

## A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet. (1721, 1748)

Jonathan Swift

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### A LETTER OF ADVICE TO A YOUNG POET.

Together with a Proposal for the Encouragement

Of Poetry in Ireland.

*Sic honor et nomen divinis vatibus atque Carminibus venit.*---Hor. De Art. Poet. 400.

December 1, 1720.

Sir,--As I have always professed a friendship for you, and have therefore been more inquisitive into your conduct and studies than is usually agreeable to young men, so I must own I am not a little pleased to find, by your last account, that you have entirely bent you thoughts to English poetry with design to make it your profession and business. Two reasons incline me to encourage you in this study; one the narrowness of your present circumstances; the other, the great use of poetry to mankind and society, and in every employment of life. Upon these views I cannot but commend your wise resolution to withdraw so early from other unprofitable and severe studies, and betake yourself to that which, if you have good luck, will advance your fortune and make you an ornament to your friends and to your country. It may be your justification, and further encouragement, to consider, that history, ancient or modern, cannot furnish you an instance of one person, eminent in any station who was not in some measure versed in poetry, or at least a well-wisher to the professors of it; neither would I despair to prove, if legally called thereto, that it is impossible to be a good soldier, divine, or lawyer, or even so much as an eminent bellman or balladsinger, without some taste of poetry, and a competent skill in versification; but I say the less of this, because the renowned Sir P. Sidney has exhausted the subject before me in his Defence of Poesie, on which I shall make no other remark but

this, that he argues there as if he really believed himself.

For my own part, having never made one verse since I was at school, where I suffered too much for my blunders in poetry to have any love to it ever since, I am not able, from any experience of my own, to give you those instructions you desire; neither will I declare (for I love to conceal my passions) how much I lament my neglect of poetry in those periods of my life which were properest for improvements in that ornamental part of learning; besides, my age and infirmities might well excuse me to you, as being unqualified to be your writing-master, with spectacles on and a shaking hand. However that I may not be altogether wanting to you in an affair of so much importance to your credit and happiness, I shall here give you some scattered thoughts upon the subject, such as I have gathered by reading and observation.

There is a certain little instrument, the first of those in use with scholars, and the meanest, considering the materials of it, whether it be joint of wheaten straw (the old Arcadian pipe) or just three inches of slender wire, or a stripped feather, or a corking-pin. Furthermore, this same diminutive tool, for the posture of it, usually reclines its head on the thumb of the right hand, sustains the foremost finger upon its breast, and is itself supported by the second. This is commonly known by the name of a fescue; I shall here, therefore condescend to be this little elementary guide, and point out some particulars, which may be of use to you in your hornbook of poetry.

In the first place, I am not yet convinced that it is at all necessary for a modern poet to believe in God, or have any serious sense of religion; and in this article you must give me leave to suspect your capacity; because religion being what your mother taught you, you will hardly find it possible, at least not easy, all at once to get over those early prejudices, so far as to think better to be a good wit than a good Christian, though herein the general practice is against you; so that if upon inquiry, you find in yourself any such softness, owing to the nature of education, my advice is, that you forthwith lay down your pen, as having no further business with it in the way of poetry; unless you will be content to pass for an insipid, or will submit to be hooted at by your fraternity, or can disguise you religion, as well-bred men do their learning, in complaisance to company.

For poetry, as it has been managed for some years past by such as make a business of it, (and of such only I speak here, for I do not call him a poet that writes for his diversion, any more than that gentleman a fiddler who amuses himself with a violin,) I say, our poetry of late has been altogether disengaged from the narrow notions of virtue and piety, because it has been found by experience of our professors, that the smallest quantity of religion, like a single drop of malt liquor in claret, will muddy and discompose the brightest poetical genius.

Religion supposes heaven and hell, the word of God, and sacraments, and twenty other circumstances, which taken seriously, are a wonderful check to wit and humour, and such as a true poet cannot possibly give in to, with a saving to his poetical licence; but yet it is necessary for him that others should believe those things seriously that his wit may be exercised on their wisdom for so doing; for though a wit need not have religion, religion is necessary to a wit, as an instrument is to the hand that plays upon it; and for this the moderns plead the example of their great idol Lucretius, who had not been by half so eminent a poet (as he truly was) but that he stood tiptoe on religion, *Religio pedibus subjecta*, and, by that rising ground, had the advantage of all poets of his or following times, who were not mounted on the same pedestal.

