

LETTERS ON ENGLAND

by Voltaire

written 1726-1729, published in English in 1733.

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INTRODUCTION

Francois Marie Arouet, who called himself Voltaire, was the son of Francois Arouet of Poitou, who lived in Paris, had given up his office of notary two years before the birth of this his third son, and obtained some years afterwards a treasurer's office in the Chambre des Comptes. Voltaire was born in the year 1694. He lived until within ten or eleven years of the outbreak of the Great French Revolution, and was a chief leader in the movement of thought that preceded the Revolution. Though he lived to his eighty-fourth year, Voltaire was born with a weak body. His brother Armand, eight years his senior, became a Jansenist. Voltaire when ten years old was placed with the Jesuits in the College Louis-le-Grand. There he was taught during seven years, and his genius was encouraged in its bent for literature — skill in speaking and in writing being especially fostered in the system of education which the Jesuits had planned to produce capable men who by voice and pen could give a reason for the faith they held. Verses written for an invalid soldier at the age of eleven won for young Voltaire the friendship of Ninon l'Enclos, who encouraged him to go on writing verses. She died soon afterwards, and remembered him with a legacy of two thousand livres for purchase of books. He wrote in his lively school-days a tragedy that afterwards he burnt. At the age of seventeen he left the College Louis-le-Grand, where he said afterwards that he had been taught nothing but Latin and the Stupidities. He was then sent to the law schools, and saw life in Paris as a gay young poet who, with all his brilliant liveliness, had an aptitude for looking on the tragic side of things, and one of whose first poems was an "Ode on the Misfortunes of Life." His mother died when he was twenty. Voltaire's father thought him a fool for his versifying, and attached him as secretary to the Marquis of Chateaufort, when he went as ambassador to the Hague. In December 1713, he was dismissed for his irregularities. In Paris his unsteadiness and his addiction to literature caused his father to rejoice in getting him housed in a country chateau with M. de Caumartin. M. de Caumartin's father talked with such enthusiasm of Henri IV and Sully that Voltaire planned the writing of what became his *Henriade*, and his "History of the Age of Louis XIV," who died on the 1st of September 1715.

Under the regency that followed, Voltaire got into trouble again and again through the sharpness of his pen, and at last, accused of verse that satirised the Regent, he was locked up — on the 17th of May 1717 — in the Bastille. There he wrote the first two books of his *Henriade*, and finished a play on OEdipus, which he had begun at the age of eighteen. He did not obtain full liberty until the 12th of April, 1718, and it was at this time — with a clearly formed design to associate the name he took with work of high attempt in literature — that Francois Marie Arouet, aged twenty-four, first called himself Voltaire.

Voltaire's *OEdipe* was played with success in November, 1718. A few months later he was again banished from Paris, and finished the *Henriade* in his retirement, as well as another play, *Artemise*, that was acted in February 1720. Other plays followed. In December 1721, Voltaire visited Lord Bolingbroke, who was then an exile from England, at the Chateau of La Source. There was now constant literary activity. From July to October 1722, Voltaire visited Holland with Madame de Rupelmonde. After a serious attack of smallpox in November 1723, Voltaire was active as a poet about the Court. He was then in receipt of a pension of two thousand livres from the king, and had inherited more than twice as much by the death of his father in January 1722. But in December 1725, a quarrel fastened upon him by the Chevalier

de Rohan, who had him waylaid and beaten, caused him to send a challenge. For this he was arrested and lodged once more, in April 1726, in the Bastille. There he was detained a month; and his first act when he was released was to ask for a passport to England.

Voltaire left France, reached London in August 1726, went as guest to the house of a rich merchant at Wandsworth, and remained three years in this country, from the age of thirty-two to the age of thirty-five. He was here when George I died, and George II became king. He published here his *Henriade*. He wrote here his "History of Charles XII." He read "Gulliver's Travels" as a new book, and might have been present at the first night of *The Beggar's Opera*. He was here when Sir Isaac Newton died (1727).

In 1731 he published at Rouen the *Lettres sur les Anglais*, which appeared in England in 1733 in the volume from which they are here reprinted.

H.M.¹

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*Transcribed from the 1894 Cassell & Co. edition
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¹ The initials are those of Henry Morley, who was a 19th-century English author and educator, known for his work in *literaturem*, and as a professor of English literature at University College London. He edited Voltaire's "Letters on England," contributing to its accessibility and understanding for English-speaking audiences.

LETTERS ON ENGLAND

LETTER 1. — ON THE QUAKERS

I was of the opinion that the doctrine and history of so extraordinary a people was worthy of the attention of the curious. To acquaint myself with them, I made a visit to one of the most eminent Quakers in England, who after having traded for thirty years, had the wisdom to prescribe limits to his fortune and to his desires, and was settled in a little solitude not far from London. Having come into it, I perceived a small but regularly built house, vastly neat, but without the least pomp of furniture. The Quaker who owned it was a hale, ruddy-complexioned old man, who had never been afflicted with sickness because he had always been insensible to passions, and a perfect stranger to intemperance. I never in my life saw a more noble or a more engaging aspect than his. He was dressed like those of his persuasion, in a plain coat without pleats in the sides, or buttons on the pockets and sleeves; and had on a beaver hat, the brims of which were horizontal like those of our clergy. He did not uncover himself when I appeared, and advanced towards me without once stooping his body; but there appeared more politeness in the open, humane air of his countenance, than in the custom of drawing one leg behind the other, and taking that from the head which is made to cover it.

