHERIDAN consisted, as I have heard, of about five-and-thirty sermons. Three or four only are published; and those I have read over with attention. The first is upon *Mutual Subjection*, and that duty which is owing from one man to another. A clearer style, or a discourse more properly adapted to a public audience, can scarce be framed. Every paragraph is simple, nervous, and intelligible. The threads of each argument are closely connected, and logically pursued: but in places where the Dean has the least opportunity to introduce political maxims, or to dart an arrow at the conduct of princes, he never fails to indulge himself in his usual manner of thinking, as you will judge from the following quotations: "*A wise man, says Dr. SWIFT,*  
 "*who doth not assist with his counsels; a great man with*  
 "*his protection; a rich man with his bounty and charity;*  
 "*and a poor man with his labour; are perfect nuisances in*  
 "*a commonwealth. Neither is any condition of life more*  
 "*honourable in the sight of God than another; otherwise*  
 "*he would be a respecter of persons, which he assureth us*  
 "*he is not: for he hath proposed the same salvation to*  
 "*all men, and hath only placed them in different ways or*  
 "*stations to work it out. Princes are born with no more*  
 "*advantages of strength or wisdom than other men; and,*  
 "*by an unhappy education, are usually more defective in both*  
 "*than*

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“*than thousands of their subjects* <sup>a</sup>.” Again, in the same strain, “*The best prince is, in the opinion of wise men, only the greatest servant of the nation; not only a servant to the public in general, but in some sort to every man in it* <sup>b</sup>.” But the most extraordinary passage is a covert stroke at the highest order of his brethren the clergy. It runs thus: “*The miseries of life are not properly owing to the unequal distribution of things; but God Almighty, the great King of heaven, is treated like the kings of the earth; who (although perhaps intending well themselves) have often most abominable ministers and stewards, and those generally the vilest, to whom they entrust the most talents* <sup>c</sup>. Dark as it is, this paragraph requires no explanation. The author’s natural turn of mind breaks forth upon all occasions, and the politician frequently outweighs the divine. If the dictates of such a spirit were capable of forcing their way from the pulpit, what a glorious, what a consistent figure, must SWIFT have made in the rostrum at *Rome*, or in one of the porticos at *Athens*?

The next moral essay, for I can scarce call it a sermon, is upon the *Testimony of Conscience*: in which the author inserts some very striking observations upon such false notions of honour as are too prevalent in the world. I am so far from thinking it a trouble, that I think it a pleasure, to transcribe the particular passage: “*The false principle, which some men set up in the place of conscience to be their director in life, is what those who pretend to*

<sup>a</sup> Page 211.

<sup>b</sup> Page 215.

<sup>c</sup> Page 218.

“*it,*

" it, call HONOUR. This word is often made the sanction  
 " of an oath; it is reckoned a great commendation to be a  
 " man of strict honour; and it is commonly understood, that  
 " a man of honour can never be guilty of a base action. This  
 " is usually the style of military men; of persons with titles;  
 " and of others who pretend to birth and quality. It is true  
 " indeed, that in antient times it was universally under-  
 " stood, that honour was the reward of virtue; but if  
 " such honour as is now-a-days going will not permit a man  
 " to do a base action, it must be allowed, there are very  
 " few such things as base actions in nature. No man of  
 " honour, as that word is usually understood, did ever pre-  
 " tend, that his honour obliged him to be chaste or tempe-  
 " rate; to pay his creditors; to be useful to his country; to  
 " do good to mankind; to endeavour to be wise or learned; to  
 " regard his word, his promise, or his oath; or if he hath  
 " any of these virtues, they were never learned in the  
 " catechism of honour; which contains but two precepts,  
 " the punctual payment of debts contracted at play, and the  
 " right understanding the several degrees of an affront, in  
 " order to revenge it by the death of an adversary <sup>a</sup>."

The third discourse upon *The Trinity* is indeed a ser-  
 mon, and one of the best in its kind. Dr. SWIFT seems  
 not to have made such a plan his voluntary choice, nor  
 to have built, *suo ex motu*, upon such a basis <sup>b</sup>; but he

<sup>a</sup> Page 228.

