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

Orrery, John Boyle of

London, 1752

Faulkner's edition of the Dean's works.

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ble provoked his rage by their own misconduct, and consequently owed to their own rashness the wounds which they received from his pen : but I have no delight in those kind of writings, except for the sake of the wit, which, either in general, or in particular satyr, is equally to be admired. The edge of wit will always remain keen, and its blade will be bright and shining, when the stone, upon which it has been whetted, is worn out, or thrown aside and forgotten. Personal satyr against evil magistrates, corrupt ministers, and those giants of power, who gorge themselves with the entrails of their country, is different from that personal satyr, which too often proceeds merely from self-love, or ill-nature : the one, is written in defence of the public, the other, in defence of ourselves. The one, is armed by the sword of justice, and encouraged not only by the voice of the people, but by the principles of morality : the other, is dictated by passion, supported by pride, and applauded by flattery. At the same time that I say this, I think every man of wit has a right to laugh at fools, who give offence, or at coxcombs, who are public nuisances. SWIFT indeed has left no weapon of sarcasm untried, no branch of satyr uncultivated : but while he has maintained a perpetual war against the mighty men in power, he has remained invulnerable, if not victorious.

Upon a review of the Dean's writings, it cannot be sufficiently lamented, that there is no just, or perfect edition of his works. FAULKNER's edition, at least the

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four first volumes of it (for there are now eight) were published, by the permission and connivance, if not by the particular appointment of the Dean himself. But the several pieces are thrown together without any order or regularity whatever: so that like the ancient chaos which contained an immense collection of various treasures, they remain in their state of confusion *rudis indigestaque moles*: and yet the incoherency of situation is perhaps one of the most excusable faults in the collection: for the materials are of so different, and so incongruous a nature, that it seems as if the author, (who was in reality the editor,) imagined the public under an absolute necessity of accepting the basest coin from the same hand, that had exhibited the purest. Surely the idle amusements of a man's private and domestic life, are not to be sent forth as sufficient entertainments for the witty or the learned. Posthumous works indeed are often worthless and improper, from the ill judged zeal of ignorant executors, or imprudent friends: but, a living author remains without excuse, who either wilfully, or wantonly imposes upon the world.

The English edition of SWIFT's works I have scarce seen; and I have had little inclination to examine it, because I was acquainted with the Dean, at the time when FAULKNER's edition came out, and therefore must always look upon that copy as most authentic; well knowing that Mr. FAULKNER had the advantage of printing his edition, by the consent and approbation

of the author himself. The four first volumes were published by subscription, and every sheet of them was brought to the Dean for his revifal and correction. The two next were published in the fame manner. The feventh volume was printed from a number of furreptitious letters published in *England*: and the eighth volume did not come out till after the Dean's death. In the publication of the fix first volumes, the fituation and arrangement of each particular piece, in verfe and profe, was left entirely to the editor. In that point, the Dean either could not, or would not give him the leaft affiftance. The dates were often gueffed at, and every fcrap was thruft into the parcel that might augment the collection. Such a conduct has been productive of a confufion that offends the eye, and mifleads the underftanding. We have lefs pleafure in looking at a palace built at different times, and put together by ignorant workmen, than in viewing a plain regular building compofed by a mafterly hand in all the beauty of fymmetry and order. The materials of the former may be more valuable, but the fimplicity of the latter is more acceptable. For health and exercife who would not chufe rather to walk upon a platform than in a labyrinth? or, who does not wish to fee an edition of SWIFT's works becoming the genius, and dignity of the author? When fuch an edition is undertaken, I fhould hope that all the *minutiæ* of his idle hours might be entirely excluded: or at leaft placed, like out buildings, at a diftance from the chief edifices of ftate.

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SWIFT was naturally fond of seeing his works in print, and he was encouraged in this fondness by his friend Dr. SHERIDAN, who had the *cacoethes scribendi* to the greatest degree, and was continually letting off squibs, rockets, and all sorts of little fireworks from the press, by which means he offended many particular persons, who, although they stood in awe of SWIFT, held SHERIDAN at defiance. The truth is, the poor Doctor, by nature the most peaceable, inoffensive man alive, was in a continual state of warfare with the minor poets, and they revenged themselves, or, in the style of Mr. BAYS, often gave him *flash for flash*, and *singed his feathers*. The affection between THESEUS and PERITHOUS was not greater than the affection between SWIFT and SHERIDAN: but the friendship that cemented the two ancient heroes probably commenced upon motives very different from those which united the two modern divines. As in a former letter, I drew a picture of SWIFT's wife^a, let me here give you some sketches of SWIFT's friend.

Dr. SHERIDAN was a schoolmaster, and, in many instances, perfectly well adapted for that station. He was deeply versed in the Greek and Roman languages; and in their customs and antiquities. He had that kind of good-nature, which absence of mind, indolence of body, and carelessness of fortune produce; and although

^a Letter II. page 14.