“Friend,” he says to me, “I perceive thou art a stranger, but if I can do anything for thee, only tell me.”² “Sir,” I said to him, bending forwards and advancing, as is usual with us, one leg towards him, “I flatter myself that my just curiosity will not give you the least offence, and that you’ll do me the honour to inform me of the particulars of your religion.” “The people of thy country,” replied the Quaker, “are too full of their bows and compliments, but I never yet met with one of them who had so much curiosity as thyself. Come in, and let us first dine together.” I still continued to make some very unseasonable ceremonies, it not being easy to disengage one’s self at once from habits we have long been used to; and after taking part in a frugal meal, which began and ended with a prayer to God, I began to question my courteous host. I opened with that which good Catholics have more than once made to Huguenots. “My dear sir,” I said, “were you ever baptised?” “I never was,” replied the Quaker, “nor any of my brethren.” “Zounds!” I say to him, “you are not Christians, then.” “Friend,” replies the old man in a soft tone of voice, “swear not; we are Christians, and endeavour to be good Christians, but we are not of the opinion that sprinkling water on a child’s head makes him a Christian.” “Heavens!” I say, shocked at his impiety, “you have then forgotten that Christ was baptised by St. John.” “Friend,” replies the mild Quaker once again, “swear not; Christ indeed was baptised by John, but He himself never baptised anyone. We are the disciples of Christ, not of John.” I pitied very much the sincerity of my worthy Quaker, and was absolutely for forcing him to get himself christened. “Were that all,” he replied very gravely, “we would submit cheerfully to baptism, purely in compliance with thy weakness, for we don’t condemn any person who uses it; but then we think that those who profess a religion of so holy, so spiritual a nature as that of Christ, ought to abstain to the utmost of their power from the Jewish ceremonies.” “O unaccountable!” I say: “what! Baptism is a Jewish ceremony?” “Yes, my friend,” he says, “so truly Jewish, that a great many Jews use the baptism of John to this

² Quakers have a tendency to use the middle-English of the King James Bible.

day. Look into ancient authors, and thou wilt find that John only revived this practice; and that it had been used by the Hebrews, long before his time, in like manner as the Mahometans imitated the Ishmaelites in their pilgrimages to Mecca. Jesus indeed submitted to the baptism of John, as He had suffered Himself to be circumcised; but circumcision and the washing with water ought to be abolished by the baptism of Christ — that baptism of the Spirit, that ablution of the soul, which is the salvation of mankind. Thus the forerunner said, ‘I indeed baptise you with water unto repentance; but He that comes after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.’ Likewise Paul, the great apostle of the Gentiles, writes as follows to the Corinthians, ‘Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the Gospel;’ and indeed Paul never baptised but two persons with water, and that was very much against his inclinations. He circumcised his disciple Timothy, and the other disciples likewise circumcised all who were willing to submit to that carnal ordinance. But art thou circumcised?” he added. “I do not have the honour to be so,” I say. “Well, friend,” continues the Quaker, “thou art a Christian without being circumcised, and I am one without being baptised.” Thus this pious man made a wrong but very specious application of four or five texts of Scripture which seemed to favour the tenets of his sect; but at the same time he forgot very sincerely a hundred texts which made directly against them. I had more sense than to contest with him, since there is no possibility of convincing an enthusiast. A man should never pretend to inform a lover of his mistress’s faults, no more than one who is at law, of the badness of his cause; nor attempt to win over a fanatic by strength of reasoning. Accordingly I waived the subject.

“Well,” I said to him, “what sort of a communion do you have?” “We have none like that which thou hintest at among us,” he replied. “How! no communion?” I said. “Only that spiritual one,” he replied, “of hearts.” He then began again to throw out his texts of Scripture; and preached a most eloquent sermon against that ordinance. He harangued in a tone as though he had been inspired to prove that the sacraments were merely of human invention, and that the word “sacrament” was not once mentioned in the Gospel. “Excuse my ignorance,” he said, “for I have not employed a hundredth part of the arguments which might be brought to prove the truth of our religion; but these thou thyself may peruse in the *Exposition of our Faith* written by Robert Barclay. It is one of the best pieces that was ever penned by man; and as our adversaries confess it to be of dangerous tendency, the arguments in it must necessarily be very convincing.” I promised to peruse this piece, and my Quaker imagined he had already made a convert of me. He afterwards gave me an account in few words of some singularities which make this sect the contempt of others. “Confess,” he said, “that it was very difficult for thee to refrain from laughter, when I answered all thy civilities without uncovering my head, and at the same time said ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ to thee. However, thou appearest to me too well read not to know that in Christ’s time no nation was so ridiculous as to put the plural number for the singular.³ Augustus Cæsar himself was spoken to in such phrases as these: ‘I love thee,’ ‘I beseech thee,’ ‘I thank thee;’ but he did not allow any person to call him ‘Domine,’ *Lord*. It was not till many ages after, that men would have the word ‘you,’ as though they were double,

³ Alluding to the royal “we” used by monarchs to refer to themselves individually; it is a verbal affectation that reflects the supposed *divine right of kings* – as if they were one with God.

instead of ‘thou’ employed in speaking to them;⁴ and usurped the flattering titles of *lordship*, of *eminence*, and of *holiness*, which mere worms bestow on other worms by assuring them that they are with a most profound respect, and an infamous falsehood, their most obedient humble servants. It is to secure ourselves more strongly from such a shameless traffic of lies and flattery, that we ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ a king with the same freedom as we do a beggar, and salute no person — we owing nothing to mankind but charity, and to the laws respect and obedience.

