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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

Swift's aversion to triplets.

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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 ^a: but I find, that I have omitted to mention two poems of great wit and humour. They are previous to the sermons. The first ^b 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

^a *The difficulty of knowing one's self*, p. 255.

^b *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 ^a, 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

^a Page 151.

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lines ^a 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