Besides, it is further to be observed, that Petronius, another of their favourites, speaking of the qualifications

of a good poet, insists chiefly on the *liber spiritus*; by which I have been ignorant enough heretofore to suppose he meant a good invention, or a great compass of thought or a sprightly imagination: but I have learned a better construction, from the opinion and practice of the moderns; and, taking it literally for a free spirit, *i.e.* a spirit, or mind, free or disengaged from all prejudices concerning God, religion, and another world, it is to me a plain account why our present set of poets are, and hold themselves obliged to be, freethinkers.

But, although I cannot recommend religion upon the practice of some of our most eminent English poets, yet I can surely advise you, from their example, to be conversant in the Scriptures, and if possible, to make yourself entirely master of them; in which, however, I intend nothing less than imposing upon you a task of piety. Far be it from me to desire you to believe them, or lay any great stress upon their authority; in that you may do as you think fit; but to read them as a piece of necessary furniture for a wit and a poet; which is a very different view from that of a Christian. For I have made it my observation, that the greatest wits have been the best textuaries: our modern poets are all, to a man, almost as well read in the Scriptures as some of our divines, and often abound more with the phrase. They have read them historically, critically, musically, comically, poetically, and every other way except religiously, and have found their account in doing so. For the Scriptures are undoubtedly a fund of wit, and a subject for wit. You may, according to the modern practice, be witty upon them, or out of them; and, so to speak the truth, but for them, I know not what our playwrights would do for images, allusions, similitudes, examples, or even language itself. Shut up the sacred books, and I would be bound our wit would run down like an alarum, or fall as the stocks did, and ruin half the poets, in these kingdoms. And if that were the case, how would most of that tribe, (all, I think, but the immortal Addison, who made a better use of his Bible, and a few more,) who dealt so freely in that fund, rejoice that they had drawn out in time, and left the present generation of poets to be in bubbles!

But here I must enter one caution, and desire you to take notice, that in this advice of reading the Scriptures, I had not the least thought concerning your qualification that way for poetical orders; which I mention, because I find a notion of that kind advanced by one of our English poets; and is, I suppose, maintained by the rest. He says to Spenser, in a pretended vision,

“----With hands laid on, ordain me fit  
For the great cure and ministry of wit.”

Which passage is, in my opinion, a notable allusion to the Scriptures; and, making but reasonable allowances for the small circumstances of profaneness, bordering close upon blasphemy, is inimitably fine; besides some useful discoveries made in it, as, that there are bishops in poetry, that these bishops must ordain young poets, and with laying on hands; and that poetry is a cure of souls; and, consequently speaking, those who have sought such cures ought to be poets, and too often are so: and indeed as of old, poets and priests were one and the same function, the alliance of those ministerial offices is to this day happily maintained in the same persons; and this I take to be the only justifiable reason for that appellation which they so much affect, I mean the modest title of divine poets. However, having never been present at the ceremony of ordaining to the priesthood of poetry, I own I have no notion of the thing, and shall say the less of it here.

The Scriptures then being generally both the foundation and subject of modern wit, I could do no less than give them the preference in your reading. After a through acquaintance with them, I would advice you to turn your thoughts to human literature, which yet I say more in compliance with vulgar opinions than according to my own sentiments.

