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Remarks On The Life and Writings Of Dr. Jonathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin

Orrery, John Boyle of

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Letter VI.

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LETTER VI.

WE are now, dear HAMILTON, no longer to behold Dr. SWIFT of any importance in *England*: his hopes there are crushed for ever: his ministerial friends are degraded, banished, or imprisoned. Indecent rage, sanguinary zeal, and ill-temper'd loyalty revelled at large throughout the three kingdoms, especially in *Ireland*, where duels were fought almost every week, and where the pest was so universal, that the ladies were as violent as the gentlemen. Even children at school quarrelled for Kings, instead of fighting for apples.

As SWIFT was known to have been attached to the Queen's last ministry, to have written against the Whigs, and "to have oiled many a spring which HARLEY moved," he met with frequent indignities from the populace, and indeed was equally abused by persons of all ranks and denominations. Such a treatment soured his temper, confined his acquaintance, and added bitterness to his style: and, since the future part of his life and writings is to differ, in all circumstances, so widely from the past, since his studies and companions, his politics and his customs, are now to be altered and exchanged for new habits, new friends, new ambition,

and a new world, suffer me, my HAM, to take a general review of him as an author.

If we consider his prose works, we shall find a certain masterly conciseness in their style, that has never been equalled by any other writer. The truth of this assertion will more evidently appear, by comparing him with some of the authors of his own time. Of these Dr. TILLOTSON, and Mr. ADDISON, are to be numbered among the most eminent. ADDISON has all the powers that can captivate and improve: his diction is easy, his periods are well turned, his expressions are flowing, and his humour is delicate. TILLOTSON is nervous, grave, majestic, and perspicuous. We must join both these characters together to form a true idea of Dr. SWIFT: yet as he outdoes ADDISON in humour, he excels TILLOTSON in perspicuity. The Archbishop indeed confined himself to subjects relative to his profession: but ADDISON and SWIFT are more diffusive writers. They continually vary in their manner, and treat different topics in a different style. When the writings of ADDISON terminate in party, he loses himself extremely, and from a delicate, and just comedian, deviates into one of the lowest kind^a. Not so Dr. SWIFT; he appears like a masterly gladiator. He wields the sword of party with ease, justness and dexterity: and while he entertains the ignorant and the vulgar, he draws an equal attention from the learned and the great. When he is serious, his gravity becomes him. When he laughs, his readers must laugh

^a See the papers intitled the Freeholder.

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with him. But, what shall be said for his love of trifles, and his want of delicacy and decorum? Errors, that if he did not contract, at least he encreased in *Ireland*. They are without a parallel. I hope they will ever remain so. The first of them, arose meerly from his love of flattery, with which he was daily fed in that kingdom: the second, proceeded from the misanthropy of his disposition, which induced him peevishly to debase mankind, and even to ridicule human nature itself. Politics were his favourite topic, as they gave him an opportunity of gratifying his ambition, and thirst of power: yet even in this road, he has seldom continued long in one particular path. He has written miscellaneously, and has chosen rather to appear a wandering comet, than a fixed star. Had he applied the faculties of his mind to one great, and useful work, he must have shined more gloriously, and might have enlightened a whole planetary system in the political world.

The poetical performances of Dr. SWIFT ought to be considered as occasional poems written either to please, or vex some particular persons. We must not suppose them designed for posterity: if he had cultivated his genius in that way, he must certainly have excelled, especially in satyr. We see fine sketches, in several of his pieces: but he seems more desirous to inform, and strengthen his mind, than to indulge the luxuriancy of his imagination. He chooses to discover, and correct errors in the works of others, rather than to illustrate, and add beauties to his own. Like a skilful artist, he is fond of probing wounds to their depth,

