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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**

XXXII. The World. Thursday, Nov. 28, 1754. N° 100.

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XXXII.

THE WORLD.

THURSDAY, Nov. 28, 1754. N^o 100.

I HEARD the other day, with great pleasure, from my worthy friend Mr. Doddsley, that Mr. Johnson's English dictionary, with a grammar and history of our language prefixed, will be published this winter, in two large volumes in folio.

I had long lamented, that we had no lawful standard of our language set up, for those to repair to, who might chuse to speak and write it grammatically and correctly: and I have as long wished that either some one person of distinguished abilities would undertake the work singly, or that a certain number of gentlemen would form themselves, or be formed by the government, into a society for that purpose. The late ingenious doctor Swift proposed a plan of this nature to his friend, as he thought him, the lord treasurer Oxford, but without success; precision and perspicuity not being in general the favourite objects of ministers, and perhaps still less so of that minister than any other.

Many people have imagined, that so extensive a work would have been best formed by numbers of persons, who should have taken their several departments, of examining, sifting, winnowing, (I borrow this image from the Italian *Crusca*), purifying, and finally fixing our language, by incorporating their respective funds into one joint stock. But, whether this opinion be true or false, I think the public in general, and the republic of letters in particular, greatly obliged to Mr. Johnson, for having undertaken and executed so great and desirable a work. Perfection is not to be expected from man; but, if we are to judge by the various works of Mr. Johnson, already published, we have good reason to believe, that he will bring this as near to perfection, as any one man could do. The Plan of it which he published some years ago, seems to me to be a proof of it. Nothing can be more rationally

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onally imagined, or more accurately and elegantly expressed. I therefore recommend the previous perusal of it to all those, who intend to buy the dictionary, and who, I suppose, are all those who can afford it.

The celebrated dictionaries of the Florentine and French academies owe their present size and perfection to very small beginnings. Some private gentlemen at Florence, and some at Paris, had met at each other's houses, to talk over and consider their respective languages: upon which they published some short essays, which essays were the embryos of those perfect productions, that now do so much honour to the two nations. Even Spain, which seems not to be the soil where, of late at least, letters have either prospered or been cultivated, has produced a dictionary, and a good one too, of the Spanish language, in six large volumes in folio.

I cannot help thinking it a sort of disgrace to our nation, that hitherto we have had no such standard of our language; our dictionaries at present being more properly what our neighbours the Dutch and the Germans call theirs, word-books, than dictionaries in the superior sense of that title. All words, good and bad, are there jumbled indiscriminately together, infomuch that the injudicious reader may speak, and write, as inelegantly, improperly, and vulgarly, as he pleases, by and with the authority of one or other of our word-books.

It must be owned that our language is at present in a state of anarchy; and hitherto, perhaps, it may not have been the worse for it. During our free and open trade, many words and expressions have been imported, adopted, and naturalized from other languages, which have greatly enriched our own. Let it still preserve what real strength and beauty it may have borrowed from others; but let it not, like the Tarpeian maid, be overwhelmed and crushed by unnecessary foreign ornaments. The time for discrimination seems to be now come. Toleration, adoption, and naturalization, have run their lengths. Good order and authority are now necessary. But where shall we find them, and at the same time the obedience due to them? We must have recourse to the old Roman expedient in times of confusion, and chuse a dictator. Upon this principle,

principle,

cept, I give my vote for Mr. Johnson to fill that great and arduous post. And I hereby declare, that I make a total surrender of all my rights and privileges in the English language, as a free-born British subject, to the said Mr. Johnson, during the term of his dictatorship. Nay more; I will not only obey him, like an old Roman, as my dictator, but, like a modern Roman, I will implicitly believe in him as my pope, and hold him to be infallible while in the chair; but no longer. More than this he cannot well require; for I presume that obedience can never be expected, when there is neither terror to enforce, nor interest to invite it.

I confess that I have so much honest English pride, or perhaps prejudice, about me, as to think myself more considerable for whatever contributes to the honor, the advantage, or the ornament, of my native country. I have therefore a sensible pleasure in reflecting upon the rapid progress, which our language has lately made, and still continues to make, all over Europe. It is frequently spoken, and almost universally understood, in Holland; it is kindly entertained as a relation in the most civilized parts of Germany; and it is studied as a learned language, tho' yet little spoke, by all those in France and Italy, who either have, or pretend to have, any learning.

The spreading the French language over most parts of Europe, to the degree of making it almost an universal one, was always reckoned among the glories of the reign of Lewis the fourteenth. But be it remembered, that the success of his arms first opened the way to it; though at the same time it must be owned, that a great number of most excellent authors, who flourished in his time, added strength and velocity to its progress. Whereas our language has made its way singly by its own weight and merit, under the conduct of those leaders, Shakespeare, Bacon, Milton, Locke, Newton, Swift, Pope, Addison, &c. A nobler sort of conquest, and a far more glorious triumph, since graced by none but willing captives!

These authors, though for the most part but indifferently translated into foreign languages, gave other nations a sample of the British genius: The copies, imperfect as they

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they were, pleased and excited a general desire of seeing the originals; and both our authors and our language soon became classical.

But a grammar, a dictionary, and a history of our language, through its several stages, were still wanting at home, and importunately called for from abroad. Mr. Johnson's labors will now, and, I dare say, very fully, supply that want, and greatly contribute to the farther spreading of our language in other countries. Learners were discouraged by finding no standard to resort to, and consequently thought it incapable of any. They will be undeceived and encouraged.

There are many hints and considerations relative to our language, which I should have taken the liberty of suggesting to Mr. Johnson, had I not been convinced that they have equally occurred to him: but there is one, and a very material one it is, to which perhaps he may not have given all the necessary attention. I mean the genteeler part of our language, which owes both its rise and progress to my fair countrywomen, whose natural turn is more to the copiousness, than to the correctness of diction. I would not advise him to be rash enough to proscribe any of those happy redundancies, and luxuriances of expression, with which they have enriched our language. They willingly inflict fetters, but very unwillingly submit to wear them. In this case the task will be so difficult, that I design, as a common friend, to propose in some future paper, the means which appear to me the most likely to reconcile matters.

P. S. I hope that none of my courteous readers will upon this occasion be so uncourteous, as to suspect me of being a hired and interested puff of this work; for I most solemnly protest, that neither Mr. Johnson, nor any person employed by him, nor any bookseller or booksellers concerned in the success of it, have ever offered me the usual compliment of a pair of gloves or a bottle of wine: nor has even Mr. Doddsley, though my publisher, and, as I am informed, deeply interested in the sale of this dictionary, so much as invited me to take a bit of mutton with him.