For, indeed, nothing has surprised me more than to see the prejudices of mankind as to this matter of human learning, who have generally thought it necessary to be a good scholar, in order to be a good poet; than which nothing is falser in fact, or more contrary to practice and experience. Neither will I dispute the matter if any man will undertake to show me one professed poet now in being who is anything of what may be justly called a scholar; or is the worse poet for that, but perhaps the better, for being so little encumbered with the pedantry of learning: it is true the contrary was the opinion of our forefathers, which we of this age have devotion enough to receive from them on their own terms, and unexamined, but not sence enough to perceive it was a gross mistake in them. So Horace has told us:

*Scribendi recte sapere est et principium et fons,  
Rem tibi Socraticæ poterunt ostendere chartæ,*

But to see the different casts of men's heads, some, not inferior to that poet in understanding, (if you will take their own word for it,) do see no more consequence in this rule, and are not ashamed to declare themselves of a contrary opinion. Do not many men write well in common account, who have nothing of that principal? Many are too wise to be poets, and others too much poets to be wise. Must a man, forsooth, be no less than a philosopher to be a poet, when it is plain that some of the greatest idiots of the age are our prettiest performers that way? And for this I appeal to the judgment and observation of mankind. Sir P. Sidney's notable remark upon this nation may not be improper to mention here. He says, "In our neighbour country, Ireland, where true learning goes very bare, yet are their poets held in devout reverence;" which shows, that learning is no way necessary either to the making of a poet, or judging of him. And further, to see the fate of things, notwithstanding our learning here is as bare as ever, yet are our poets not held, as formerly, in devout reverence; but are, perhaps, the most contemptible race of mortals now in this kingdom, which is no less to be wondered at than lamented.

Some of the old philosophers were poets, as, according to the forementioned author, Socrates and Plato were: which, however, is what I did not know before; but that does not say that all poets are, or that any need be, philosophers, otherwise than as those are so called who are a little out at the elbows. In which sense the great Shakespeare might have been a philosopher; but was no scholar yet was an excellent poet. Neither do I think a late most judicious critic so much mistaken, as others do, in advancing this opinion, that "Shakespeare had been a worse poet, had he been a better scholar:" and sir W. Davenant is another instance of the same kind. Nor must it be forgotten that Plato was an avowed enemy to poets; which is, perhaps, the reason why poets have been always at enmity with his profession; and have rejected all learning and philosophy, for the sake of that one philosopher. As I take the matter, neither philosophy, nor any part of learning is more necessary to poetry (which, if you will believe the same author, is "the sum of all learning") than to know the theory of light and the several proportions and diversifications of it in particular colours is to a good painter.

Whereas, therefore, a certain author, called Petronius Arbiter, going upon the same mistake, has confidentially declared, that one ingredient of a good poet is "*mens ingenti literarum flumine inundata;*" I do on the contrary declare, that this his assertion (to speak of it in the softest terms) is no better than an invidious and unhandsome reflection on all the gentlemen poets of these times: for, with his good leave, much less than a flood or inundation will serve the turn; and, to my certain knowledge, some of our greatest wits in your poetical way have not as much real learning as would cover a sixpence in the bottom of a basin; nor do I think the worse of them; for to speak my private opinion, I am for every man's working upon his

own materials, and producing only what he can find within himself, which is commonly a better stock than the owner knows it to be. I think flowers of wit ought to spring, as those in the garden do, from their own root and stem, without foreign assistance. I would have a man's wit rather like a fountain, that feeds itself invisibly, than a river that is supplied by several streams from abroad.

Or if it be necessary, as the case is with some barren wits, to take in the thoughts of others in order to draw forth their own, as dry pumps will not play till water is thrown into them; in that necessity, I would recommend some of the approved standard authors of antiquity for your perusal, as a poet and a wit, because, maggots being what you look for, as monkeys do for vermin in their keepers' heads, you will find they abound in good old authors, as in rich old cheese, not in the new; and for that reason you must have the classics, especially the most worm-eaten of them, often in your hands.

But with this caution, that you are not to use those ancients, as unlucky lads do their old fathers, and make no conscience of picking their pockets and pillaging them. Your business is not to steal from them, but to improve upon them, and make their sentiments your own; which is an effect of great judgment; and, though difficult, yet very possible, without the scurvy imputation of flinching; for I humbly conceive, though I light my candle at my neighbour's fire, that does not alter the property, or make the wick, the wax, or the flame, or the whole candle less than my own.

