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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**

XXXIX. The World. Thursday, April 17, 1755. N° 120.

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self-evidence of his facts, had entirely removed all my doubts, and convinced me of the unspeakable advantages of ILLUSTRIOUS BIRTH, and unfortunately I added, that my own vanity was greatly flattered by it, in consequence of my being lineally descended from the first man. Upon this my friend looked grave, and seemed rather displeas'd; whether from a suspicion that I was jesting, or upon an apprehension that I meant to *out-descend* him, I cannot determine; for he contented himself with saying, "That is not a necessary consequence neither, Mr. Fitz-Adam, since I have read somewhere or other of pre-adamites, which opinion did not seem to me an absurd one."

Here I took my leave of him, and went home full of reflections upon the astonishing power of self-love, that can extract comfort and pleasure from such groundless, absurd, and extravagant prejudices. In all other respects my friend is neither a fool nor a madman, and can talk very rationally upon any rational subject. But such is the inconsistency both of the human mind and the human heart, that one must not form a general judgment of either, from one glaring error, or one shining excellence.

 XXXIX.

THE WORLD.

THURSDAY, April 17, 1755. N^o 120.

MOST people complain of fortune, few of nature; and the kinder they think the latter has been to them, the more they murmur at what they call the injustice of the former.

Why have not I the riches, the rank, the power, of such and such, is the common expostulation with fortune: but why have not I the merit, the talents, the wit, or the beauty, of such and such others, is a reproach rarely or never made to nature.

The truth is, that nature, seldom profuse, and seldom niggardly, has distributed her gifts more equally than she is generally

generally supposed to have done. Education and situation make the great difference. Culture improves, and occasions elicit, natural talents. I make no doubt but that there are potentially, if I may use that pedantic word, many Bacons, Lockes, Newtons, Cæsars, Cromwells, and Marlboroughs, at the plough-tail, behind counters, and, perhaps, even among the nobility; but the soil must be cultivated, and the seasons favourable, for the fruit to have all its spirit and flavor.

If sometimes our common parent has been a little partial, and not kept the scales quite even; if one preponderates too much, we throw into the lighter a due counterpoise of vanity, which never fails to set all right. Hence it happens, that hardly any one man would, without reserve, and in every particular, change with any other.

Though all are thus satisfied with the dispensations of nature, how few listen to her voice! how few follow her as a guide! In vain she points out to us the plain and direct way to truth; vanity, fancy, affectation, and fashion, assume her shape, and wind us through fairy-ground to folly and error.

These deviations from nature are often attended by serious consequences, and always by ridiculous ones; for there is nothing truer than the trite observation, "that people are never ridiculous for being what they really are, but for affecting what they really are not." Affectation is the only source, and at the same time, the only justifiable object, of ridicule. No man whatsoever, be his pretensions what they will, has a natural right to be ridiculous: it is an acquired right, and not to be acquired without some industry; which perhaps is the reason why so many people are so jealous and tenacious of it. Even some people's VICES are not their own, but affected and adopted, though at the same time unenjoyed, in hopes of shining in those fashionable societies, where the reputation of certain vices gives lustre. In these cases, the execution is commonly as awkward, as the design is absurd; and the ridicule equals the guilt.

This calls to my mind a thing, that really happened not many years ago. A young fellow of some rank and fortune, just let loose from the university, resolved, in order to make a figure in the world, to assume the shining
character

character of, what he called, a rake. By way of learning the rudiments of his intended profession, he frequented the theatres, where he was often drunk, and always noisy. Being one night at the representation of that most absurd play, the *Libertine destroyed*, he was so charmed with the profligacy of the hero of the piece, that, to the edification of the audience, he swore many oaths that he would be the libertine *destroyed*. A discreet friend of his who sat by him, kindly represented to him, that to be the *libertine* was a laudable design, which he greatly approved of; but that to be the libertine *destroyed*, seemed to him an unnecessary part of his plan, and rather rash. He persisted, however, in his first resolution, and insisted upon being the libertine, and *destroyed*. Probably he was so; at least the presumption is in his favor. There are, I am persuaded, so many cases of this nature, that for my own part I would desire no greater step towards the reformation of manners for the next twenty years, than that our people should have no vices but *their own*.

The blockhead who affects wisdom, because nature has given him dulness, becomes ridiculous only by his adopted character, whereas he might have stagnated unobserved in his native mud, or perhaps have engrossed deeds, collected shells, and studied heraldry, or logic, with some success.

The shining coxcomb aims at all, and decides finally upon every thing, because nature has given him pertness. The degree of parts and animal spirits, necessary to constitute that character, if properly applied, might have made him useful in many parts of life; but his affectation and presumption make him useless in most, and ridiculous in all.

The septuagenary fine gentleman might probably, from his long experience and knowledge of the world, be esteemed and respected in the several relations of domestic life, which, at his age, nature points out to him: he will most ridiculously spin out the rotten thread of his former gallantries. He dresses, languishes, ogles, as he did at five-and-twenty; and modestly intimates that he is not without a *bonne fortune*; which *bonne fortune* at last appears to be the prostitute he had long kept, not to himself, whom
he

he marries and owns, because *the poor girl was so fond of him, and so desirous to be made an honest woman.*

The sexagenary widow remembers that she was handsome, but forgets that it was thirty years ago, and thinks herself so, or at least very *likeable*, still. The pardonable affectations of her youth and beauty unpardonably continue, increase even with her years, and are doubly exerted in hopes of concealing the number. All the gaudy glittering parts of dress, which rather degrade than adorn her beauty in its bloom, now expose to the highest and justest ridicule her shrivelled or her overgrown carcase. She totters or sweats under the load of her jewels, embroideries, and brocades, which like so many Egyptian hieroglyphics, serve only to authenticate the venerable antiquity of her august mummy. Her eyes dimly twinkle tenderness, or leer desire: their language, however inelegant, is intelligible, and the half pay-captain understands it. He addresses his vows to her vanity, which assures her they are sincere. She pities him, and prefers him to credit, decency, and every social duty. He tenderly prefers her, though not without some hesitation, to a jail.

Self-love, kept within due bounds is a natural and useful sentiment. It is, in truth, social love too, as Mr. Pope has very justly observed: it is the spring of many good actions, and of no ridiculous ones. But self-flattery is only the ape or caricatura of self-love, and resembles it no more than to heighten the ridicule. Like other flattery, it is the most profusely bestowed and greedily swallowed, where it is the least deserved. I will conclude this subject with the substance of a fable of the ingenious monsieur De La Motte, which seems not unapplicable to it.

Jupiter made a lottery in heaven, in which mortals, as well as gods, were allowed to have tickets. The prize was WISDOM; and Minerva got it. The mortals murmured, and accused the gods of foul play. Jupiter, to wipe off this aspersion, declared another lottery, for mortals singly and exclusively of the gods. The prize was FOLLY. They got it, and shared it among themselves. All were satisfied. The loss of WISDOM was neither regretted nor remembered; FOLLY supplied its place, and those who had the largest share of it, thought themselves the wisest.