“Our apparel is also somewhat different from that of others, and this purely, that it may be a perpetual warning to us not to imitate them. Others wear the badges and marks of their several dignities, and we wear those of Christian humility. We fly from all assemblies of pleasure, from diversions of every kind, and from places where gaming is practised; and indeed our case would be very deplorable, if we were to fill the heart with such levities as those I have mentioned, which ought to be the habitation of God. We never swear, not even in a court of justice, being of the opinion that the most holy name of God should not be prostituted in the miserable contests between man and man. When we are obliged to appear before a magistrate upon other people’s account (for law-suits are unknown among the Friends), we give evidence to the truth by sealing it with our *yea* or *nay*; and the judges believe us on our bare affirmation, while so many other Christians forswear themselves on the holy Gospels. We never war or fight in any case; but it is not that we are afraid, for so far from shuddering at the thoughts of death, we on the contrary bless the moment which unites us with the Being of Beings; but the reason for our not using the outward sword is that we are neither wolves, tigers, nor mastiffs, but men and Christians. Our God, who has commanded us to love our enemies, and to suffer without repining, would certainly not permit us to cross the seas merely because murderers clothed in scarlet, and wearing caps two foot high, enlist citizens by a noise made with two little sticks on a stretched ass’s skin. And when, after a victory is gained, the whole city of London is illuminated — when the sky is in a blaze with fireworks, and a noise is heard in the air, of thanksgivings, of bells, of organs, and of the cannon — we groan in silence, and are deeply affected with sadness of spirit and brokenness of heart, for the sad havoc which is the occasion of those public rejoicings.”

LETTER 2. — ON THE QUAKERS

Such was the substance of the conversation I had with this very singular person; but I was greatly surprised to see him come the Sunday following and take me with him to the Quakers’ meeting. There are several of these in London, but that which he carried me to stands near the famous pillar called *The Monument*. The brethren were already assembled at my entering it with my guide. There might be about four hundred men and three hundred women in the meeting. The women hid their faces behind their fans, and the men were covered with their broad-brimmed hats. All were seated, and the silence was universal. I passed through them, but did not perceive so much as one lift up his eyes to look at me. This silence lasted a quarter of an hour, when at last one of them rose up, took off his hat, and after making a variety of wry faces and groaning in a most lamentable manner he, partly from his nose and partly from

⁴ In English, the word *you* may be singular or plural, but *thou* is always singular. In middle-English, *ye* was the plural form of *you*, but it was never used to address royalty; *you* was used instead. See the previous note.

his mouth, threw out a strange, confused jumble of words (borrowed, as he imagined, from the Gospel) which neither himself nor any of his hearers understood. When this distorter had ended his beautiful soliloquy, and that the stupid but greatly edified congregation were separated, I asked my friend how it was possible for the judicious part of their assembly to suffer such a babbling? “We are obliged,” he says, “to suffer it, because no one knows when a man rises up to hold forth, whether he will be moved by the Spirit or by folly. In this doubt and uncertainty we listen patiently to everyone; we even allow our women to hold forth. Two or three of these are often inspired at one and the same time, and it is then that a most charming noise is heard in the Lord’s house.” “You have, then, no priests?” I say to him. “No, no, friend,” replies the Quaker, “to our great happiness.” Then opening one of the Friends’ books, as he called it, he read the following words in an emphatic tone: “‘God forbid we should presume to ordain anyone to receive the Holy Spirit on the Lord’s Day to the prejudice of the rest of the brethren.’ Thanks to the Almighty, we are the only people upon earth that have no priests. Wouldst thou deprive us of so happy a distinction? Why should we abandon our babe to mercenary nurses, when we ourselves have milk enough for it? These mercenary creatures would soon domineer in our houses and destroy both the mother and the babe. God has said, ‘Freely you have received, freely give.’ Shall we, after these words, cheapen, as it were, the Gospel, sell the Holy Ghost, and make of an assembly of Christians a mere shop of traders? We don’t pay a set of men clothed in black to assist our poor, to bury our dead, or to preach to the brethren. These offices are all of too tender a nature for us ever to entrust them to others.” “But how is it possible for you,” I said, with some warmth,⁵ “to know whether your discourse is really inspired by the Almighty?” “Whoever,” he says, “implores Christ to enlighten him, and publishes the Gospel truths that he may feel inwardly, such a one may be assured that he is inspired by the Lord.” He then poured forth a numberless multitude of Scripture texts which proved, as he imagined, that there is no such thing as Christianity without an immediate revelation, and he added these remarkable words:

“When thou movest one of thy limbs, is it moved by thy own power? Certainly not; for this limb is often sensible to involuntary motions. Consequently he who created thy body gives motion to this earthly tabernacle. And are the several ideas of which thy soul receives the impression formed by thyself? Much less are they since these pour in upon thy mind whether thou wilt or not. Consequently thou receivest thy ideas from Him who created thy soul. But as He leaves thy affections at full liberty, He gives thy mind such ideas as thy affections may deserve. If thou *livest* in God, thou *actest*, thou *thinkest* in God. After this thou needst only but open thine eyes to that light which enlightens all mankind, and it is then thou wilt perceive the truth, and make others perceive it.”

“Why, this,” I said, “is Malebranche’s doctrine to a tittle.”⁶ “I am acquainted with thy Malebranche,” he said; “he had something of the Friend in him, but was not enough so.” These are the most considerable particulars I learnt concerning the doctrine of the Quakers. In my next letter I will acquaint you with their history, which you will find more singular than their opinions.

⁵ *Warmth*: here it means anger or displeasure.

⁶ Malebranche: a 17th-century French philosopher known for the theory of *occasionalism* - a theory that all events are directly caused by God, with created things having no real causal power of their own.

LETTER 3. — ON THE QUAKERS

You have already heard that the Quakers date from Christ, who according to them was the first Quaker. Religion, these say, was corrupted a little after His death, and remained in that state of corruption about sixteen hundred years. But there were always a few Quakers concealed in the world, who carefully preserved the sacred fire which was extinguished in all but themselves, until at last this light spread itself in England in 1642.

