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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 The Tale of a Tub.

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his pieces, *The Tale of a Tub*, *the Battle of the Books in St. James's Library*, and *The Fragment*, which, although not absolutely owned by the Dean, *aut Erasmi sunt aut Diaboli*.

The first of these, *The Tale of a Tub*, has made much noise in the world. It was one of SWIFT's earliest performances, and has never been excelled in wit and spirit by his own, or any other pen. The censures that are passed upon it, are various. The most material of which were such as reflected upon Dr. SWIFT, in the character of a clergyman, and a Christian. It has been one of the misfortunes attending Christianity, that many of her sons, from a mistaken filial piety, have indulged themselves in too restrained, and too melancholy a way of thinking. Can we wonder then, if a book, composed with all the force of wit and humour in derision of sacerdotal tyranny, in ridicule of grave hypocrisy, and in contempt of phlegmatic stiffness, should be wilfully misconstrued by some persons, and ignorantly mistaken by others, as a sarcasm and reflection upon the whole Christian Church? SWIFT's ungovernable spirit of irony has sometimes carried him into very unwarrantable flights of wit. I have remarked such passages with a most unwilling eye. But, let my affections of friendship have been ever so great, my paternal affection is still greater: and I will pursue candour, even with an aching heart, when the pursuit of it may tend to your advantage or instruction. In the style of truth therefore, I must still look upon *The Tale of a Tub*, as no intended insult against Christianity; but as a satyr against the wild errors of
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the church of *Rome*, the slow and incomplete reformation of the Lutherans, and the absurd and affected zeal of the Presbyterians. In the character of PETER, we see the pope, seated on his pontifical throne, and adorned with his triple crown. In the picture of MARTIN, we view LUTHER, and the first reformers: and in the representation of JACK, we see JOHN CALVIN and his disciples. The author's arrows are chiefly directed against PETER and JACK. To MARTIN, he shews all the indulgence that the laws of allegory will permit.

The actions of PETER are the actions of a man intoxicated with pride, power, rage, tyranny, and self-conceit. These passions are placed in the most ridiculous light: and the effects of them produce to us the tenets and doctrines of papal *Rome*, such as purgatory, penance, images, indulgences, auricular confession, transubstantiation, and those dreadful monsters, the pontifical bulls, which, according to this ludicrous author, derived their origin from the famous bulls of COLCHOS, described by OVID.

*Terribiles vultus, præfixaque cornua ferro;
Pulveremque solum pede pulsavere bisulco;
Fumificisque locum mugitibus implevere*^a.

“ But LORD PETER'S BULLS, says *The Tale of a Tub*,
“ were extremely vitiated by time in the metal of their
“ feet, which, from BRASS, was now degenerated into
“ common LEAD. However, the terrible roaring peculiar

^a OVID *Metam.* Lib. VII. ver. 112.

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“ to their lineage was preserved, as likewise that faculty
 “ of BREATHING out fire at their nostrils.” These passages, and many others, no doubt, must be construed as antichristian by the church of *Rome*. When the chief minister, and his minions, are exposed, the keener the satyr, the more liable is it to be interpreted into high treason against the king.

In the character of JACK, a set of people were alarmed, who are easily offended, and who can scarce bear the cheerfulness of a smile. In their dictionry, wit is only another name for wickedness: and the purer or more excellent the wit, the greater and more impious the *abomination*. However wide therefore the difference of PETER and JACK might have been in fashioning their coats, the two brothers most sincerely agreed in their hatred of an adversary so powerful as this anonymous author. They spared no unmannerly reflections upon his character. They had recourse to every kind of abuse that could reach him. And sometimes it was the work of SWIFT, and his companions: sometimes not a syllable of it was his work; it was the work of one of his uncle's sons, a clergyman: and sometimes it was the work of a person, who was to be nameless. Each of these malicious conjectures reigned in its turn; and you will find, my HAMILTON, that bold assertions, however false, almost constantly meet with success; a kind of triumph, that would appear one of the severest institutes of fate, if time, and truth, did not soon obliterate all marks of the victory.

The

The criticisms of the Martinists (whom we may suppose the members of the church of *England*) were, it is to be hoped, more candid: for MARTIN, as I have just now hinted, is treated with a much less degree of sarcasm than the other two brothers. What relates to him is so short, that I will venture to transcribe it. “ They
 “ both [LUTHER and CALVIN] “ unanimously entered upon
 “ this great work [THE REFORMATION], looking some-
 “ times on their coats, and sometimes on the WILL. MAR-
 “ TIN laid the first hand; at one twitch brought off a
 “ large handful of POINTS; and, with a second pull,
 “ stript away ten dozen yards of FRINGE. But, when he
 “ had gone thus far, he demurred a while: he knew
 “ very well, there yet remained a great deal more to be
 “ done: however, the first heat being over, his violence
 “ began to cool, and he resolved to proceed more mode-
 “ rately in the rest of the work; having already very
 “ narrowly escaped a swinging rent in pulling off the
 “ POINTS, which, being TAGGED WITH SILVER (as
 “ we have observed before), the judicious workman had,
 “ with much sagacity, double-sown to preserve them from
 “ FALLING. Resolving therefore to rid his coat of a huge
 “ quantity of GOLD LACE, he picked up the stitches with
 “ much caution, and diligently gleaned out all the loose
 “ threads as he went; which proved to be a work of time.
 “ Then he fell about the embroidered INDIAN figures of
 “ men, women, and children; against which, as you have
 “ heard in its due place, their father’s testament was ex-
 “ tremely exact and severe. These, with much dexterity
 “ and application, were, after a while, quite eradicated,

