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The Works Of Horatio Walpole, Earl of Orford

In Five Volumes

Walpole, Horace

London, 1798

The World, No.VI.

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-54372](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-54372)

The W O R L D*.

By ADAM FITZ-ADAM.

NUMB. VI. *Thursday, February 8, 1753.*

To Mr. FITZ-ADAM.

† *Totum mundum agit hiftrio.*

S I R,

AS you have chosen the whole world for your province, one may reasonably suppose, that you will not neglect that epitome of it, the theatre. Most of your predecessors have bestowed their favourite pains upon it: the learned and the critics (generally two very distinct denominations of men) have employed many hours and much paper in comparing the ancient and modern stage. I shall not undertake to decide a question which seems to me so impossible to be determined, as which have most merit, plays written in a dead language, and which we can only read; or such as we every day see acted inimitably, in a tongue familiar to us, and adapted to our common ideas and customs. The only preference that I shall pretend to give to the modern stage over Greece and Rome, relates to the subject of the present letter: I mean the daily progress we make towards *nature*. This will startle any bigot to Euripides, who perhaps will immediately demand, whether ‡ Juliet's nurse be a more natural gossip than Electra's or Medea's. But I did not hint at the representation of either persons or characters. The improvement of nature, which I had in view, alluded to those excellent exhibitions of the animal or inanimate parts of the creation, which are furnished

* A periodical paper, undertaken by Mr. E. Moore, author of several plays and poems. The World has been re-printed in six volumes, 12mo.

† The play-house motto reversed: "Totus mundus agit hiftrionem."

‡ In Shakespear's Romeo and Juliet.

by

by the worthy philosophers Rich and Garrick; the latter of whom has refined on his competitor; and having perceived that art was become so perfect that it was necessary to mimic it by nature, he has happily introduced a cascade of real water*.

I know there are persons of a systematic turn, who affirm that the audience are not delighted with this beautiful water-fall, from the reality of the element, but merely because they are pleased with the novelty of any thing that is out of its proper place. Thus they tell you, that the town is charmed with a genuine cascade upon the stage, and were in raptures last year with one of tin at Vauxhall. But this is certainly prejudice: the world, Mr. Fitz-Adam, though never sated with show, is sick of fiction. I foresee the time approaching, when delusion will not be suffered in any part of the drama: the inimitable serpent in Orpheus and Eurydice, and the amorous ostrich in the Sorcerer, shall be replaced by real monsters from Afric. It is well known that the pantomime of the Genii narrowly escaped being damned, on my lady Maxim's observing very judiciously, *That the brick-kiln was horribly executed, and did not smell at all like one.*

When this entire castigation of improprieties is brought about, the age will do justice to one of the first reformers of the stage, Mr. Cibber, who essayed to introduce a taste for real nature in his *Cæsar in Egypt*, and treated the audience with real—not swans indeed, for that would have been too bold an attempt in the dawn of truth, but very personable geese. The inventor, like other original geniuses, was treated ill by a barbarous age: yet I can venture to affirm, that a stricter adherence to reality would have saved even those times from being shocked by absurdities, always incidental to fiction. I myself remember, how, much about that æra, the great Senefino, representing Alexander at the siege of Oxydracæ, so far forgot himself in the heat of conquest, as to stick his sword into one of the pasteboard stones of the wall of the town, and bore it in triumph before him as he entered the breach; a puerility so renowned a general could never have committed, if the ramparts had been built, as in this enlightened age they would be, of actual brick and stone.

* In the pantomime of the Genii.

Will you forgive an elderly man, Mr. Fitz-Adam, if he cannot help recollecting another passage that happened in his youth, and to the same excellent performer? He was stepping into Armida's enchanted bark; but treading short, as he was more attentive to the accompaniment of the orchestra than to the breadth of the shore, he fell prostrate, and lay for some time in great pain, with the edge of a wave running into his side. In the present state of things, the worst that could have happened to him, would have been drowning; a fate far more becoming Rinaldo, especially in the sight of a British audience!