It was at the time when Great Britain was torn to pieces by the intestine wars which three or four sects had raised in the name of God, that one George Fox, born in Leicestershire, and son to a silk-weaver, took it into his head to preach; and as he pretended, with all the requisites of a true apostle — that is, without being able either to read or write. He was about twenty-five years of age, irreproachable in his life and conduct, and a holy madman. He was equipped in leather from head to foot, and travelled from one village to another, exclaiming against war and the clergy. Had his invectives been levelled only against the soldiery he would have been safe enough, but he inveighed against ecclesiastics. Fox was seized at Derby, and being carried before a justice of peace, he did not once offer to pull off his leathern hat, upon which an officer gave him a great box of the ear, and cried to him, “Don’t you know you are to appear uncovered before his worship?” Fox presented his other cheek to the officer, and begged him to give him another box for God’s sake. The justice would have had him sworn before he asked him any questions. “Know, friend,” says Fox to him, “that I never swear.” The justice, observing he “thee’d” and “thou’d” him, sent him to the House of Correction, in Derby, with orders that he should be whipped there. Fox praised the Lord all the way he went to the House of Correction, where the justice’s order was executed with the utmost severity. The men who whipped this enthusiast were greatly surprised to hear him beseech them to give him a few more lashes for the good of his soul. There was no need to entreat these people; the lashes were repeated, for which Fox thanked them very cordially, and began to preach. At first the spectators fell a-laughing; but afterwards they listened to him; and as enthusiasm is an epidemical distemper, many were persuaded; and those who scourged him became his first disciples. Being set at liberty, he ran up and down the country with a dozen proselytes at his heels, still declaiming against the clergy, and he was whipped from time to time. One day, being set in the pillory, he harangued the crowd in so strong and moving a manner, that fifty of the auditors became his converts. And he won the rest so much in his favour that, his head being freed tumultuously from the hole where it was fastened, the populace went and searched for the Church of England clergyman who had been chiefly instrumental in bringing him to this punishment, and set him on the same pillory where Fox had stood.

Fox was bold enough to convert some of Oliver Cromwell’s soldiers, who thereupon quit the service and refused to take the oaths. Oliver, having as great a contempt for a sect which would not allow its members to fight, as Sixtus Quintus ⁷ had for another sect, *Dove non si chiamava* (“where was it not called?”), began to persecute these new converts. The prisons were crowded with them; but persecution seldom has any other effect than to increase the

⁷ Pope Sixtus V, ruler of the Papal States from April 1585 to his death in August 1590. During the Counter-Reformation, he sought to restore Catholic dominance and combat heresy. His reign was marked by strict measures against those he viewed as heretics, including excommunication and other punitive actions.

number of proselytes. These came, therefore, from their confinement more strongly confirmed in the principles they had imbibed, and followed by their jailers whom they had brought over to their belief. But the circumstances which contributed chiefly to the spreading of this sect were as follows: Fox thought himself inspired, and consequently he was of the opinion that he must speak in a manner different from the rest of mankind. He thereupon began to writhe his body, to screw up his face, to hold in his breath, and to exhale it in a forcible manner, insomuch that the priestess of the Pythian god at Delphos could not have acted her part to better advantage. Inspiration soon became so habitual to him, that he could scarcely deliver himself in any other manner. This was the first gift he communicated to his disciples. These aped very sincerely their master's several grimaces, and shook in every limb the instant the fit of inspiration came upon them, from which they were called *Quakers*. The vulgar (*i.e.*, commoners) attempted to mimic them: they trembled, they spoke through the nose, they quaked and fancied themselves inspired by the Holy Ghost. The only thing now wanting was a few miracles, and accordingly they wrought some.

Fox, this modern patriarch, spoke thus to a justice of peace before a large assembly of people: "Friend, take care what thou dost; God will soon punish thee for persecuting His saints." This magistrate, being one who besotted himself every day with bad beer and brandy, died of an apoplexy two days after, the moment he had signed a *mittimus* for imprisoning some Quakers. The sudden death with which this justice was seized was not ascribed to his intemperance, but was universally looked upon as the effect of the holy man's predictions. So that this accident made more converts to Quakerism than a thousand sermons and as many shaking fits could have done. Oliver Cromwell, finding them increase daily, was desirous to bring them over to his party. And for that purpose, he attempted to bribe them with money. However, they were incorruptible, which one day made him declare that this religion was the only one he had ever met with that had resisted the charms of gold.

The Quakers were persecuted several times under Charles II — not upon a religious account, but for refusing to pay the tithes, for "thee-ing" and "thou-ing" the magistrates, and for refusing to take the oaths enacted by the laws.

At last Robert Barclay, a native of Scotland, presented to the King in 1675, his "Apology for the Quakers," a work as well drawn up as the subject could possibly admit. The dedication to Charles II is not filled with mean, flattering encomiums, but abounds with bold touches in favour of truth and with the wisest counsels. He says to the King at the close of his epistle's dedicatory:

"Thou hast tasted of prosperity and adversity; thou knowest what it is to be banished from thy native country; to be overruled as well as to rule, and sit upon the throne; and being oppressed, thou hast reason to know how hateful the Oppressor is both to God and man. If, after all these warnings and advertisements, thou dost not turn to the Lord with all thy heart, but forget Him who remembered thee in thy distress, and give thyself to follow lust and vanity, surely great will be thy condemnation.

