

Verses on the Death of Doctor Swift

Jonathan Swift

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As Rochefoucauld his maxims drew
From nature, I believe 'em true:
They argue no corrupted mind
In him; the fault is in mankind.

This maxim more than all the rest
Is thought too base for human breast:
"In all distresses of our friends,
We first consult our private ends;
While nature, kindly bent to ease us,
Points out some circumstance to please us."

If this perhaps your patience move,
Let reason and experience prove.
We all behold with envious eyes
Our equal raised above our size.
Who would not at a crowded show
Stand high himself, keep others low?
I love my friend as well as you:
But why should he obstruct my view?
Then let me have the higher post:
Suppose it but an inch at most.
If in battle you should find
One whom you love of all mankind,
Had some heroic action done,
A champion killed, or trophy won;
Rather than thus be overtopped,
Would you not wish his laurels cropped?
Dear honest Ned is in the gout,
Lies racked with pain, and you without:
How patiently you hear him groan!
How glad the case is not your own!

What poet would not grieve to see
His breth'ren write as well as he?
But rather than they should excel,
He wished his rivals all in hell.

Her end when Emulation misses,
She turns to Envy, stings, and hisses:
The strongest friendship yields to pride,
Unless the odds be on our side.

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Vain human kind! fantastic race!
Thy various follies who can trace?
Self-love, ambition, envy, pride,
Their empire in our hearts divide.
Give others riches, power, and station,
'Tis all on me an usurpation.
I have no title to aspire;
Yet, when you sink, I seem the higher.
In Pope I cannot read a line,
But with a sigh I wish it mine;
When he can in one couplet fix
More sense than I can do in six;
It gives me such a jealous fit,
I cry "Pox take him and his wit!"
I grieve to be outdone by Gay
In my own hum'rous biting way.
Arbuthnot is no more my friend,
Who dares to irony pretend,
Which I was born to introduce,
Refined it first, and shewed its use.
St. John, as well as Pultney, knows
That I had some repute for prose;
And till they drove me out of date
Could maul a minister of state.
If they have mortified my pride,
And made me throw my pen aside;
If with such talents Heav'n has blest 'em,
Have I not reason to detest 'em?

To all my foes, dear Fortune, send
Thy gifts; but never to my friend:
I tamely can endure the first;
But this with envy makes me burst.
Thus much may serve by way of proem:
Proceed we therefore to our poem.

The time is not remote when I
Must by the course of nature die;
When, I foresee, my special friends
Will try to find their private ends:
Tho' it is hardly understood
Which way my death can do them good,
Yet thus, methinks, I hear 'em speak:
"See, how the Dean begins to break!
Poor gentleman, he droops apace!
You plainly find it in his face.
That old vertigo in his head
Will never leave him till he's dead.
Besides, his memory decays:
He recollects not what he says;
He cannot call his friends to mind;

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Forgets the place where last he dined;
Plyes you with stories o'er and o'er,
He told them fifty times before.
How does he fancy we can sit
To hear his out-of-fashioned wit?
But he takes up with younger folks,
Who for his wine will bear his jokes.
Faith! he must make his stories shorter,
Or change his comrades once a quarter:
In half the time he talks them round,
There must another set be found.

"For poetry he's past his prime:
He takes an hour to find a rhyme;
His fire is out, his wit decayed,
His fancy sunk, his Muse a jade.
I'd have him throw away his pen;—
But there's no talking to some men!"

And then their tenderness appears,
By adding largely to my years:
"He's older than he would be reckoned,
And well remembers Charles the Second.
He hardly drinks a pint of wine;
And that, I doubt, is no good sign.
His stomach too begins to fail;
Last year we thought him strong and hale,
But now he's quite another thing:
I wish he may hold out till spring."
Then hug themselves, and reason thus:
"It is not yet so bad with us!"

In such a case they talk in tropes,
And by their fears express their hopes:
Some great misfortune to portend,
No enemy can match a friend.
With all the kindness they profess,
The merit of a lucky guess
(When daily how-d'ye's come of course,
And servants answer, Worse and worse!)
Would please 'em better than to tell
That "God be praised, the Dean is well."
Then he who prophecied the best
Approves his foresight to the rest:
"You know I always feared the worst,
And often told you so at first."—
He'd rather choose that I should die
Than his prediction prove a lie.
Not one foretells I shall recover,
But all agree to give me over.

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Yet, should some neighbour feel a pain
Just in the parts where I complain,
How many a message would he send?
What hearty prayers that I should mend?
Inquire what regimen I kept,
What gave me ease, and how I slept?
And more lament when I was dead,
Than all the sniv'lers round my bed.