depth, and of enlarging them to open view. He prefers caustics, which erode proud flesh, to softer balsamics, which give more immediate ease. He aims to be severely useful, rather than politely engaging: and as he was either not formed, or would not take pains to excel in poetry, he became, in some measure, superior to it; and assumed more the air and manners of a critic, than of a poet. Had he lived in the same age with HORACE he would have approached nearer to him, than any other poet: and if we may make an allowance for the different course of study, and different form of government, to which each of these great men were subject, we may observe, in several instances, a strong resemblance between them. Both poets are equally distinguished for wit and humour. Each displays a peculiar felicity in diction: but of the two, HORACE is the more elegant and delicate: while he condemns, he pleases. SWIFT takes pleasure in giving pain: The dissimilitude of their tempers might be owing to the different turns in their fortune. SWIFT early formed large views of ambition, and was disappointed. HORACE, from an exiled low state, rose into affluence, and enjoyed the favour and friendship of AUGUSTUS. Each poet was the delight of the principal persons of his age. *Cum magnis vixisse* was not more applicable to HORACE, than to SWIFT. They both were temperate: both were frugal; and both were of the same Epicurean taste. HORACE had his LYDIA, SWIFT had his VANESSA. HORACE had his MECÆNAS, and

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and his AGRIPPA. SWIFT had his OXFORD, and his BOLINGBROKE. HORACE had his VIRGIL, SWIFT had his POPE.

After the great names, which I have just now mentioned, it is matter of astonishment to find the same person, who had enjoyed the highest, and the best conversation, equally delighted with the lowest and the worst: and yet it is certain, from SWIFT'S settlement in *Dublin* as Dean of *St. Patrick's*, his choice of companions in general shewed him of a very depraved taste.

From the year seventeen hundred and fourteen, till he appeared in the year twenty, a champion for *Ireland* against Wood's halfpence, his spirit of politics, and of patriotism, was kept almost closely confined within his own breast. Idleness and trifles engrossed too many of his hours: fools and sycophants too much of his conversation. However, let me observe to you, that the treatment which he received, after the death of *Queen ANN*, was almost a sufficient reason to justify a contempt, if not an abhorrence of the human race. He had bravely withstood all hostile indignities, during the life time of that Princess; but when the whole army of his friends were not only routed, but taken prisoners, he dropt his sword, and retired into his fortification at *Dublin*, from whence he seldom stirred beyond the limits of his own garden, unless in great indulgence to some particular favourites.

His attendance upon the public service of the church was regular and uninterrupted: and indeed regularity was peculiar

peculiar to him in all his actions, even in the greatest trifles. His hours of walking, and reading, never varied: His motions were guided by his watch, which was so constantly held in his hand, or placed before him upon his table, that he seldom deviated many minutes, in the daily revolution of his exercises and employments. His works, from the year 1714, to the year 1720, are few in number, and of small importance. Poems to STELLA, and trifles to Dr. SHERIDAN, fill up a great part of that period.

In the year 1720, he began to re-assume, in some degree, the character of a political writer. A small pamphlet *in defence of the Irish manufactures*, was, I believe, his first essay (in *Ireland*) in that kind of writing: and to that pamphlet, he owed the turn of the popular tide in his favour^a. His sayings of wit and humour had been handed about, and repeated from time to time among the people. They had the effect of an artful preface, and had pre-engaged all readers in his favour. They were adapted to the understanding, and pleased the imagination of the vulgar: and he was now looked upon in a new light, and distinguished by the title of THE DEAN.

The flux and reflux of popular love and hatred are equally violent. They are often owing to accidents, but sometimes to the return of reason, which, unassisted by education, may not be able to guide the lower class

^a See Letter 16th.

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of people, into the right tract at the beginning, but will be sufficient to keep them in it, when experience has pointed out the road. The pamphlet, proposing the universal use of *Irish* manufactures *within the kingdom*, had captivated all hearts. *Some little pieces of poetry to the same purpose*, were no less acceptable and engaging. The attachment which the Dean bore to the true interest of *Ireland*, was no longer doubted. His patriotism was as manifest as his wit. He was looked upon with pleasure and respect, as he passed through the streets: and he had attained so high a degree of popularity, as to become an arbitrator in the disputes of property among his neighbours: nor did any man dare to appeal from his opinion, or to murmur at his decrees.

