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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

Remarks upon A discourse of the contests and diffentions between the
nobles and commons in Athens and Rome.

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comply with your requests, I take the earliest opportunity of going on with a plan, that hitherto has received the encouragement of your filial partiality.

The first volume of FAULKNER'S edition consists of various tracts jumbled together, without any regularity or order. The first treatise in this volume is intitled, *A discourse of the contests and dissensions between the nobles and commons in ATHENS and ROME*. It was written in the year 1701, towards the latter end of King WILLIAM'S reign, and at a time, when that Prince was made extremely uneasy, by the violence with which some of his ministers, and chief favourites were pursued. However bright the crown of *England* might have glittered in the eyes of the Prince of *Orange*, he found it, when placed upon his head, a crown of thorns. The longer he wore the diadem, the bandelet still became more tight and irksome. Complaints, and enquiries arose in the senate. Feuds, and unchristian animosities, in the convocation. Nor had foreign affairs a more propitious aspect. LEWIS the fourteenth was making large strides towards universal monarchy. Plots were carrying on at St. GERMAIN'S. The *Dutch* had acknowledged the Duke of ANJOU as King of SPAIN: and EUROPE in general seemed pregnant of fire, and ready to burst into flames. Thus began the year 1701. King WILLIAM in hopes to dispel this sulphureous body of clouds, which seemed to threaten some future thunder of extraordinary violence, had made several changes in his ministry, and had removed some of his faithfulest servants from places of the highest trust and dignity. The alteration

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teration proved of little or no effect. The animosity of the house of commons could not be appeased. They looked upon the deprivation of lucrative employments, as an insufficient punishment for high crimes and misdemeanours: and they began first by impeaching the Earl of PORTLAND^a; and then proceeded to the impeachments of Lord SOMERS^b, the Earl of ORFORD^c, and the Earl of HALLIFAX^d.

These were all great men; and the three last were of remarkable abilities and experience. Lord SOMERS was the general patron of the *literati*, and the particular friend of Dr. SWIFT. The Earl of ORFORD had been considered in a manner as lord high admiral; the whole affairs of the navy having been committed to his charge. Lord HALLIFAX had a fine genius for poetry, and had employed his more youthful part of life in that science. He was distinguished by the name of MOUSE MOUNTAGUE, having ridiculed, jointly with MAT PRIOR, Mr. DRYDEN's famous poem of the Hind and Panther. The parody is drawn from HORACE's fable of the City Mouse and Country Mouse, and begins,

^a WILLIAM BENTINCK, Earl of PORTLAND, Groom of the stole.

^b JOHN SOMERS, Baron SOMERS of *Evesham*. First, Lord Keeper: afterwards, Lord High Chancellor.

^c EDWARD RUSSEL, Earl of ORFORD. Treasurer of the Navy, and one of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty.

^d CHARLES MOUNTAGUE, Earl of HALLIFAX. Appointed one of the Commissioners of the Treasury; and afterwards made Chancellor of the Exchequer.

A milk

*A milk white mouse, immortal and unchang'd,
Fed on soft cheese, and o'er the dairy rang'd.*

But afterwards, upon Mr. MOUNTAGUE's promotion to the chancellorship of the Exchequer, PRIOR, with a good humoured indignation at seeing his friend preferred, and himself neglected, concludes an epistle written in the year 1698, to FLEETWOOD SHEPHERD, Esq; with these three lines,

*My friend CHARLES MOUNTAGUE's prefer'd,
Nor wou'd I have it long obser'd,
That one Mouse eats, while t'other's starv'd.* }

You will find the characters of the four impeached lords described under *Athenian* names. PHOCION is the Earl of PORTLAND. ARISTIDES is Lord SOMERS. THEMISTOCLES is the Earl of ORFORD. PERICLES is the Earl of HALLIFAX. In parallels of this sort, it is impossible that every circumstance should tally with the utmost exactness: but the whole treatise is full of historical knowledge, and excellent reflections. It is not mixed with any improper sallies of wit, or any light airs of humour: and in point of style and learning, is equal, if not superior, to any of his political works.

Subsequent to *the discourse concerning Athens and Rome*, is a paper written in the year 1703, in derision of the style and manner of Mr. ROBERT BOYLE. To what a height must the spirit of sarcasm arise in an author, who

who could prevail upon himself to ridicule so good a man as Mr. BOYLE? The sword of wit, like the scythe of time, cuts down friend and foe, and attacks every object that accidentally lies in its way. But, sharp and irresistible as the edge of it may be, Mr. BOYLE will always remain invulnerable.

The sentiments of a church-of-England-man, with respect to religion and government, was written in the year 1708. It is adapted to that particular period. The style of the whole pamphlet is nervous, and, except in some few places, impartial. The state of *Holland* is so justly, and, at the same time, so concisely delineated, that I cannot help transcribing it. Speaking of the *Dutch*, the author says, “*They are a commonwealth founded on a sudden, by a desperate attempt on a desperate condition, not formed or digested into a regular system by mature thought and reason, but huddled up under the pressure of sudden exigencies; calculated for no long duration, and hitherto subsisting by accident in the midst of contending powers, who cannot yet agree about sharing it amongst them.*” This tract is very well worth your reading and attention: and it confirms an observation which will perpetually occur, that SWIFT excels in whatever style or manner he assumes. When he is in earnest, his strength of reason carries with it conviction. When in jest, every competitor in the race of wit is left behind him.

