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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**

XXVII. The World. Saturday, Dec. 7, 1753. N° 49.

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XXVII.

T H E W O R L D.

SATURDAY, Dec. 7, 1753. N^o 49.

THOUGH I am an old fellow, I am neither four nor fifty enough yet, to be a snarling *laudator temporis acti*, and to hate or despise the present age because it is the present. I cannot, like many of my cotemporaries, rail at the wonderful degeneracy and corruption of these times, nor, by sneering compliments to the ingenious, the sagacious, moderns, intimate that they have not common sense. I really do not think that the present age is marked out by any new and distinguished vices and follies, unknown to former ages. On the contrary, I am apt to suspect that human nature was always very like what it is at this day, and that men, from the time of my great progenitors down to this moment, have always had in them the same seeds of virtue and vice, wisdom and folly, of which only the modes have varied, from climate, education, and a thousand other conspiring causes.

Perhaps this uncommon good-humour and indulgence of mine to my cotemporaries may be owing to the natural benignity of my constitution, in which I can discover no particles of envy or ill-nature, even to my rivals, both in fame and profit, the weekly writers; or perhaps to the superiority of my parts, which every body must acknowledge, and which places me infinitely above the mean sentiments of envy and jealousy. But, whatever may be the true cause, which probably neither my readers nor I shall ever discover with precision, this at least is certain, that the present age has not only the honor and pleasure of being extremely well with me, but, if I dare say so, better than any that I have yet either heard or read of. Both vices and virtues are smoothed and softened by manners, and though they exist as they ever have done, yet the former are become less barbarous, and the latter less rough; insomuch that I am as glad as Mr. Voltaire can be, that I have the good fortune to live in this age,
independen-

independently of that interested consideration, that it is rather better to be still alive, than only to have lived.

This my benevolence to my countrymen and cotemporaries ought to be esteemed still the more meritorious in me, when I shall make it appear that no man's merit has been less attended to or rewarded than mine : and nothing produces ill-humor, rancour, and malevolence so much, as neglected and unrewarded merit.

The utility of my weekly labors is evident, and their effects, wherever they are read, prodigious. They are equally calculated, I may say it without vanity, to form the heart, improve the understanding, and please the fancy. Notwithstanding all which, the ungrateful public does not take above three thousand of them a week, though, according to Mr. Maitland's calculation of the number of inhabitants in this great metropolis, they ought to take two hundred thousand of them, supposing only five persons, and one paper to each family ; and allowing seven millions of souls in the rest of the kingdom, I may modestly say, that one million more of them ought to be taken and circulated in the country. The profit arising from the sale of twelve hundred thousand papers, would be some encouragement to me to continue these my labors, for the benefit of mankind.

I have not yet had the least intimation from the ministers, that they have any thoughts of calling me to their assistance, and giving me some considerable employment of honor and profit ; and, having had no such intimations, I am justly apprehensive that they have no such intentions : such intimations being always long previous to the performance, often to the intentions.

Nor have I been invited, as I confess I expected to be, by any considerable borough or county, to represent them in the next parliament, and to defend their liberties, and the Christian religion, against the ministers and the Jews. But I think I can account for this seeming slight, without mortification to my vanity and self-love ; my name being a pentateuch name, which, in these suspicious and doubtful times, favours too strongly of Judaism ; though, upon the faith of a Christian, I have not the least tendency to it ; and I must do Mrs. Fitz-Adam, who I own has some influence over me, the justice to
say,

say, that she has the utmost horror for those sanguinary rites and ceremonies.

Notwithstanding all this ill usage, for every man may be said to be ill used, who is not rewarded according to his own estimation of his own merit, which I feel and lament, I cannot however call the present age names, and brand it with degeneracy; nature, as I have already observed, being always the same, modes only varying. With modes, the signification of words also varies, and in the course of those variations, convey ideas very different from those, which they were originally intended to express. I could give numberless instances of this kind, but at present I shall content myself with this single one.

The word HONOR, in its proper signification, doubtless implies the united sentiments of virtue, truth, and justice, carried by a generous mind beyond those mean moral obligations, which the laws require, or can punish the violation of. A TRUE MAN OF HONOR will not content himself with the literal discharge of the duties of a man and a citizen; he raises and dignifies them into magnanimity. He gives where he may with justice refuse, he forgives where he may with justice resent, and his whole conduct is directed by the noble sentiments of his own unvitiated heart; surer and more scrupulous guides than the laws of the land, which, being calculated for the generality of mankind, must necessarily be more a restraint upon vices in general, than an invitation and reward of particular virtues. But these extensive and compound notions of HONOR have been long contracted, and reduced to the single one of personal courage. Among the Romans, HONOR meant no more than contempt of dangers and death in the service, whether just or unjust, of their country. Their successors and conquerors, the Goths and Vandals, who did not deal much in complex ideas, simplified those of HONOR, and reduced them to this plain and single one, of fighting for fighting's sake, upon any, or all, no matter what, occasions.

Our present mode of HONOR is something more compounded, as will appear by the true character which I shall now give of a fashionable MAN OF HONOR.

