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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**

XII. Common Sense. Saturday, Sept. 3, 1737. N° 32.

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## XII.

## COMMON SENSE.

SATURDAY, Sept. 3, 1737. N<sup>o</sup> 32.

**M**ONSIEUR de la Rochefoucault very justly observes, that people are never ridiculous from their real, but from their affected, characters; they cannot help being what they are, but they can help attempting to appear what they are not. A hump-back is by no means ridiculous, unless it be under a fine coat; nor a weak understanding, unless it assumes the lustre and ornaments of a bright one. Good-nature conceals and pities the inevitable defects of body or mind, but is not obliged to treat acquired ones with the least indulgence. Those who would pass upon the world talents which they have not, are as guilty in the common course of society, as those who, in the way of trade, would put off false money, knowing it to be such; and it is as much the business of ridicule to expose the former, as of the law to punish the latter.

I do not here mean to consider the affectation of moral virtues, which comes more properly under the definition of hypocrisy, and justly excites our indignation and abhorrence, as a criminal deceit; but I shall confine myself now to the affectation of those lesser talents and accomplishments, without any of which a man may be a very worthy valuable man, and only becomes a very ridiculous one by pretending to them. Those people are the proper, and, it may be, the only proper objects of ridicule; for they are above fools, who are below it, and below wise men, who are above it. They are the coxcombs lord Rochester describes as self-created, and of whom he says, that God never made one worth a groat. Besides, as they are rebels and traitors to common sense, whose natural-born subjects they are, I am justified in treating them with the utmost rigor.

I cannot be of the general opinion, that these coxcombs have first imposed upon themselves, and really think

think themselves what they would have others think them. On the contrary, I am persuaded that every man knows himself best, and is his own severest censor; nay, I am convinced that many a man has lived and died with faults and weaknesses, which nobody but himself ever discovered. It is true, they keep their own secrets inviolate, which makes people believe they have not found it out. Why do we discern the failings of our friends sooner and better than we do other people's, but because we interest ourselves more in them? By the same rule, we feel our own still sooner. And possibly, in this case alone, we are kinder to our friends than to ourselves; since I very much question if a man would love his friend so well if he were faultless, and he would certainly like himself the better for being so. If this supposition be true, as I think it is, my coxcombs are both the more guilty, and the more ridiculous, as they live in a constant course of practical lying, and in the absurd and sanguine hopes of passing undetected.

Fatuus, the most consummate coxcomb of this or any other age or country, has parts enough to have excelled in almost any one thing he would have applied himself to. But he must excel in all. He must be at once a wit, a lover, a scholar, and a statesman; yet, conscious of the impracticability of the undertaking, he parcels out his accomplishments, and compounds to have the several branches of his merit admired in separate districts.

Hence, he talks politics to his women, wit to ministers of state, displays his learning to beaux, and brags of his success in gallantry to his country neighbours. His caution is a proof of his guilt, and shews that he does not deceive himself, but only hopes to impose upon others. Fatuus's parts have undone him, and brought him to a bankruptcy of common sense and judgment; as many have been ruined by great estates, which led them into expences they were not able to support.

There are few so universal coxcombs as Fatuus, to whom I therefore gave the post of honor; but infinite are the numbers of minor coxcombs, who are coxcombs *quoad hoc*, and who have singled out certain accomplishments, which they are resolved to possess in spite of reluctant nature. Their most general attempts are at wit  
and

and women, as the two most shining and glittering talents in the *beau monde*.

Thus Protervus, who has a good serious understanding, contrives to pass almost for a fool, because he will be a wit. He must shine; he admires and pursues the lustre of wit, which, like an *ignis fatuus*, leads him out of his way into all sorts of absurdities. He is awkwardly pert; he puns, twists words, inverts sentences, and retails in one company the scraps he has picked up in another; but still, conscious of his own insufficiency, he cautiously seeks to shine, where he hopes he may dazzle, and prudently declines the encounter of the strongest eyes. How often have I seen his unnatural alacrity suddenly confounded, and shrinking into silence, at the appearance of somebody of avowed and unquestioned wit!