Possibly you may think it is a very severe task, to arrive at a competent knowledge of so many of the ancients as excel in their way; and it would indeed be really so, but for the short and easy method lately found out, of abstracts, abridgements, summaries, &c., which are admirable expedients for being very learned with little or no reading; and have the same use with burning-glasses, to collect the diffused rays of wit and learning in authors, and make them point with warmth and quickness upon the reader's imagination. And to this is nearly related that other modern device of consulting indexes, which is to read books Hebraically, and begin where others usually end. And this is a compendious way of coming to an acquaintance with authors; for authors are to be used like lobsters, you must look for the best meat in the tails, and lay the bodies back again in the dish. Your cunningest thieves (and what else are readers, who only read to borrow, *i.e.* to steal,) use to cut off the portmanteau from behind, without staying to dive into the pockets of the owner. Lastly, you are taught thus much in the very elements of philosophy; for one of the finest rules in logic is, *Finis est primus in intentione*.

The learned world is therefore most highly indebted to a late painful and judicious editor of the classics, who has laboured in that new way with exceeding felicity. Every author, by his management, sweats under himself, being overloaded with his own index, and carries, like a north-country pedlar, all his substance and furniture upon his back, and with as great a variety of trifles. To him let all young students make their compliments for so much time and pains saved in the pursuit of useful knowledge; for whoever shortens a road, is a benefactor to the public, and to every particular person who has occasion to travel that way.

But to proceed, I have lamented nothing more in my time than the disuse of some ingenious little plays in fashion with young folks when I was a boy, and to which the great facility of that age, above ours, in composing, was certainly owing; and if anything has brought a damp upon the versification of these times, we have no further than this to go for the cause of it. Now, could these sports be happily revived, I am of opinion your wisest course would be to apply thoughts to them, and never fail to make a party when you can, in those profitable diversions. For, example, crambo is of extraordinary use to good rhyming, and rhyming

is what I have ever accounted the very essential part of a good poet; and in that notion I am not singular; for the aforesaid sir P. Sidney has declared "That the chief life of modern verifying consists in the like sounding of words, which we call rhyme;" which is an authority, either without exception, or above any reply. Wherefore, you are ever to try a good poem as you would sound a pipkin; and if it rings well upon the knuckle, be sure there is no flaw in it. Verse without rhyme, is a body without soul, (for the chief life consisteth in the rhyme,") or a bell without a clapper; which, in strictness, is no bell, as being of neither use nor delight. And the same ever honoured knight, with so musical an ear, had that veneration for the tunableness and chiming of verse, that he speaks of a poet as one that has "the revered title of a rhymers." Our celebrated Milton has done these nations great prejudice in this particular, having spoiled as many revered rhymers, by his example, as he has made real poets.

For which reason I am overjoyed to hear that a very ingenious youth of this town is now upon the useful design (for which he is never enough to be commended,) of bestowing rhyme upon Milton's "Paradise Lost," which will make the poem, in that only defective, more heroic and sonorous than it hitherto has been. I wish the gentleman success in the performance; and, as it is a work in which a young man could not be more happily employed, or appear in with greater advantage to his character, so I am concerned that it did not fall out to be your province.

With much the same view, I would recommend to you the witty play of pictures and mottoes, which will furnish your imagination with great store of images and suitable devices. We of these kingdoms have found our account in this diversion, as little as we consider or acknowledge it; for to this we owe our eminent felicity in posies of rings, mottoes of snuffboxes, the humours of sign-posts, with their elegant inscriptions, &c.; in which kind of productions not any nation in the world, no doubt the Dutch themselves, will presume to rival us.

For much the same reason it may be proper for you to have some insight into the play called, "What is it like?" as of great use in common practice to quicken slow capacities, and improve the quickest; but the chief end of it is to supply the fancy with varieties of similies for all subjects. It will teach you to bring things to a likeness, which have not the least imaginable conformity in nature, which is properly creation, and the very business of a poet, as his name implies; and let me tell you, a good poet can no more be without a stock of similies by him than a shoemaker without his lasts. He should have them sized, and ranged, and hung up in order in his shop, ready for all customers, and shaped to the feet of all sorts of verse; and here I could more fully (and I long to do it) insist upon the wonderful harmony and resemblance between a poet and a shoemaker in many circumstances common to both; such as the binding if their temples, the stuff they work upon, and the paring-knife they use, &c., but that I would not digress, nor seems to trifle in so serious a matter.