But the popular affection, which the Dean had hitherto acquired, may be said not to have been universal, till the publication of the DRAPIER'S *letters*, which made all ranks, and all professions unanimous in his applause. The occasion of those letters was a scarcity of copper coin in *Ireland*, to so great a degree, that for some time past the chief manufacturers throughout the kingdom, were obliged to pay their workmen in pieces of tin, or in other tokens of supposititious value. Such a method was very disadvantageous to the lower parts of traffic, and was in general an impediment to the commerce of the state. To remedy this evil, the late King granted a patent to WILLIAM WOOD, to coin, during the term of fourteen years, farthings and halfpence in *England* for the use of *Ireland*, to the value of a certain

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sum specified. These halfpence and farthings were to be received by those persons, who would voluntarily accept them. But the patent was thought to be of such dangerous consequence to the public, and of such exorbitant advantage to the patentee, that the DEAN, under the character of M. B. DRAPIER, wrote a letter to the people, warning them not to accept WOOD's halfpence and farthings as current coin. This first letter was succeeded by several others to the same purpose, all which are inserted in his works.

At the found of the DRAPIER's trumpet, a spirit arose among the people, that, in the eastern phrase, was *like unto a tempest in the day of the whirlwind*. Every person of every rank, party, and denomination, was convinced, that the admission of WOOD's copper must prove fatal to the commonwealth. The Papist, the Fanatic, the Tory, the Whig, all lifted themselves volunteers under the banner of M. B. DRAPIER, and were all equally zealous to serve the common cause. Much heat, and many fiery speeches against the administration, were the consequence of this union: nor had the flames been allayed, notwithstanding threats and proclamations, had not the coin been totally suppressed, and had not WOOD withdrawn his patent.

This is the most succinct account that can be given of an affair, which alarmed the whole *Irish* nation to a degree that in a less loyal kingdom must have fomented a rebellion: but the stedfast loyalty of the *Irish*, and their true devotion to the present royal family is immoveable: and although this unfortunate nation

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tion may not hitherto have found many distinguishing marks of favour and indulgence from the throne, yet it is to be hoped, in time they may meet with their reward.

The name of AUGUSTUS was not bestowed upon OCTAVIUS CÆSAR with more universal approbation, than the name of THE DRAPIER was bestowed upon THE DEAN. He had no sooner assumed his new *cognomen*, than he became the idol of the people of *Ireland* to a degree of devotion, that in the most superstitious country scarce any idol ever obtained. Libations to his health, or, in plain english, bumpers were poured forth to the DRAPIER as *large* and as *frequent* as to the *glorious and immortal memory of K. WILLIAM the third*. His effigies was painted in every street in *Dublin*. Acclamations and vows for his prosperity attended his footsteps wherever he passed. He was consulted in all points relating to domestic policy in general, and to the trade of *Ireland* in particular: but he was more immediately looked upon as the legislator of the weavers, who frequently came in a body, consisting of fifty or sixty chieftains of their trade, to receive his advice, in settling the rates of their manufactures, and the wages of their journeymen. He received their addresses with less majesty than sternness, and ranging his subjects in a circle round his parlour, spoke as copiously, and with as little difficulty and hesitation, to the several points in which they supplicated his assistance, as if trade had been the only study and employment of his life. When elections were depending for the city of *Dublin*, many corporations

corporations refused to declare themselves, till they had consulted his sentiments and inclinations, which were punctually followed with equal cheerfulness and submission. In this state of power, and popular love and admiration, he remained till he lost his senses: a loss which he seemed to foresee, and prophetically lamented to many of his friends^a.

I have now conducted the Dean through the most interesting circumstances of his life, to the fatal period wherein he was utterly deprived of reason. If your curiosity leads you to enquire into the particulars of that misfortune, it must be the subject of some future letter: for, at present, I think it is time to indulge myself in assuring you, that I am with an inexpressible warmth of heart, my dear HAMILTON,

Your most affectionate Father,

O R R E R Y.

^a See Letter XXI.

L E T.