Ponderosus has a slow laborious understanding, a good memory, and, with application, might succeed in business; but truly he must be a fine man, and succeed with women. He exposes his clumsy figure by adorning it, makes declaration of love with all the form and solemnity of a proclamation, and ridiculously consumes in revels the time he might usefully employ at the desk. He cannot be ignorant of his ill success; he feels it, but endeavours to impose upon the world, by hinting, in one set of company, his successes in another; and by whispering, in public places, with an air of familiarity, such indifferent trifles, as would not justify the woman in refusing to hear them. But how have I seen him skulk at the approach of the real favourite, and betray his consciousness of his affected character! Be it known to Ponderosus, and all those of his turn, that this vanity, besides the absurdity of it, leads them into a most immoral attempt; and that this practical defamation of a woman more justly deserves an action at law, than a coarse word rashly uttered.

Garrulus hopes to pass for an orator, without either words or matter; it is plain he knows his own poverty, by his laborious robbery of authors. He passes the nights in book-breaking, and puts off in the day-time the stolen goods as his own; but so awkwardly and unskilfully, that they are always brought back to their true owners.

Bavius,

Bavius, ballasted with all the lead of a German, will rise into poetry, without either ear or invention: he recites, what he calls his verses, to his female relations, and his city acquaintance, but never mentions them to Pope.

Perplexus insists upon being a man of business, and, though formed, at best, for a letter-carrier, will be a letter-writer; but conscious that he can neither be necessary nor useful, endeavours to be tolerated by an implicit conformity to men and times.

In short, there are as many species of coxcombs, as there are desirable qualifications and accomplishments in life; and it would be endless to give instances of every particular vanity and affectation, by which men either make themselves ridiculous, or, at least, depreciate the other qualities they really possess. Every one's observation will furnish him with examples enough of this kind. But I will now endeavour to point out the means of avoiding these errors; though, indeed, they are so obvious in themselves, that one should think it unnecessary, if one did not daily experience the contrary.

It is very certain, that no man is fit for every thing; but it is almost as certain too, that there is scarce any one man, who is not fit for something, which something nature plainly points out to him, by giving him a tendency and propensity to it. I look upon common sense to be to the mind, what conscience is to the heart, the faithful and constant monitor of what is right or wrong. And I am convinced that no man commits either a crime or a folly, but against the manifest and sensible representations of the one or the other. Every man finds in himself, either from nature or education, for they are hard to distinguish, a peculiar bent and disposition to some particular character; and his struggling against it is the fruitless and endless labor of Sisyphus. Let him follow and cultivate that vocation, he will succeed in it, and be considerable in one way at least: whereas, if he departs from it, he will at best be inconsiderable, probably ridiculous. Mankind, in general, have not the indulgence and good-nature to save a whole city for the sake of five righteous, but are more inclined to condemn many righteous for the sake of a few guilty. And a man may easily sink many virtues by the weight of one folly, but will hardly be able to protect many follies by the force of one virtue. The players,

who get their parts by heart, and are to simulate but for three hours, have a regard, in choosing those parts, to the natural bent of their genius. Penkethman never acted Cato, nor Booth Scrub; their invincible unfitness for those characters would inevitably have broke out, in the short time of their representation. How then shall a man hope to act with success all his life long a borrowed and ill-suited character? In my mind, Pinkey got more credit by acting Scrub well, than he would have got by acting Cato ill; and I would much rather be an excellent shoemaker, than a ridiculous and inept minister of state. I greatly admire our industrious neighbours, the Germans, for many things, but for nothing more, than their steady adherence to the voice of nature: they indefatigably pursue the way she has chalked out to them, and never deviate into any irregularities of character. Thus many of the first rank, if happily turned to mechanics, have employed their whole lives in the incatenation of fleas, or the curious sculpture of cherry-stones; while others, whose thirst of knowledge leads them to investigate the secrets of nature, spend years in their elaboratory, in pursuit of the philosopher's stone: but none, that I have heard of, ever deviated into an attempt at wit. Nay, even due care is taken in the education of their princes, that they may be fit for something, for they are always instructed in some other trade besides that of government; so that, if their genius does not led them to be able princes, it is ten to one but they are excellent turners.

I will conclude my remonstrance to the coxcombs of Great Britain with this admonition and engagement, that "they disband their affectations, and common sense shall be their friend." Otherwise I shall proceed to further extremities, and single out, from time to time, the most daring offenders.

I must observe, that the word *coxcomb* is of the common gender, both masculine and feminine, and that the male coxcombs are equalled in number by the female ones, who shall be the subject of my next paper.