Now I say, if you apply yourself to these diminutive sports (not to mention others of equal ingenuity, such as draw gloves, cross purposes, questions, and commands, and the rest), it is not to be conceived what benefit (of nature) you will find by them, and how they will open the body of your invention. To these devote your spare hours, or rather spare all your hours to them, and then you will act as becomes a wise man, and make even diversions an improvement; like the inimitable management of the bee, which does the whole business of life at once, and at the same time both feeds, and works, and diverts itself.

Your own prudence will, I doubt not, direct you to take a place every evening among the ingenious, in the corner of a certain coffeehouse in this town, where you will receive a turn equally right as to wit ,

religion, and politics; as likewise to be as frequent at the playhouse as you can afford without selling your books. For, in our chaste theatre, even Cato himself might sit to the falling of the curtain: besides, you will meet sometimes with tolerable conversation among the players, they are such a kind of men as may pass, upon the same sort of capacities, for wit off the stage, as they do for fine gentlemen upon it. Besides that, I have known a factor deal in as good ware, and sell as cheap, as the merchant himself that employs him.

Add to this the expediency of furnishing out your shelves with a choice collection of modern miscellanies, in the gayest edition; and of reading all sorts of plays, especially the new, and above all, those of our own growth, printed by subscription; in which article of Irish manufacture, I readily agree to the late proposal, and am altogether for “rejecting and renouncing everything that comes from England.” To what purpose should we go thither for coals or poetry, when we have a vein within ourselves equally good and more convenient? Lastly,

A commonplace book is what a provident poet cannot subsist without, for this proverbial reason, that “great wits have short memories;” and whereas, on the other hand, poets, being liars by profession, ought to have god memories; to reconcile these, a book of this sort is in the nature of a supplemented memory, or a record of what occurs remarkable in every day’s reading or conversation. There you enter not only your own original thoughts (which, a hundred to one, are few and insignificant), but such of other men’s as you think properly fit to make your own, by entering them there. For, take this for a rule, when an author is in your books, you have the same demand upon him for his wit as a merchant has for your money when you are in his.

By these few and easy prescriptions (with the help of a good genius), it is possible you may in a short time, arrive at the accomplishments of a poet, and shine in that character. As for your manner of composing, and choice of subjects, I cannot take upon me to be your director; but I will venture to give you some short hints, which you may enlarge upon at your leisure. Let me entreat you, then, by no means to lay aside that notion peculiar to our modern refiners in poetry, which is, that a poet must never write or discourse as the ordinary part of mankind do, but in number and verse, as an oracle; which I mention the rather, because, upon this principle, I have known heroes brought into the pulpit, and a whole sermon composed and delivered in blank verse, to the vast credit of the preacher, no less than the real entertainment and great edification of the audience; the secret of which I take to be this: when the matter of such discourses is but mere clay, or, as we usually call it, sad stuff, the preacher, who can afford no better, wisely moulds, and polishes, and dries, and washes this piece of earthenware, and then bakes it with poetic fire; after which it will ring like any pancrock, and is a good dish to set before common guests, as every congregation is that comes so often for entertainment to one place.

There was a good old custom in use, which our ancestors had, of invoking the muses at the entrance of their poems; I suppose, by way of craving a blessing: this the graceless moderns have in a great measure laid aside, but are not to be followed in that poetical impiety; for, although to nice ears such invocations may sound harsh and disagreeable (as tuning instruments is before a concert), they are equally necessary. Again, you must not fail to dress your muse in a forehead cloth of Greek or Latin; I mean, you are always to make use of a quaint motto to all your compositions; for, beside that this artifice bespeaks the reader’s opinion of the writer’s learning, it is otherwise useful and commendable. A bright passage in the front of a poem is a good mark, like a star in a horse’s face; and the piece will certainly go off the better for it. The *os magna sonaturum*, which, if I remember right, Horace makes one qualification of a good poet, may teach you not to gag your muse, or stint yourself in words and epithets which cost you nothing, contrary to the practice of

some few out-of-the-way writers, who use a natural and concise expression, and affect a style like unto a Shrewsbury cake, short and sweet upon the palate; they will not afford you a word more than is necessary to make them intelligible, which is as poor and niggardly as it would be to set down no more meat than your company will be sure to eat up. Words are but lackeys to sense, and will dance attendance without wages or compulsions; *Verba non invita sequentur*.

