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Miscellaneous works Of The Late Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl Of Chesterfield

Consisting Of Letters to his Friends, never before printed, And Various
Other Articles

**Chesterfield, Philip Dormer Stanhope of
Dublin, 1777**

VI. Common Sense. Saturday, February 26, 1737. N° 4.

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But it is certain, that to come some way or other at the intrinsic weight of the individuals who compose our legislature, and to distinguish exactly betwixt that intrinsic weight, and the extraneous weight they may be apt to acquire, would greatly tend to preserve a due equilibrium, between the collective bodies that form our constitution.

I must own, many difficulties occur to me in this undertaking; but, as I am unwearied in my endeavours for the good of my country, I will turn this matter in my thought, till I have reduced it to some method that may appear to me to be practicable, when I shall not fail communicating it to the world, for the good of posterity. In the mean time, I shall think myself obliged to any ingenious person who shall send me his thoughts upon this subject, and help me to ascertain the due weight of every individual, as well as a true method of coming at it.

VI.

COMMON SENSE.

SATURDAY, February 26, 1737. N^o 4.

THE Romans used to say, *ex pede Herculem*, or, you may know Hercules by his foot, intimating, that one may commonly judge of the whole by a part. I confess, I am myself very apt to judge in this manner, and may, without pretending to an uncommon share of sagacity, say, that I have very seldom found myself mistaken in it. It is impossible not to form to one's self some opinion of people the first time one sees them, from their air and dress; and a suit of cloaths has often informed me, with the utmost certainty, that the wearer had not common sense. The Greeks (to display my learning) said *ἰματίον ἀνθρώπου*, or, the dress shews the man; and it is certain, that of all trifling things, there is none by which people so much discover their natural turn of mind, as by their dress. In greater matters they proceed more cautiously, nature is disguised, and weaknesses are concealed by art or imitation; but in dress they give a loose to their fancy, and by declaring it an immaterial thing, though at the same time they do not think it so, promise themselves at least

least impunity, in their greatest oddnesses, and wildest excesses. I shall therefore, in this paper, consider the subject of dress, by certain plain rules of common sense, which I shall strictly charge and require all persons to observe.

As dress is more immediately the province, not to say the pleasure, not to say the care, not to say the whole study, of the fair sex, I make my first application to them; and I humbly beg their indulgence, if the rules I shall lay down should prove a little contrary to those they have hitherto practised. There is a proper dress for every rank, age and figure, which those who deviate from, are guilty of petty-treason against common sense; to prevent which crime for the future, I have some thoughts of disposing, in proper parts of the town, a certain number of babies in the statutable dress, for each rank, age, and figure, which, like the 25th of Edward III, shall reduce that matter to a precision.

Dress, to be sensible, must be properly adapted to the person, as in writing, the style must be suited to the subject, which image may not unaptly be carried on through the several branches of it. I am far from objecting to the magnificence of apparel, in those whose rank and fortune justify and allow it; on the contrary, it is a useful piece of luxury, by which the poor and the industrious are enabled to live, at the expence of the rich and the idle. I would no more have a woman of quality dressed in dog-grel, than a farmer's wife in heroics. But I hereby notify to the profuse wives of industrious tradesmen and honest yeomen, that all they get by dressing above themselves, is the envy and hatred of their inferiors and their equals, with the contempt and ridicule of their superiors.

To those of the first rank in birth and beauty, I recommend a noble simplicity of dress; the subject supports itself, and wants none of the borrowed helps of external ornaments. Beautiful nature may be disfigured, but cannot be improved, by art; and as I look upon a very handsome woman to be the finest subject in nature, her dress ought to be epic, modest, noble, and entirely free from the modern tinsel. I therefore prohibit all *con-cetti*, and luxuriances of fancy, which only depreciate so noble a subject; and I must do the handsomest women I know, the justice to say, that they keep the clearest from these

these extravagances. Delia's good sense appears even in her dress, which she neither studies nor neglects; but, by a decent and modest conformity to the fashion, equally shuns the triumphant pageantry of an over-bearing beauty, or the insolent negligence of a conscious one.

As for those of an inferior rank of beauty, such as are only pretty women, and whose charms result rather from a certain air and *je ne sais quoi* in their whole composition, than from any dignity of figure, or symmetry of features, I allow them greater licences in their own ornaments, because their subject not being of the sublimest kind, may receive some advantages from the elegance of style, and the variety of images. I therefore, permit them to dress up to all the flights and fancies of the sonnet, the madrigal, and such like minor compositions. Flavia may serve for a model of this kind; her ornaments are her amusement, not her care; though she shines in all the gay and glittering images of dress, the prettiness of the subject warrants all the wantonness of the fancy. And if she owes them a lustre, which it may be, she would not have without them, she returns them graces they could find no where else.

There is a third sort, who, with a perfect neutrality of face, are neither handsome nor ugly, and who have nothing to recommend them, but a certain smart and genteel turn of little figure, quick and lively. These I cannot indulge in a higher style than the epigram, which should be neat, clever, and unadorned, the whole to lie in the sting; and where that lies, is unnecessary to mention.