"Against this snare, as well as the temptation of those who may or do feed thee and prompt thee to evil, the most excellent and prevalent remedy will be to apply thyself to that light of Christ which shineth in thy conscience, which neither can nor will flatter thee, nor suffer thee to be at

ease in thy sins, but doth and will deal plainly and faithfully with thee, as those who are followers thereof have plainly done. — Thy faithful friend and subject, Robert Barclay.”

A more surprising circumstance is that this epistle, written by a private man of no figure, was so happy in its effects, as to put a stop to the persecution.

LETTER 4. — ON THE QUAKERS

About this time arose the illustrious William Penn, who established the power of the Quakers in America. He would have made them appear venerable in the eyes of the Europeans, were it possible for mankind to respect virtue when revealed in a ridiculous light. He was the only son of Vice-Admiral Penn, favourite of the Duke of York, afterwards King James II.

William Penn, at twenty years of age, happening to meet with a Quaker in Cork, whom he had known at Oxford, this man made a proselyte of him. And William being a sprightly youth, and naturally eloquent, having a winning aspect, and a very engaging carriage, he soon gained over some of his intimates. He carried matters so far, that he formed by insensible degrees, a society of young Quakers, who met at his house; so that he was at the head of a sect when a little above twenty.

After leaving Cork, having returned to the Vice-Admiral his father, instead of falling upon his knees to ask his blessing, he went up to him with his hat on, and said, “Friend, I am very glad to see thee in good health.” The Vice-Admiral imagined his son to be crazy, but soon finding that he was turned Quaker, he employed all the methods that prudence could suggest to engage him to behave and act like other people. The youth made no other answer to his father, than by exhorting him to turn Quaker also. At last his father confined himself to this single request, viz., “that he should wait upon the King and the Duke of York with his hat under his arm, and should not ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ them.” William answered that, “he could not do these things, for conscience’ sake.” This exasperated his father to such a degree, that he turned him out of doors. Young Penn gave God thanks for permitting him to suffer so early in His cause, after which he went into the city, where he held forth, and made a great number of converts.

The Church of England clergy found their congregations dwindle away daily; and Penn being young, handsome, and of a graceful stature, the court as well as the city ladies flocked very devoutly to his meeting. The patriarch, George Fox, hearing of his great reputation, came to London (though the journey was very long) purely to see and converse with him. Both resolved to go upon missions into foreign countries, and accordingly they embarked for Holland, after having left labourers sufficient to take care of the London vineyard.

Their labours were crowned with success in Amsterdam, but a circumstance which reflected the greatest honour on them, and at the same time put their humility to the greatest trial, was the reception they met with from Elizabeth, the Princess Palatine, aunt to George I of Great Britain, a lady conspicuous for her genius and knowledge, and to whom Descartes ⁸ had dedicated his Philosophical Romance (*Principles of Philosophy*).

⁸ René Descartes (1596-1650) was a French polymath — the father of modern philosophy, including metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and the philosophy of science (“I think, therefore I am”); also theology; mathematics; cosmology and meteorology; physiology; and medicine.

She was then retired to the Hague, where she received these Friends, for so the Quakers were called at that time in Holland. This princess had several conferences with them in her palace, and she at last entertained so favourable an opinion of Quakerism, that they confessed she was not far from the kingdom of heaven. The Friends likewise sowed the good seed in Germany, but reaped very little fruit; for the mode of “thee-ing” and “thou-ing” was not approved of in a country where a man is perpetually obliged to employ the titles of “highness” and “excellency.” William Penn soon returned to England upon hearing of his father’s sickness, in order to see him before he died. The Vice-Admiral was reconciled to his son, and though of a different persuasion, embraced him tenderly. William made a fruitless exhortation to his father not to receive the sacrament, but to die a Quaker, and the good old man entreated his son William to wear buttons on his sleeves, and a crape hatband in his beaver, but all to no purpose.

William Penn inherited very large possessions, part of which consisted in Crown debts due to the Vice-Admiral for sums he had advanced for the sea service. No moneys were at that time more insecure than those owing from the king. Penn was obliged to go more than once, and “thee” and “thou” King Charles and his Ministers, in order to recover the debt; and at last, instead of specie (coin), the Government invested him with the right and sovereignty of a province of America, with Maryland to the south.⁹ Thus a Quaker was raised to sovereign power. Penn set sail for his new dominions with two ships freighted with Quakers, who followed his fortune. The country was then called Pennsylvania from William Penn, who there founded Philadelphia, now the most flourishing city in that country. The first step he took was to enter into an alliance with his American neighbours. This is the only treaty between those people and the Christians, that was not ratified by an oath, and was never infringed. The new sovereign was at the same time the legislator of Pennsylvania, and enacted very wise and prudent laws, none of which have ever been changed since his time. The first is to injure no person upon a religious account, and to consider as brethren all those who believe in one God.

He had no sooner settled his government, than several American merchants came and peopled this colony. The natives of the country, instead of fleeing into the woods, cultivated by insensible degrees a friendship with the peaceable Quakers. They loved these foreigners as much as they detested the other Christians who had conquered and laid waste America. In a little time a great number of these savages (falsely so called), charmed with the mild and gentle disposition of their neighbours, came in crowds to William Penn, and besought him to admit them into the number of his vassals. It was very rare and uncommon for a sovereign to be “thee’d” and “thou’d” by the meanest of his subjects, who never took their hats off when they came into his presence. And it was just as singular for a Government to be without one priest in it, and for a people to be without arms, either offensive or defensive; for a body of citizens to be absolutely undistinguished but by the public employments; and for neighbours not to entertain the least jealousy one against the other.