<sup>b</sup> In the beginning of his sermon, he lets us know, that  
 he preached it on Trinity Sunday, a day on which all the  
 clergy think themselves confined to this theme.

has

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has completed the superstructure in a most masterly manner: the materials answer the dignity of the edifice, and the artificer may assume great honour, upon the completion of so noble, so simple, and so useful a pile. The mysterious parts of our religion are apt to have dreadful effects upon weak minds. The general comments upon the sacred writings, and the several sermons upon the most abstruse points of scripture, are too often composed in the gloomy style. Damnation, eternal damnation, is placed with all its horror before our eyes; and we are so terrified at the prospect, that fear makes us imagine, we can comprehend mysteries, which, on this side of the grave, must be for ever denied to our limited understandings. SWIFT has taken the safest, and the properest method of expounding these *arcana*. He advances every position that can be established upon so incomprehensible a subject. He sustains the belief, avows the doctrine, and adapts the matter of faith as well as possible to the human capacity. His manner of reasoning is masterly, and his arguments are nervous, particularly where he says, "*It is highly probable, that if God should please to reveal unto us this great mystery of the Trinity, or some other mysteries in our holy religion, we should not be able to understand them, unless he would at the same time think fit to bestow on us some new powers or faculties of the mind, which we want at present, and are reserved to the day of resurrection to life eternal*."

But, my HAM, you must be weary of quotations. I

<sup>a</sup> Page 246.

will

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will make no more: and in excuse of those already made, I can only offer, that in comments upon original authors, quotations are often the best, and perhaps the only explanations that can fully answer the end proposed. I mean, that the original spirit is so volatile, as not to admit of the least transfusion. In ordinary compositions, the essence may be extracted, and the subtlest parts distilled: but SWIFT's sermons appeared a chymical preparation of so extraordinary, and penetrating a nature, that I was resolved to send you as much of the æthereal spirit, as might be safely conveyed by the post.

I shall take no notice of a fourth sermon, as it is evidently not composed by the Dean <sup>a</sup>: but I find, that I have omitted to mention two poems of great wit and humour. They are previous to the sermons. The first <sup>b</sup> was artfully published by Dr. SWIFT in a manner so different from those rules of poetry to which he confined himself, that he hoped the public might mistake it for a spurious, or incorrect copy stolen by memory from his original poem. He took great pleasure in this supposition: and I believe it answered his expectation. One of his strictest rules in poetry was to avoid *triplets*. What can have given rise to so nice a peculiarity, is difficult to determine. It might be owing only to a singular turn of thinking; but the reason which he publicly assigned, seemed not so much against the practice itself, as against

<sup>a</sup> *The difficulty of knowing one's self*, p. 255.

<sup>b</sup> *The Life and Genuine Character of the Reverend Dr. SWIFT.*

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the poets who indulged themselves in that manner of writing. "A custom (according to the Dean's opinion) introduced by laziness, continued by ignorance, and established by false taste." With deference to so great a critic, it is a custom, that has frequently been pursued with remarkable success. Mr. DRYDEN abounds in triplets; and in some of his most elegant poems, the third concluding verse forms the finest climax in the whole piece. Mr. WALLER, the father of all flowing poetry, has generally reserved the nicest point of wit to his triplicate line: and upon an impartial enquiry, it is almost to be questioned, whether, in many instances, this despicable triplet may not add a greater beauty to a poetical composition, than any other circumstance. To be confined, on any terms, by the links of rhyme, is of great disadvantage to our English poetry. The finest poem that we can boast, and which we equalize, and perhaps would willingly prefer, to the Iliad, is void of those fetters. But, when it is our destiny to wear chains, surely we may be allowed to make them as light and easy as we can.

The second poem <sup>a</sup>, entitled, *Verses on the Death of Dr. SWIFT, occasioned by reading a Maxim in ROCHEFOUCAULT*, is a most pointed piece of sarcasm. Not any of the Dean's poems have more wit; nor are any of them more severe. In it he has summoned together his whole powers of satyr and poetry. It is a parting blow; the legacy of anger and disappointment; but as the two last

<sup>a</sup> Page 151.

lines

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lines <sup>a</sup> are grammatically incorrect, and as they were not inserted in the first edition published at *London*, I cannot tell how they have crept into a poem, that is otherwise as exactly polished as any of SWIFT'S nicest compositions.

The remaining pieces in this volume are neither worthy of SWIFT'S pen, nor of your perusal. Many of them are spurious, and many more are trifling, and in every respect improper for the public view: so that what was once ludicrously said upon a different occasion, may be applied not only to the last volume, but indeed to some of the former, as "they put us in mind of the famous machine in WINSTANLEY'S water-works, where, out of the same vessel, the spectators were presented with tea, coffee, chocolate, champagne, and four small beer."

*I am, my dear Son,  
Your truly affectionate Father,*

ORRERY.



LETTER XXIII.

WE have now gone through FAULKNER'S edition of SWIFT'S works; but there are still remaining three of

*\* That kingdom he hath left his debtor.  
I wish it soon may have a better.*

his