Furthermore, when you set about composing, it may be necessary for your ease, and better distillation of wit, to put on your worst clothes, and the worse the better; for an author, like a limbeck, will yield the better for having a rag about him: besides that, I have observed a gardener cut the outward of a rind of a tree (which is the surtout of it) to make it bear well; and this is a natural account of the usual poverty of poets, and is an argument why wits, of all men living, ought to be ill clad. I have always a sacred veneration for anyone I observe to be a little out of repair in his person, as supposing him either a poet or a philosopher; because the richest minerals are ever found under the most ragged and withered surface of the earth.

As for your choice of subjects, I have only to give you this caution: that as a handsome way if praising is certainly the most difficult point in writing or speaking, I would by no means advise any young man to make his first essay in panegyrio beside the danger of it: for a particular encomium is ever attended with more ill-will than any general invective, for which I need give no reasons; wherefore my council is, that you use the point of your pen, not the feather: let your first attempt be a *coup d'éclat* in the way of a libel, lampoon, or satire. Knock down half a score reputations, and you will infallibly raise your own; and so it be with wit, no matter with how little justice; for fiction is your trade.

Every great genius seems to ride upon mankind, like Pyrrhus on his elephant; and the way to have the absolute ascendant of your resty nag, and to keep your seat is, at your first mounting, to afford him the whip and spurs plentifully; after which, you may travel the rest of the day with great alacrity. Once kick the world, and the world and you will live together at a reasonable good understanding. You cannot but know that those of your profession have been called *genus irritabile vatum*; and you will find it necessary to qualify yourself for that waspish society, by exerting your talent of satire upon the first occasion, and to abandon good nature only to prove yourself a true poet, which you will allow to be a valuable consideration: in a word, a young robber is usually entered by a murder; a young hound is blooded when he comes first into the field; a young bully begins with killing his man; and a young poet must show his wit, as the other his courage, by cutting, and slashing, and laying about him, and banging mankind.

Lastly, It will be your wisdom to look out betimes for a good service for your muse, according to her skill and qualifications, whether in the nature of a dairymaid, a cook, or charwoman: I mean, to hire out your pen to a party, which will afford you both pay and protection; and when you have to do with the press (as you will long to be there), take care to bespeak an importunate friend, to extort your productions with an agreeable violence, and which, according to the cue between you, you must surrender *digito male pertinuci*: there is a decency in this; for it no more becomes an author, in modesty, to have a hand in publishing his own works than a woman in labour to lay herself.

I would be very loath to give the least umbrage or offence by what I have here said, as I may do, if I should be thought to insinuate that these circumstances of good writing have been unknown to, or not observed by, the poets of this kingdom: I will do my countrymen the justice to say, they have written by the foregoing rules with great exactness, and so far as hardly to come behind those of their profession in England, in perfection of low writing. The sublime, indeed, is not so common with us; but ample amends is made for

that want, in great abundance of the admirable and amazing, which appears in all our compositions. Our very good friend (the knight aforesaid), speaking of the force of poetry, mentions “rhyming to death, which (adds he) is said to be done in Ireland;” and, truly, to our honour be it spoken, that power, in a great measure, continues with us to this day.

I would now offer some poor thoughts of mine for the encouragement of poetry in this kingdom, if I could hope they would be agreeable. I have had many an aching heart for the ill plight of that noble profession here; and it has been my late and early study how to bring it into better circumstances. And, surely, considering what monstrous wits, in the poetic way, do almost daily start up and surprise us in this town; what prodigious geniuses we have here (of which I could give instances without number), and withal of what great benefit it may be to our trade to encourage that science here, for it is plain our linen manufacture is advanced by the great waste of paper made by our present set of poets; not to mention other uses of the same to shopkeepers, especially grocers, apothecaries, and pastrycooks, and I might add, but for our writers, the nation would in a little time be utterly destitute of bum-fodder, and must of necessity import the same from England and Holland, where they have it in great abundance, by the indefatigable labour of their own wits: I say, these things considered, I am humbly of opinion it would be worth the care of our governors to cherish gentlemen of the quill, and give them all proper encouragements here. And, since I am upon the subject, I shall speak my mind very freely, and if I add saucily, it is no more than my birthright as a Briton.