William Penn might glory in having brought down upon earth the so much boasted golden age, which in all probability never existed but in Pennsylvania. He returned to England to

⁹ Originally “to the south of Maryland.”

settle some affairs relating to his new dominions. After the death of King Charles II, King James, who had loved the father, indulged the same affection for the son, and no longer considered him as an obscure sectary, but as a very great man. The king's politics on this occasion agreed with his inclinations. He was desirous to please the Quakers by annulling the laws made against Nonconformists, in order to have an opportunity, by this universal toleration, to establish the Romish religion. All the sectarists in England saw the snare that was laid for them, but did not give into it; they never failed to unite when the Romish religion, their common enemy, was to be opposed. But Penn did not think himself bound in any manner to renounce his principles, merely to favour Protestants to whom he was odious, in opposition to a king who loved him. He had established a universal toleration with regard to conscience in America, and would not have it thought that he intended to destroy it in Europe. For this reason he adhered so inviolably to King James, that a report prevailed universally of his being a Jesuit. This calumny affected him very strongly, and he was obliged to justify himself in print. However, the unfortunate King James II, in whom grandeur and weakness were equally blended, as in most princes of the Stuart family, and who, like them, as much overdid some things as he was short in others, lost his kingdom in a manner that is hardly to be accounted for.

All the English sectarists accepted from William III and his Parliament the toleration and indulgence which they had refused when offered by King James. It was then that the Quakers began to enjoy, by virtue of the laws, the several privileges they possess at this time. Penn having at last seen Quakerism firmly established in his native country, went back to Pennsylvania. His own people and the Americans received him with tears of joy, as though he had been a father who had returned to visit his children. All the laws had been religiously observed in his absence, a circumstance in which no legislator but himself had ever been happy. After having resided some years in Pennsylvania he left it, but with great reluctance, in order to return to England, there to solicit some matters in favour of the commerce of Pennsylvania. But he never saw it again, he dying in Ruscombe, in Berkshire, in 1718.

I am not able to guess what fate Quakerism may have in America, but I perceive it dwindles away daily in England. In all countries where liberty of conscience is allowed, the established religion will at last swallow up all the rest. Quakers are disqualified from being members of Parliament. Nor can they enjoy any post or preferment, because an oath must always be taken on these occasions, and they never swear. They are therefore reduced to the necessity of subsisting upon commerce. Their children, whom the industry of their parents has enriched, are desirous to enjoy honours, to wear buttons and ruffles, and are quite ashamed of being called Quakers. They become converts to the Church of England, merely to be in the fashion.

LETTER 5. — ON THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

England is properly the country of sectarists. *Multae sunt mansiones in domo patris mei* (in my Father's house are many mansions). An Englishman, as one to whom liberty is natural, may go to heaven his own way.

Nevertheless, though everyone is permitted to serve God in whatever mode or fashion he thinks proper, yet their true religion, that in which a man makes his fortune, is the sect of Episcopalians or Churchmen, called the Church of England, or simply the Church, by way of

eminence. No person can possess an employment either in England or Ireland unless he is ranked among the faithful, that is, professes himself a member of the Church of England. This reason (which carries mathematical evidence with it) has converted such numbers of Dissenters of all persuasions, that not a twentieth part of the nation is out of the pale of the Established Church. The English clergy have retained a great number of the Romish ceremonies, and especially that of receiving (with a most scrupulous attention) their tithes. They also have the pious ambition to aim at superiority.

Moreover, they very religiously inspire their flock with a holy zeal against Dissenters of all denominations. This zeal was pretty violent under the Tories in the four last years of Queen Anne; but was productive of no greater mischief than breaking the windows of some meeting-houses and demolishing a few of them. For religious rage ceased in England with the civil wars,¹⁰ and under Queen Anne (1702-1714) was no more than the hollow noise of a sea whose billows still heaved, though so long after the storm when the Whigs and Tories laid waste their native country, in the same manner as the Guelphs and Ghibelins formerly did theirs.¹¹ It was absolutely necessary for both parties to call in religion on this occasion; the Tories declared for Episcopacy, and the Whigs, as some imagined, were for abolishing it. However, after the Whigs had gotten the upper hand, they contented themselves with only abridging it.

At the time when the Earl of Oxford¹² and Lord Bolingbroke¹³ used to drink to the health of the Tories, the Church of England considered those noblemen as the defenders of its holy privileges. The lower House of Convocation (a kind of House of Commons) composed wholly of the clergy, was in some credit at that time. At least the members of it had the liberty to meet, to dispute on ecclesiastical matters, and to sentence impious books to the flames from time to time — that is, books written against themselves. The Ministry which is now composed of Whigs does not so much as allow those gentlemen to assemble, so that they are at this time reduced (in the obscurity of their respective parishes) to the melancholy occupation of praying for the prosperity of the Government, whose tranquillity they would willingly disturb. With regard to the bishops, who are twenty-six in all, they still have seats in the House of Lords in spite of the Whigs, because the ancient abuse of considering them as barons subsists to this day. There is a clause, however, in the oath which the Government requires from these gentlemen, that puts their Christian patience to a very great trial, viz., that they shall be of the Church of England as established by law. There are few bishops, deans, or other dignitaries, who do not imagine they are so *jure divino* (by divine right). It is consequently a great mortification to them to be obliged to confess that they owe their dignity to a pitiful law

¹⁰ The English civil wars were a series of conflicts fought between 1642 and 1651, primarily between supporters of King Charles I (Royalists) and those loyal to Parliament (Parliamentarians). These wars were part of a broader struggle involving England, Scotland, and Ireland, known as the Wars of the Three Kingdoms.