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A Gentleman *, which is now the genteel synonymous term for a MAN OF HONOR, must, like his Gothic ancestors, be ready for, and rather desirous of, single combat. And if by a proper degree of wrongheadedness he provokes it, he is only so much the more jealous of his HONOR, and more of a GENTLEMAN.

He may lie with impunity, if he is neither detected nor accused of it: for it is not the lie he tells, but the lie he is told of, that dishonors him. In that case he demonstrates his veracity by his sword or his pistol, and either kills or is killed with the greatest HONOR.

He may abuse and starve his own wife, daughters, or sisters, and he may seduce those of other men, particularly his friends, with inviolate HONOR, because, as sir John Brute very justly observes, *he wears a sword.*

By the laws of HONOR, he is not obliged to pay his servants or his tradesmen; for, as they are a pack of scoundrels, they cannot without insolence demand their due of a gentleman: but he must punctually pay his gaming debts to the sharpers who have cheated him; for those debts are really debts of HONOR.

He lies under one disagreeable restraint; for he must not cheat at play, unless in a horse-match: but then he may with great HONOR defraud in an office, or betray a trust.

In public affairs, he may, not only with HONOR, but even with some degree of LUSTRE, be in the same session a turbulent patriot, opposing the best measures, and a servile courtier, promoting the worst; provided a very lucrative consideration be known to be the motive of his conversion: for in that case the point of HONOR turns singly upon the *quantum*.

From these premises, which the more they are considered the truer they will be found, it appears that there are but two things which a man of the nicest HONOR may not do, which are, declining single combat, and cheating at play. Strange! that VIRTUE should be so difficult, and HONOR, its superior, so easy to attain!

VOL. II.

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* A gentleman, is every man, who with a tolerable suit of cloaths, a sword by his side, and a watch and snuff-box in his pocket, asserts himself to be a gentleman, swears with energy that he will be treated as such, and that he will cut the throat of any man who presumes to say to the contrary.

The uniformed herd of mankind are governed by words and names, which they implicitly receive without either knowing or asking their meaning. Even the philosophical and religious controversies, for the last three or four hundred years, have turned much more upon words and names, unascertained and misunderstood, than upon things fairly stated. The polite world, to save time and trouble, receive, adapt, and use words, in the signification of the day; not having leisure nor inclination to examine and analyse them; and thus, often misled by sounds, and not always secured by sense, they are hurried into fatal errors, which they do not give their understandings fair play enough to prevent.

In explaining words, therefore, and bringing them back to their true signification, one may sometimes happen to expose and explode those errors, which the abuse of them both occasions and protects. May that be the good fortune of this day's paper! How many unthinking and unhappy men really take themselves to be MEN of HONOR, upon these mistaken ideas of that word! And how fatal to others, especially to the young and inexperienced, is their example and success in the world! I could heartily wish that some good dramatic poet would exhibit at full length and in lively colors, upon the stage, this modish character of a MAN of HONOR, of which I have but slightly and hastily chalked the outlines. Upon such a subject, I am apt to think that a good poet might be more useful than a good preacher, as perhaps his audiences would be more numerous, and his matter more attended to. Besides,

“*Segnius irritant animos, demissa per aurem*

“*Quam quæ sunt oculis subjecta fidelibus, et quæ*

“*Ipse sibi tradit spectator.**”

P. S. To prevent mistakes, I must observe that there is a great difference between a MAN of HONOR, and a PERSON of HONOR. By PERSONS of HONOR were meant, in the latter end of the last century, bad authors and poets of noble birth, who were but just not fools enough to prefix their names in great letters to the prologues, epilogues, and sometimes even the plays, with which they

* Horat. Art. Poet.

— What we hear

More slowly moves the heart than what we see.

DUNCOMBE'S translation.

entertained

entertained the public. But now that our nobility are too generous to interfere in the trade of us poor professed authors, or to eclipse our performances by the distinguished and superior excellency and lustre of theirs; the meaning at present of a PERSON OF HONOR, is reduced to the SIMPLE idea of a PERSON OF ILLUSTRIOUS BIRTH.

XXVIII.

THE WORLD.

THURSDAY, Sept. 19, 1754. N^o 90.

AN old friend and fellow-student of mine at the university, called upon me the other morning, and found me reading Plato's Symposium. I laid down my book to receive him, which, after the first usual compliments, he took up, saying, "You will give me leave to see what was the object of your studies." "Nothing less than the divine Plato," said I, "that amiable philosopher—" "with whom," interrupted my friend, "Cicero declares that he would rather be in the wrong, than in the right with any other." "I cannot," replied I, "carry my veneration for him to that degree of enthusiasm; but yet, whenever I understand him, for I confess I do not every where, I prefer him to all the antient philosophers. His Symposium more particularly engages and entertains me, as I see the manners and characters of the most eminent men, of the politest times, of the politest city of Greece. And, with all due respect to the moderns, I must question whether an account of a modern Symposium, though written by the ablest hand, could be read with so much pleasure and improvement." "I do not know that," replied my friend; "for, though I revere the antients as much as you possibly can, and look upon the moderns as pigmies, when compared to those giants, yet if we come up to or near them in any thing, it is the elegance and delicacy of our convivial intercourse."

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