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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**

Remarks upon those sermons.

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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*."<sup>a</sup> 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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