¹¹ The Guelphs and Ghibellines were opposing political factions in the Middle Ages in Italian (and also German) politics, with Guelphs supporting the pope, and Ghibellines supporting the Holy Roman emperor. Their rivalry was especially important in northern and central Italian city-states during the 12th and 13th centuries. It arose with the Investiture Controversy (the papal investiture of kings), which began in 1075 and ended with the Concordat of Worms in 1122.

¹² Edward de Vere, 17th earl of Oxford (1550-1604) – English lyric poet and theatre patron, alleged to have written the plays of Shakespeare if William Shakespeare was indeed only a pen name.

¹³ Henry St. John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke (1678-1751) – British politician and philosopher who served as Secretary of State for the Northern Department, and Secretary of State for the Southern Department, during Queen Anne's reign.

enacted by a set of profane laymen. A learned monk (Father Courayer) wrote a book lately to prove the validity and succession of English ordinations. This book was forbidden in France, but do you believe that the English Ministry were pleased with it? Far from it. Those wicked Whigs don't care a straw whether the episcopal succession among them has been interrupted or not, or whether Bishop Parker was consecrated (as it is pretended) in a tavern or a church.¹⁴ For these Whigs are much better pleased that the Bishops should derive their authority from the Parliament than from the Apostles. The Lord Bolingbroke observed that this notion of divine right would only make so many *tyrants* in lawn sleeves,¹⁵ but that the laws made so many *citizens*.

With regard to the morals of the English clergy, they are more regular than those of France, and for this reason. All the clergy (a very few excepted) are educated in the Universities of Oxford or Cambridge, far from the depravity and corruption which reign in the capital. They are not called to dignities till very late, at a time of life when men are sensible of no other passion but avarice, that is, when their ambition craves a supply. Employments are here bestowed both in the Church and the army, as a reward for long services. And we never see youngsters made bishops or colonels immediately upon their laying aside the academic gown; and besides this, most of the clergy are married. The stiff and awkward air contracted by them at the University, and the little familiarity the men of this country have with the ladies, commonly oblige a bishop to confine himself to, and rest contented with, his own. Clergymen sometimes take a glass at the tavern, custom giving them a sanction on this occasion. And if they befuddle themselves, it is in a very serious manner, and without giving the least scandal.

That fable-mixed kind of mortal (not to be defined), who is neither of the clergy nor of the laity — in a word, the thing called *Abbe* in France — is a species quite unknown in England. All the clergy here are very much upon the reserve, and most of them pedants. When these are told that in France young fellows who are famous for their dissoluteness, and raised to the highest dignities of the Church by female intrigues — who address the fair ladies publicly in an amorous way, or amuse themselves in writing tender love songs, or entertain their friends very splendidly every night at their own houses, and after the banquet is ended withdraw to invoke the assistance of the Holy Ghost, and boldly call themselves the successors of the Apostles — they bless God for their being Protestants. But these are shameless heretics, who deserve to be blown away through the flames to old Nick (the devil), as Rabelais says, and for this reason I do not trouble myself about them.¹⁶

¹⁴ The Nag's Head Fable was a fiction which purported that Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury under Elizabeth I, was consecrated with a Bible pressed to his neck in the Nag's Head tavern in Cheapside. The story surfaced more than 40 years after Parker's consecration and was spread by some Roman Catholics as fact until the dawn of the 20th century.

¹⁵ "Tyrants in lawn sleeves" refers to individuals who exercise authority or power in a cruel or oppressive manner while appearing genteel or refined, often used to describe hypocritical figures in positions of authority.

¹⁶ François Rabelais (1494–1553) wrote *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a satirical epic which explores themes of folly, excess, and human weakness, through bawdy humor and allegory. He was critical of scholasticism, monasticism, and abuses by popes and princes. The Reformation had given permission to hold both church and state accountable.

LETTER 6. — ON THE PRESBYTERIANS

The Church of England is confined almost to the kingdom from which it received its name, and to Ireland; for Presbyterianism is the established religion in Scotland. This Presbyterianism is directly the same with Calvinism, as it was established in France, and is now professed at Geneva. As the priests of this sect receive but very inconsiderable stipends from their churches, and consequently cannot emulate the splendid luxury of bishops, they exclaim very naturally against honours which they can never attain to. Figure to yourself the haughty Diogenes trampling under foot the pride of Plato.¹⁷ The Scotch Presbyterians are not very unlike that proud though tattered reasoner. Diogenes did not use Alexander half so impertinently as these treated King Charles II.¹⁸ For when they took up arms in his cause in opposition to Oliver Cromwell, who had deceived them, they forced that poor monarch to undergo hearing three or four sermons every day, would not allow him to play, reduced him to a state of penitence and mortification, so that Charles soon grew sick of these pedants, and accordingly he eloped from them with as much joy as a youth does from school.

A Church of England minister appears as another Cato¹⁹ in presence — of a juvenile, sprightly French graduate, who bawls for a whole morning in the divinity schools, and hums a song in chorus with ladies in the evening; but this Cato is a veritable spark when he is before a Scotch Presbyterian. The latter affects a serious gait, puts on a sour look, wears a vastly broad-brimmed hat and a long cloak over a very short coat, preaches through the nose, and gives the name of the *whore of Babylon*^{Rev 17} to all churches where the ministers are so fortunate as to enjoy an annual revenue of five or six thousand pounds, and where the people are weak enough to suffer this, and to give them the titles of *my lord*, *your lordship*, or *your eminence*.

These gentlemen, who also have some churches in England, introduced there the mode of grave and severe exhortations. To them is owing the sanctification of Sunday in the three kingdoms. People are there forbidden to work or take any recreation on that day, in which the severity is twice as great as that of the Romish Church. No operas, plays, or concerts are allowed in London on Sundays, and even cards are so expressly forbidden that none but persons of quality, and those we call the *genteel*, play on that day; the rest of the nation either go to church, to the tavern, or to see their mistresses.