Having thus gone through the important article of dress, with relation to the three classes of my countrywomen, who alone can be permitted to dress at all, *viz.* the handsome, the pretty, and the genteel, I must add, that this privilege is limited by common sense to a certain number of years, beyond which no woman can be any one of the three. I therefore require, that, when turned of thirty, they abate of the vigor of their dress: and that, when turned of forty, they utterly lay aside all thoughts of it. And as an inducement to them so to do, I do most solemnly assure them, that they may make themselves ridiculous, but never desirable by it. When they are once arrived at the latitude of forty, the propi-

tious gales are over; let them gain the first port, and lay aside their rigging.

I come now to a melancholy subject, and upon which the freedom of my advice, I fear, will not be kindly taken; but as the cause of common sense is most highly concerned in it, I shall proceed without regard to the consequences. I mean the ugly, and, I am sorry to say it, so numerous a part of my countrywomen, I must, for their own sakes, treat them with some rigor, to save them not only from the public ridicule, but indignation. Their dress must not rise above plain humble prose; and any attempts beyond it, amount at best to the mock-heroic, and excite laughter. An ugly woman should by all means avoid any ornament, that may draw eyes upon her, which she will entertain so ill. But if she endeavours, by dint of dress, to cram her deformity down mankind, the insolence of the undertaking is resented; and when a Gorgon curls her snakes to charm the town, she would have no reason to complain if she lost head and all, by the hand of some avenging Perseus. Ugly women, who may more properly be called a third sex, than a part of the fair one, should publicly renounce all thoughts of their persons, and turn their minds another way; they should endeavour to be honest, good-humoured gentlemen, they may amuse themselves with field sports, and a chearful glass, and, if they could get into parliament, I should, for my own part, have no objection to it. Should I be asked how a woman shall know she is ugly, and take her measures accordingly; I answer, that, in order to judge right, she must not believe her eyes, but her ears, and if they have not heard very warm addresses and applications, she may depend upon it, it was the deformity, and not the severity, of her countenance, that prevented them.

There is another sort of ladies, whose daily insults upon common sense call for the strongest correction, and who may most properly be styled old offenders. These are the sexagenary fair ones, and upwards, who, whether they were handsome or not in the last century, ought at least in this to reduce themselves to a decency and gravity of dress suited to their years. These offenders are exceedingly numerous: witness all the public places, where they exhibit whatever art and dress can do, to make them
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completely ridiculous. I have often observed septuagenary great-grandmothers adorned, as they thought, with all the colours of the rainbow, while in reality they looked more like the decayed worms in the midst of their own silks. Nay, I have seen them proudly display withered necks, shriveled and decayed like their marriage-settlements, and which no hand, but the cold hand of time, had visited these forty years. The utmost indulgence I can allow here, is extreme cleanliness, that they may not offend more senses than the sight; but for the dress, it must be confined to the elegy and the *tristibus*.

What has been said with relation to the fair sex, holds true with relation to the other, only with still greater restrictions, as such irregularities are less pardonable in men than in ladies. A reasonable compliance with the fashion is no disparagement to the best understanding, and an affected singularity would; but an excess, beyond what age, rank, and character will justify, is one of the worst signs the body can hang out, and will never tempt people to call in. I see with indulgence the youth of our nation finely bound, and gilt on the back, and wish they were lettered into the bargain. I forgive them the unnatural scantiness of their wigs, and the immoderate dimensions of their bags, in consideration that the fashion has prevailed, and that the opposition of a few to it would be the greater affectation of the two. Though, by the way, I very much doubt whether they are all of them gainers by shewing their ears; for it is said that Midas, after a certain accident, was the judicious inventor of long wigs. But then these luxuriancies of fancy must subside, when age and rank all upon judgment to check its excrescences and irregularities.

I cannot conclude this paper, without an animadversion upon one prevailing folly, of which both sexes are equally guilty, and which is attended with real ill consequences to the nation; I mean that rage of foreign fopperies, by which so considerable a sum of ready money is annually exported out of the kingdom, for things which ought not to be suffered to be imported even *gratis*. In order therefore to prevent, as far as I am able, this absurd and mischievous practice, I hereby signify, that I will shew a greater indulgence than ordinary to those, who only expose themselves in the manufactures of their own

country; and that they shall enjoy a connivance, in the nature of a drawback, to those excesses, which otherwise I shall not tolerate.

I must add, that if it be so genteel to copy the French, even in their weaknesses, I should humbly hope it might be thought still more so, to imitate them where they really deserve imitation, which is, in preferring every thing of their own to every thing of other people's. A Frenchman, who happened to be in England, at the time of the last total eclipse of the sun, assured the people, whom he saw looking at it with attention, that it was not to be compared to a French eclipse: would some of our fine women emulate that spirit, and assert, as they might do with much more truth, that the foreign manufactures are not to be compared to the English, such a declaration would be worth two or three hundred thousand pounds a year to the kingdom, and operate more effectually than all the laws made for that purpose. The Roman ladies got the Oppian law, which restrained their dress, repealed, in spite of the unwearied opposition of the elder Cato. I exhort the British ladies to exert their power to better purposes, and to revive, by their credit, the trade and manufactures of their own country, in spite of the supine negligence of those, whose more immediate care it ought to be to cultivate and promote them.

VII.

COMMON SENSE.

SATURDAY, April 30, 1737. N^o 14.

THOSE, who attack the fundamental laws of virtue and morality, urge the uncertainty of them, and alledge their variations in different countries, and even in different ages in the same countries. Morality, say they, is local, and consequently an imaginary thing, since what is rejected in one climate as a vice, is practised in another as a virtue; and according to them, the voice of nature speaks as many different languages as there are nations in the world.

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