Seriously, then, I have many years lamented the want of a Grub-street in this our large and polite city, unless the whole may be called one. And this I have accounted an unpardonable defect in our constitution, ever since I had any opinions I could call my own. Every one knows Grub-street is a market for small ware in wit, and as necessary, considering the usual purgings of the human brain, as the nose is upon a man’s face: and for the same reason, we have here a court, a college, a playhouse, and beautiful ladies, and fine gentlemen, and good claret, and abundance of pens, ink, and paper, clear of taxes, and every other circumstance to provoke wit; and yet those whose province it is have not thought fit to appoint a place for evacuations of it, which is a very hard case, as may be judged by comparisons.

And truly this defect has been attended with unspeakable inconveniences; for not to mention the prejudice done to the commonwealth of letters, I am of opinion we suffer in our health by it: I believe our corrupted air and frequent thick fogs are in a great measure owing to the common exposal of our wit; and that, with good management, our poetical vapours might be carried off in a common drain, and fall into one quarter of the town without infecting the whole, as the case is at the present, to the great offence of our nobility and gentry, and others of nice noses. When writers of all sizes, like freemen of the city, are at liberty to throw out their filth and excrementitious productions in every street as they please, what can the consequences be, but that the town must be poisoned, and become such another jakes, as, by report of great travellers, Edinburgh is at night; a thing well to be considered in these pestilential times.

I am not of the society for reformation of manners, but, without that pragmatistical title, I should be glad to see some amendment in the matter before us; wherefore I humbly bespeak the favour of the lord mayor, the court of aldermen, and common council, together with the whole circle of arts in this town, and do recommend this affair to their most political consideration; and I persuade myself they will not be wanting in their best endeavours, when they can serve two such ends at once, as both to keep the town sweet and encourage poetry in it. Neither do I make any exceptions as to satirical poets and lampoon writers in consideration of their office; for indeed, their business is to rake into kennels, and gather up the filth of streets and families (in which respect they may be, for aught I know, as necessary to the town as scavengers

or chimney-sweeps), yet I have observed, they too have themselves, at the same time, very foul clothes, and, like dirty persons, leave more filth and nastiness than they sweep away.

In a word, what I would be at (for I love to be plain in matters of importance to my country) is, that some private street, or blind alley, of this town, may be fitted up, at the charge of the public, as an apartment for the muses, (like those at Rome and Amsterdam, for their female relations,) and be wholly consigned to the users of our wits, furnished completely with all appurtenances, such as authors, supervisors, presses, printers, hawkers, shops, and warehouses, abundance of garrets, and every other implement and circumstance of wit; the benefit of which would obviously be this, viz., that we should then have a safe repository for our best productions, which at present are handed about in single sheets or manuscripts, and may be altogether lost, (which were a pity,) or, at the best, are subject, in that loose dress, like handsome women, to great abuse.

Another point that has cost me some melancholy reflections, is the present state of the playhouse; the encouragement of which has an immediate influence upon the poetry of the kingdom; as a good market improves the tillage of the neighbouring country, and enriches the ploughman; neither do we of this town seem enough to know or consider the vast benefit of a playhouse to our city and nation: that single house is the foundation of all our love, wit, dress, and gallantry. It is the school of wisdom; for there we learn to know what's what; which, however, I cannot say is always in that place sound knowledge. There our young folks drop their childish mistakes, and come first to perceive their mother's cheat of the parsley-bed; there too, they get rid of natural prejudices, especially those of religion and modesty, which are great restraints to a free people. The same is a remedy for the spleen, and blushing, and several distempers occasioned by the stagnation of blood. It is likewise a school of common swearing; my young master, who at first but minced an oath, is taught there to mouth it gracefully, and to swear, as he reads French, *ore rotundo*. Profaneness was before to him in the nature of his best suit, or holiday-clothes; but upon frequenting the playhouse, swearing, cursing, and lying, become like his everyday coat, waistcoat, and breeches. Now, I say, common swearing, a produce of this country as plentiful as our corn, thus cultivated by the playhouse, might, with management, be of wonderful advantage to the nation, as a projector of the swearer's bank has proved at large. Lastly, the stage, in great measure, supports the pulpit; for I know not what our divines could have to say there against the corruptions of the age, but for the playhouse, which is the seminary of them. From which it is plain the public is a gainer by the playhouse, and consequently ought to countenance it; and, were I worthy to put in my word, or prescribe to my betters, I could say in what manner.