“ or

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“ or utterly defaced. For the rest, where he observed the
 “ embroidery to be worked so close, as not to be got away
 “ without damaging the cloth, or where it served to hide
 “ or strengthen any flaw in the body of the coat, contracted
 “ by the perpetual tampering of workmen upon it; he con-
 “ cluded, the wisest course was to let it remain, resolving
 “ in no case whatsoever, that the substance of the stuff
 “ should suffer injury, which he thought the best method for
 “ serving the true intent and meaning of his father’s
 “ WILL. And this is the nearest account I have been able
 “ to collect of MARTIN’s proceedings up n this great revo-
 “ lution.”

The church of England can scarce be angry at such a favourable account of LUTHER: especially as we have since reformed from LUTHER himself, and, so far as our judgments can teach us, have restored our *habits* still nearer to the original fashion, which they bore at the perfection of the *Testament*. The best, and, what is more extraordinary, the most serious apology, that can be made for the author, was written by himself, and is dated June 3, 1709; from which time, it has been constantly printed in a prefatory manner to the work itself. In this apology, Dr. SWIFT candidly acknowledges, that
 “ There are several youthful sallies, which, from the grave
 “ and the wise, may deserve a rebuke.” And further adds, that “ He will forfeit his life, if any one opinion
 “ can fairly be deduced from the book, which is contrary
 “ to religion or morality.”

The dedication to *Prince Posterity* will please you; nor will you be less entertained by the several *digressions*

which are written in ridicule of bad critics, dull commentators, and the whole fraternity of Grub-street philosophers. *The Introduction* abounds with wit and humour: but the author never loses the least opportunity of venting his keenest satyr against Mr. DRYDEN, and consequently loads with insults the greatest, although the least prosperous, of our English poets. Yet who can avoid smiling, when he finds the *Hind and Panther* mentioned as *a complete abstract of sixteen thousand schoolmen*, and when TOMMY PORTS is supposed written by *the same hand*, as *a supplement to the former work*? I am willing to imagine, that DRYDEN, in some manner or other, had offended my friend Dr. SWIFT, who, otherwise, I hope, would have been more indulgent to the errors of a man oppressed by poverty, driven on by party, and bewildered by religion.

But although our satyrical author, now-and-then, may have indulged himself in some personal animosities, or may have taken freedoms not so perfectly consistent with that solemn decency, which is required from a clergyman; yet, throughout the whole piece, there is a vein of ridicule and good humour, that laughs pedantry and affectation into the lowest degree of contempt, and exposes the character of PETER and JACK in such a manner, as never will be forgiven, and never can be answered.

The *Battle of the Books* took its rise from the controversy between Sir WILLIAM TEMPLE and Mr. WOTTON: a controversy which made much noise, and employed many pens, towards the latter end of the last century.

This

This humorous treatise is drawn up in an heroic comic style, in which SWIFT, with great wit and spirit, gives the victory to the former. The general plan is excellent; but particular parts are defective. The frequent chasms puzzle and interrupt the narrative: they neither convey any latent ideas, nor point out any distant or occult sarcasms. Some characters are barely touched upon, which might have been extended; others are enlarged, which might have been contracted. The name of HORACE is scarce inserted, and VIRGIL is introduced only for an opportunity of comparing his translator DRYDEN, to *the Lady in a Lobster: to a Mouse under a Canopy of State: and to a scriwelled Beau within the Penthouse of a full-bottomed Perriwig*. These similies carry the true stamp of ridicule: but rancour must be very prevalent in the heart of an author, who could overlook the merits of DRYDEN; many of whose dedications and prefaces are as fine compositions, and as just pieces of criticism, as any in our language. The translation of VIRGIL was a work of haste and indigence: DRYDEN was equal to the undertaking, but unfortunate during the conduct of it.

And now, as I have mentioned VIRGIL, and as I indulge myself in an unlimited manner of expressing to you my thoughts, I must plead that kind of habit for inserting a conjecture, which, perhaps, is purely chimerical, but which, in the pursuit of it, has given me no small degree of pleasure, as the motive tends to vindicate one of your favourite poets from the censure of ingratitude.

The critics have been justly surpris'd, that VIRGIL seems entirely to have neglected HORACE, when it is