My good companions, never fear,
For though you may mistake a year,
Though your prognostics run too fast,
They must be verified at last.

Behold the fatal day arrive!
"How is the Dean?" – "He's just alive."
Now the departing prayer is read:
"He hardly breathes." – "The Dean is dead."

Before the Passing–bell begun,
The news thro' half the town has run.
"O, may we all for death prepare!
What has he left? and who's his heir?"—
"I know no more that what the news is:
'Tis all bequeathed to public uses."—
"To public use! A perfect whim!
What had the public done for him?
Mere envy, avarice, and pride:
He gave it all –but first he died.
And had the Dean, in all the nation,
No worthy friend, no poor relation?
So ready to do strangers good,
Forgetting his own flesh and blood!"

Now Grub Street wits are all employed;
With elegies the town is cloyed:
Some paragraph in ev'ry paper,
To curse the Dean, or bless the Drapier.

The doctors, tender of their fame,
Wisely on me lay all the blame:
"We must confess his case was nice;
But he would never take advice.
Had he been ruled, for aught appears,
He might have lived these twenty years;
For when we opened him we found
That all his vital parts were sound."

From Dublin soon to London spread,
'Tis told at court "the Dean is dead."
Kind Lady Suffolk, in the spleen,

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Runs laughing up to tell the queen.
The queen, so gracious, mild, and good,
Cries "Is he gone? 'tis time he should.
He's dead, you say; why, let him rot:
I'm glad the medals were forgot.
I promised him, I own; but when?
I only was a princess then;
But now, as consort of a king,
You know, 'tis quite a diff'rent thing."

Now Chartres, at Sir Robert's levee,
Tells with a sneer the tidings heavy:
"Why, is he dead without his shoes?"
Cries Bob "I'm sorry for the news:
O, were the wretch but living still,
And in his place my good friend Will!
Or had a mitre on his head,
Provided Bolinbroke were dead!"

Now Curll his shop from rubbish drains:
Three genuine tomes of Swift's remains!
And then, to make them pass the glibber,
Revised by Tibbalds, Moore, and Cibber.
He'll treat me as he does my betters,
Publish my will, my life, my letters;
Revive the libels born to die;
Which Pope must bear, as well as I.

Here shift the scene, to represent
How those I love my death lament.
Poor Pope will grieve a month; and Gay
A week; and Arbuthnot a day.
St. John himself will scarce forbear
To bite his pen, and drop a tear.
The rest will give a shrug, and cry
"I'm sorry –but we all must die."

Indifference, clad in Wisdom's guise,
All fortitude of mind supplies:
For how can stony bowels melt
In those who never pity felt?
When we are lashed, they kiss the rod,
Resigning to the will of God.

The fools, my juniors by a year,
Are tortured with suspense and fear:
Who wisely thought my age a screen
When death approached, to stand between:—
The screen removed, their hearts are trembling;
They mourn for me without dissembling.

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My female friends, whose tender hearts
Have better learned to act their parts,
Receive the news in doleful dumps:
"The Dean is dead –and what is trumps?—
Then Lord have mercy on his soul!
– Ladies, I'll venture for the vole.—
Six deans, they say, must bear the pall.
– I wish I knew what king to call.—
Madam, your husband will attend
The funeral of so good a friend?
No, madam, 'tis a shocking sight,
And he's engaged tomorrow night;
My Lady Club would take it ill
If he should fail her at quadrille.
He loved the Dean –I lead a heart—
But dearest friends, they say, must part.
His time was come; he ran his race;
We hope he's in a better place."
Why do we grieve that friends should die?
No loss more easy to supply.
One year is past: a different scene:
No further mention of the Dean;
Who now, alas, no more is missed
Than if he never did exist.
Where's now this fav'rite of Apollo?
Departed: –and his works must follow;
Must undergo the common fate;
His kind of wit is out of date.