If you will allow me to wander a little from the stage, I shall observe that this pursuit of nature is not confined to the theatre, but operates where one should least expect to meet it, in our fashions. The fair part of the creation are shedding all covering of the head, display their unveiled charming tresses, and, if I may say so, are daily *moulting* the rest of their clothes. What lovely fall of shoulders, what ivory necks, what snowy breasts in all the pride of nature, are continually divested of art and ornament!

In gardening, the same love of nature prevails. Clipt hedges, avenues, regular platforms, straight canals, have been for some time very properly exploded. There is not a citizen who does not take more pains to torture his acre and half into irregularities, than he formerly would have employed to make it as formal as his cravat. Kent*, the friend of nature, was the Calvin of this reformation; but, like the other champion of truth, after having routed tinsel and trumpery, with the true zeal of a founder of a sect he pushed his discipline to the deformity of holiness: not content with banishing symmetry and regularity, he imitated nature even in her blemishes, and planted † dead trees and mole-hills, in opposition to parterres and quincunxes.

The last branch of our fashions into which the close observation of nature has been introduced, is our desserts;—a subject I have not room now to treat at large, but which yet demands a few words, and not improperly in this

* Where Kent and nature vie for Pelham's love. POPE.

† In Kensington garden, and Carlton garden.

paper,

paper, as I see them a little in the light of a pantomime. Jellies, biscuits, sugar-plums and creams have long given way to harlequins, gondoliers, Turks, Chinese, and shepherdesses of Saxon china. But these, unconnected, and only seeming to wander among groves of curled paper and silk flowers, were soon discovered to be too insipid and unmeaning. By degrees whole meadows of cattle, of the same brittle materials, spread themselves over the whole table; cottages rose in sugar, and temples in barley-sugar; pigmy Neptunes in cars of cockle-shells triumphed over oceans of looking-glasses, or * seas of silver tissue; and at length the whole system of Ovid's metamorphosis succeeded to all the transformations which † Chloe and other great professors had introduced into the science of hieroglyphic eating. Confectioners found their trade moulder away, while toymen and china-shops were the only fashionable purveyors of the last stage of polite entertainments. Women of the first quality came home from Chenevix's laden with dolls and babies, not for their children, but their house-keeper.— At last even these puerile puppet-shows are sinking into disuse, and more manly ways of concluding our repasts are established. Gigantic figures succeed to pigmies; and if the present taste continues, Ryibrack and other neglected statuaries, who might have adorned Grecian salons, though not Grecian desserts, may come into vogue. It is known that a celebrated ‡ confectioner (so the architects of our desserts still humbly call themselves) complained, that after having prepared a middle dish of gods and goddesses eighteen feet high, his lord would not cause the ceiling of his parlour to be demolished to facilitate their entrée: “*Imaginez-vous, said he, que milord n'a pas voulu faire ôter le plafond.*”

I shall mention but two instances of glorious magnificence and taste in desserts, in which foreigners have surpassed any thing yet performed in this sumptuous island. The former was a duke of Wirtemberg, who, so long ago as the year thirty-four, gave a dessert, in which was a representation of mount Ætna, which vomited out real fireworks over the heads of the com-

* The French ambassador, the duke de Mirapois, gave a dessert in which was the story of Perseus and Andromeda; the sea was silver tissue covered with barley-sugar.

† A famous French cook, who lived with the duke of Newcastle.

‡ Lord Albemarle's.

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pany during the whole entertainment. The other was the intendant of Gascony, who on the late birth of the duke of Burgundy, among many other magnificent festivities, treated the noblesse of the province with a dinner and a dessert, the latter of which concluded with a representation, by wax figures moving by clockwork, of the whole labour of the dauphiness and the happy birth of an heir to the monarchy.

I am, Sir,

Your humble servant,

JULIO.

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