The argument against abolishing Christianity is carried on with the highest wit and humour. Graver divines threaten the irreaders with future punishments: SWIFT artfully

artfully exhibits a picture of present shame. He judged rightly in imagining that a small treatise, written with a spirit of mirth and freedom, must be more efficacious, than long sermons, or laborious lessons of morality. He endeavours to laugh us into religion; well knowing, that we are often laughed out of it. As you have not read the pamphlet, excuse a quotation, to which may be prefixed the old proverb *ex pede Herculem*. “ I would
 “ *fain know* (says the Dean) *how it can be pretended;*
 “ *that the churches are misapplied. Where are more ap-*
 “ *pointments and rendezvouses of gallantry? Where more*
 “ *care to appear in the foremost box with greater advantage*
 “ *of dress? Where more meetings for business? Where*
 “ *more bargains driven of all sorts? And where so many*
 “ *conveniencies or incitements to sleep?*

The papers which immediately follow are entirely humorous, and relate to PARTRIDGE the almanac maker: and although they are not only temporary, but local, yet by an art peculiar to SWIFT himself, they are rendered immortal, so as to be read with pleasure, as long as the English language subsists.

To these succeeds *A project for the advancement of religion, and the reformation of manners*, written in the year 1709, and dedicated to the Countess of BERKLEY. The author appears in earnest throughout the whole treatise, and the dedication, or introduction, is in a strain of serious panegyric, which the Lady, to whom it is addressed, undoubtedly deserved. But as the pamphlet is of the satirical kind, I am apt to imagine, that my friend the Dean put a violence upon himself, in
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chusing to appear candidly serious, rather than to laugh silently under his usual mask of gravity. Read it, and tell me your opinion: for methinks, upon these occasions, I perceive him writing in shackles.

The critical essay on the faculties of the mind, will make you smile.

The letter to the Earl of OXFORD for correcting, improving, and ascertaining the English tongue might have been a very useful performance, if it had been longer, and less eclipsed by compliments to the noble person to whom it is addressed. It seems to have been intended as a preface to some more enlarged design: at the head of which such an introduction must have appeared with great propriety. A work of this kind is much wanted, as our language, instead of being improved, is every day growing worse, and more debased. We bewilder ourselves in various orthography; we speak, and we write at random; and if a man's common conversation were to be committed to paper, he would be startled for to find himself guilty in a few sentences, of so many solecisms and such false English. I believe we are the only people in the Christian world, who repeat the Lord's Prayer, in an ungrammatical manner: and I remember to have heard, that when a motion was made in the Convocation to alter the word [which] for the word [who] the proposition was rejected by the majority. This instance may shew you of what sort of men, the most learned, and even the most reverend assemblies, are sometimes composed. But let us consider the conduct of a neighbouring nation. How industrious have the

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the French been to improve their language? and to what a state of perfection have they brought it? *Rome*, by her conquests, made her dialect universal: *France*, by her policy, has done the same. By policy, I mean the encouragement of arts and sciences; which will often render a nation more powerful than arms. Nothing has contributed so much to the purity and excellence of the French tongue, as the noble academies established for that purpose: and, until some public work of the same kind is undertaken in *England*, we cannot flatter ourselves with any hopes of amending the errors, or ascertaining the limits of our style. I shall not presume even to whisper to you, that I think a design of this sort is sufficiently momentous to attract the consideration of our legislative powers. Their thoughts are otherways employed, and their faculties otherways applied. But I will venture to say, that if to our hospitals for lunatics, an hospital was added for the reception, and support of men of sense and learning, it would be of the highest honour to the present age, and of no less advantage to posterity. I call it an hospital, because I suppose it to be erected for the benefit of such persons, whose infirm fortunes, or diseased revenues, may have rendered the strength and abilities of their minds weak and useless to the public: for I entirely agree with ARISTOTLE, where he says, in the words of his scholiast. *Eum præclara et magna vix posse exequi et præstare, cui facultates desunt: quoniam per amicos et civilem potentiam veluti per instrumenta necesse est pleraque effici.* The reflexions, that arise from this theme, I find,

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find, are driving me beyond the bounds of a letter: therefore I shall only add, that I heartily wish you may think an attention to your native language as useful, and improving a study, as can be pursued, in whatever station of life Providence may allot you.

There are two other letters in this volume extremely worthy of your notice. The one is, *To a young gentleman lately entered into holy orders*. The other is, *To a young lady on her marriage*. The former, ought to be read by all the young clergymen in the three kingdoms, and the latter, by all the new married women. But, here again is the peculiar felicity of SWIFT's writings; the letters are addressed only to a young clergyman and a young lady, but they are adapted to every age and understanding. They contain observations that delight and improve every mind; and they will be read, with pleasure and advantage, by the oldest, and most exemplary divines, and by the most distinguished, and most accomplished ladies.

The rest of the volume is filled up with short tracts, and papers of various sorts: mostly humorous, and entertaining. You will laugh at the story in one of the *Intelligencers*, of *Whisk* and *Swobbers*: and you will wish *the Tatler* on those inferior duties of life, called *Les petites Morales*, hung up in every squire's hall in England. I am, my dearest HAMILTON,

Your most affectionate Father,

O R R E R Y.

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