Some country squire to Lintot goes,
Inquires for "Swift in Verse and Prose".
Says Lintot "I have heard the name;
He died a year ago." –"The same."
He searches all the shop in vain.
"Sir, you may find them in Duck Lane:
I sent them with a load of books
Last Monday to the pastry–cook's.
To fancy they could live a year!
I find you're but a stranger here.
The Dean was famous in his time,
And had a kind of knack at rhyme.
His way of writing now is past;
The town has got a better taste.
I keep no antiquated stuff;
But spick and span I have enough.
Pray do but give me leave to show 'em:
Here's Colley Cibber's birthday poem.
This ode you never yet have seen,
By Stephen Duck, upon the queen.
Then here's a letter finely penned
Against the Craftsman and his friend;

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It clearly shows that all reflection
On ministers is disaffection.
Next, here's Sir Robert's vindication;
And Mr Henley's last oration.
The hawkers have not got 'em yet—
Your honour please to buy a set?
Here's Woolston's tracts, the twelfth edition,
'Tis read by ev'ry politician:
The country members, when in town,
To all their boroughs send them down;
You never met a thing so smart!
The courtiers have them all by heart;
Those maids of honour (who can read),
Are taught to use them for their creed.
The rev'rend author's good intention
Has been rewarded with a pension.
He does an honour to his gown,
By bravely running priestcraft down:
He shows, as sure as God's in Gloucester,
That Moses was a grand imposter;
That all his miracles were cheats,
Performed as jugglers do their feats.
The church had never such a writer;
A shame he has not got a mitre!"

Suppose me dead; and then suppose
A club assembled at the Rose;
Where, from discourse of this and that,
I grow the subject of their chat.
And while they toss my name about,
With favour some, and some without,
One, quite indiff'rent in the cause,
My character impartial draws:

"The Dean, if we believe report,
Was never ill-received at court.
As for his works in verse and prose,
I own myself no judge of those;
Nor can I tell what critics thought 'em,
But this I know, all people bought 'em;
As with a moral view designed
To cure the vices of mankind:
And, if he often missed his aim,
The world must own it, to their shame:
The praise is his, and theirs the blame."

"Sir, I have heard another story:
He was a most confounded Tory,
And grew, or he is much belied,
Extremely dull before he died."

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"Can we the Drapier then forget?
Is not our nation in his debt?
'Twas he that writ the Drapier's letters!"

"He should have left them for his betters;
We had a hundred abler men,
Nor need depend upon his pen.
Say what you will about his reading,
You never can defend his breeding;
Who in his satires running riot,
Could never leave the world in quiet;
Attacking, when he took the whim,
Court, city, camp –all one to him!
But why should he, except he slobber't,
Offend our patriot, great Sir Robert,
Whose counsels aid the sov'reign power
To save the nation every hour?
What scenes of evil he unravels
In satires, libels, lying travels!
Not sparing his own clergy–cloth,
But eats into it, like a moth!"

"His vein, ironically grave,
Exposed the fool and lashed the knave.
To steal a hint was never known,
But what he writ was all his own.
He never thought an honour done him
Because a duke was proud to own him;
Would rather slip aside and choose
To talk with wits in dirty shoes;
Despised the fools with stars and garters,
So often seen caressing Chartres.
He never courted men in station,
Nor persons held in admiration.
Of no man's greatness was afraid,
Because he sought for no man's aid.
Though trusted long in great affairs,
He gave himself no haughty airs.
Without regarding private ends,
Spent all his credit for his friends;
And only chose the wise and good;
No flatterers; no allies in blood;
But succoured virtue in distress,
And seldom failed of good success;
As numbers in their hearts must own,
Who, but for him, had been unknown.
With princes kept a due decorum,
But never stood in awe before 'em.
He followed David's lesson just:
In princes never put thy trust.
And would you make him truly sour,

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Provoke him with a slave in power.
The Irish senate, if you named,
With what impatience he declaimed!
Fair LIBERTY was all his cry;
For her he stood prepared to die;
For her he boldly stood alone;
For her he oft exposed his own.
Two kingdoms, just as faction led,
Had set a price upon his head;
But not a traitor could be found
To sell him for six hundred pound.
Had he but spared his tongue and pen,
He might have rose like other men;
But power was never in his thought,
And wealth he valued not a groat.
Ingratitude he often found,
And pitied those who meant the wound;
But kept the tenor of his mind
To merit well of human kind;
Nor made a sacrifice of those
Who still were true, to please his foes.
He laboured many a fruitless hour
To reconcile his friends in power;
Saw mischief by a faction brewing,
While they pursued each other's ruin.
But finding vain was all his care,
He left the court in mere despair.
And oh! how short are human schemes!
Here ended all our golden dreams.
What St John's skill in state affairs,
What Ormond's valour, Oxford's cares,
To save their sinking country lent,
Was all destroyed by one event.
Too soon that precious life was ended,
On which alone our weal depended.
When up a dangerous faction starts,
With wrath and vengeance in their hearts,
By solemn League and Cov'nant bound,
To ruin, slaughter, and confound;
To turn religion to a fable,
And make the government a Babel;
Pervert the laws, disgrace the gown,
Corrupt the senate, rob the crown;
To sacrifice old England's glory,
And make her infamous in story:—
When such a tempest shook the land,
How could unguarded Virtue stand!
With horror, grief, despair, the Dean
Beheld the dire destructive scene:
His friends in exile, or the tower,
Himself within the frown of power,