I have heard that a certain gentleman has great design to serve the public, in the way of their diversion, with due encouragement; that is, if he can obtain some concordatum-money, or yearly salary, and handsome contribution; and well he deserves the favours of the nation: for to do him justice, he has an uncommon skill in pastimes, having altogether applied his studies that way, and travelled full a many league, by sea and land, for this his profound knowledge. With that view alone he has visited all the courts and cities in Europe, and has been at more pains than I shall speak of, to take an exact draught of the playhouse at the Hague, as a model for a new one here. But what can a private man do by himself in so public an undertaking? It is not to be doubted but, by his care and industry, vast improvements may be made, not only in our playhouse, (which is his immediate province,) but in our gaming ordinaries, groom-porters, lotteries, bowling-greens, ninepin-alleys, bear-gardens, cockpits, prizes, puppets, and rareeshows, and whatever else concerns the elegant diversities of this town. He is truly an original genius; and I felicitate this our capital city on his residence here, where I wish him long to live and flourish, for the good of the commonwealth.

Once more: if any further application shall be made on the other side, to obtain a charter for a bank here, I

presume to make a request, that poetry may be a sharer in that privilege, being a fund as real, and to the full as well grounded, as our stocks; but I fear our neighbours, who envy our wit as much as they do our wealth or trade, will give no encouragement to either. I believe, also, it might be proper to erect a corporation of poets in this city. I have been idle enough in my time to make a computation of wits here, and do find we have three hundred performing poets, and upward, in and about this town, reckoning six score to the hundred, and allowing for demies, like pint bottles; including also the several denominations of imitators, translators, and family letter-writers, &c. One of these last has lately entertained the town with an original piece, and such a one as, I dare say, the last British Spectator, in his decline, would have called, “an excellent specimen of the true sublime;” or a “noble poem;” or “a fine copy of verses on a subject perfectly new,” the author himself; and had given it a place among his latest lucubrations.

But, as I was saying, so many poets, I am confident, are sufficient to furnish out a corporation, in point of number. Then, for the several degrees of subordinate members requisite to such a body, there can be no want; for, although we have not one masterly poet, yet we abound with wardens and beasles; having a multitude of poetasters, poetitoes, parcel-poets, poet-apes, and philo-poets, and many of inferior attainments in wit, but strong inclinations to it which are, by odds, more than all the rest. Nor shall I ever be at ease till this project of mine (for which I am heartily thankful to myself) shall be reduced to practice. I long to see the day when our poets will be a regular and distinct body, and wait upon the lord mayor on public days, like other good citizens, in gowns turned up with green, instead of laurel; and when I myself, who make the proposal, shall be free of their company.

To conclude: what if our government had a poet-laureat here, as in England? What if our university had a professor of poetry here, as in England? What if our lord mayor had a city bard here, as in England? And, to refine upon England, what if every corporation, parish, and ward in this town, had a poet in fee, as they have not in England? Lastly, what if every one, so qualified, were obliged to add one more than usual to the number of his domestics, and, besides a fool and a chaplain, (which are often united in one person,) would retain a port in his family? For, perhaps, a rhymer is as necessary among servants of a house, as a dobbin with his bells at the head of a team. But these things I leave to the wisdom of my superiors.

While I have been directing your pen, I should not forget to govern my own, which has already exceeded the bounds of a letter: I must therefore take my leave abruptly, and desire you, without further ceremony, to believe that I am, Sir, your most humble servant,

JONATHAN SWIFT.