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Pursued by base envenomed pens,
Far to the land of slaves and fens;
A servile race in folly nursed,
Who truckle most when treated worst.
By innocence and resolution,
He bore continual persecution;
While numbers to preferment rose,
Whose merits were, to be his foes;
When ev'n his own familiar friends,
Intent upon their private ends,
Like renegadoes now he feels,
Against him lifting up their heels.
The Dean did by his pen defeat
An infamous destructive cheat;
Taught fools their int'rest how to know,
And gave them arms to ward the blow.
Envy has owned it was his doing,
To save that hapless land from ruin;
While they who at the steerage stood,
And reaped the profit, sought his blood.
To save them from their evil fate,
In him was held a crime of state.
A wicked monster on the bench,
Whose fury blood could never quench
– As vile and profligate a villain
As modern Scroggs, or old Tresilian;
Who long all justice had discarded,
Nor feared he God, nor man regarded—
Vowed on the Dean his rage to vent,
And make him of his zeal repent.
But Heaven his innocence defends,
The grateful people stand his friends:
Not strains of law, nor judge's frown,
Nor topics brought to please the crown,
Nor witness hired, nor jury picked,
Prevail to bring him in convict.
In exile, with a steady heart,
He spent his life's declining part;
Where folly, pride, and faction sway,
Remote from St John, Pope, and Gay.
Alas, poor Dean! his only scope
Was to be held a misanthrope.
This into gen'ral odium drew him,
Which, if he liked, much good may't do him.
His zeal was not to lash our crimes,
But discontent against the times;
For had we made him timely offers
To raise his post, or fill his coffers,
Perhaps he might have truckled down,
Like other brethren of his gown.
For party he would scarce have bled—

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I say no more, because he's dead.
What writings has he left behind?
I hear they're of a different kind:
A few in verse, but most in prose,
— Some high-flown pamphlets, I suppose—
All scribbled in the worst of times,
To palliate his friend Oxford's crimes,
To praise Queen Anne, nay more, defend her,
As never fav'ring the Pretender;
Or libels yet concealed from sight,
Against the court to show his spite;
Perhaps his Travels, part the third,
A lie at every second word,
Offensive to a loyal ear;
But not one sermon, you may swear."

"His friendships there, to few confined,
Were always of the middling kind:
No fools of rank, a mongrel breed,
Who fain would pass for lords indeed.
Where titles give no right or power,
And peerage is a withered flower,
He would have held it a disgrace
If such a wretch had known his face.
On rural squires, that kingdom's bane,
He vented oft his wrath in vain;
[Biennial] squires to market brought,
Who sell their souls and [votes] for nought;
The [nation stripped,] go joyful back,
To [rob the] church, their tenants rack,
Go snacks with [rogues and rapparees,]
And keep the peace to pick up fees;
In every job to have a share,
A goal or barrack to repair;
And turn the tax for public roads
Commodious to their own abodes."
"Perhaps I may allow the Dean
Had too much satire in his vein,
And seemed determined not to starve it,
Because no age could more deserve it.
Yet malice never was his aim;
He lashed the vice, but spared the name;
No individual could resent
Where thousands equally were meant.
His satire points at no defect
But what all mortals may correct;
For he abhorred that senseless tribe
Who call it humour when they gibe.
He spared a hump, or crooked nose,
Whose owners set not up for beaux.
True genuine dulness moved his pity,

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Unless it offered to be witty.
Those who their ignornace confessed
He ne'er offended with a jest;
But laughed to hear an idiot quote
A verse from Horace learned by rote.
Vice, if it e'er can be abashed,
Must be or ridiculed or lashed.
If you resent it, who's to blame?
He neither knew you nor your name.
Should vice expect to 'scape rebuke,
Because its owner is a duke?"
"He knew an hundred pleasant stories,
With all the turns of Whigs and Tories;
Was cheerful to his dying day,
And friends would let him have his way."
"He gave what little wealth he had
To build a house for fools and mad;
And showed by one satiric touch,
No nation wanted it so much.
That kingdom he hath left his debtor,
I wish it soon may have a better."
And since you dread no further lashes,
Methinks you may forgive his ashes.