¹⁷ Diogenes and Plato often clashed in their philosophical views, with Diogenes representing a pragmatic, ascetic lifestyle and critiquing societal norms, while Plato focused on ideal forms and structured society.

¹⁸ The meeting of Diogenes of Sinope and Alexander the Great is a famous anecdote from Greek philosophical history, said to have happened in Corinth. In the story, when Alexander asked what Diogenes wanted, Diogenes replied, “Stand out of my sun” (or similar wording), showing his disregard for authority and wealth.

¹⁹ Cato the Elder (234-149 BC) was a statesman and Latin prose writer known for his conservative values and opposition to Greek influences. Cato the Younger (95-46 BC), was a senator and Stoic philosopher who fiercely defended the Roman Republic against the rise of Julius Caesar. Both are noted for their commitment to traditional Roman morals and governance. Hence Voltaire describes Scotch Presbyterians as Cato-like.

Though the Episcopal and Presbyterian sects are the two prevailing ones in Great Britain, yet all others are very welcome to come and settle in it, and live very sociably together, though most of their preachers hate one another almost as cordially as a Jansenist damns a Jesuit.²⁰

Take a view of the Royal Exchange in London, a place more venerable than many courts of justice, where the representatives of all nations meet for the benefit of mankind.²¹ There the Jew, the Mahometan, and the Christian transact together, as though they all professed the same religion, and give the name of *infidel* to none but bankrupts. There the Presbyterian confides in the Anabaptist, and the Churchman depends on the Quaker's word. If only one religion were allowed in England, the Government would very possibly become arbitrary; if there were but two, the people would cut one another's throats; but as there are such a multitude of religions, they all live happily and in peace.

LETTER 7. — ON THE SOCINIANS, OR ARIANS, OR ANTI-TRINITARIANS

There is a little sect here composed of clergymen, and of a few very learned persons among the laity, who though they do not call themselves Arians or Socinians, yet dissent entirely from St. Athanasius with regard to their notions of the Trinity, and declare very frankly that the Father is greater than the Son.

Do you remember what is related of a certain orthodox bishop who, in order to convince an emperor of the reality of consubstantiation, put his hand under the chin of the monarch's son, and took him by the nose in the presence of his sacred majesty? The emperor was going to order his attendants to throw the bishop out of the window, when the good old man gave him this handsome and convincing reason: "Since your majesty," he says, "is angry when your son does not have due respect shown him, what punishment do you think God the Father will inflict on those who refuse His Son Jesus the titles due to Him?" The persons I just now mentioned declare that the holy bishop took a very wrong step, that his argument was inconclusive, and that the emperor should have answered him thus: "Know that there are two ways by which men may be wanting in respect to me — first, in not doing sufficient honour to my son; and secondly, in paying him the same honour as to me."

Be this as it will, the principles of Arius ²² begin to revive, not only in England, but in Holland and Poland. The celebrated Sir Isaac Newton ²³ honoured this opinion so far as to countenance it. This philosopher thought that the Unitarians argued more mathematically

²⁰ Jansenists and Jesuits were two opposing factions within the Catholic Church during the 17th and 18th centuries. Jansenists emphasized the necessity of divine grace and the limited role of human free will in salvation, while Jesuits advocated for a more optimistic view of free will and human cooperation with grace.

²¹ The Royal Exchange opened in 1571 as a trading center for merchants and brokers.

²² Arius: 4th-c. Christian who taught that Jesus Christ was a created being and not co-eternal with God the Father.

²³ Sir Isaac Newton (1643–1727) – English polymath who helped lead the Scientific Revolution. He was a physicist and mathematician who developed the laws of motion and gravitational attraction, as well as modern optics.

than we do. But the most sanguine stickler for Arianism is the illustrious Dr. Clark.²⁴ This man is rigidly virtuous, and of a mild disposition. He is more fond of his tenets than desirous of propagating them, and is absorbed so entirely in problems and calculations, that he is a mere reasoning machine.

It is he who wrote a book which is much esteemed and little understood, on the existence of God, and another more intelligible, but pretty much contemned, on the truth of the Christian religion.

He never engaged in scholastic disputes, which our friend calls venerable trifles. He only published a work containing all the testimonies of the primitive ages for and against the Unitarians, and leaves to the reader the counting of the voices and the liberty of forming a judgment. This book won the doctor a great number of partisans, and lost him the See of Canterbury; but in my humble opinion, he was out in his calculation, and would better have been Primate of all England than merely an Arian parson.

You see that opinions, as well as empires, are subject to revolutions. Arianism, after having triumphed during three centuries, and been forgotten for twelve, at last rises out of its own ashes. But it has chosen a very improper season to make its appearance in, the present age being quite cloyed with disputes and sects. The members of this sect are, besides too few to be indulged the liberty of holding public assemblies which, however, they will doubtless be permitted to do in case they spread considerably. But people are now so very cold with respect to all things of this kind, that there is little probability any new religion, or old one that may be revived, will meet with favour. Is it not whimsical enough that Luther, Calvin, and Zuinglius (Zwingli), all of them wretched authors, should have founded sects which are now spread over a great part of Europe; that Mahomet, though so ignorant, should have given a religion to Asia and Africa; and that Sir Isaac Newton, Dr. Clark, Mr. Locke, Mr. Le Clerc,²⁵ etc., the greatest philosophers as well as the ablest writers of their ages, should scarcely have been able to raise a little flock, which even decreases daily.

This is what it is to be born at a proper period of time. Were Cardinal de Retz ²⁶ to return again into the world, neither his eloquence nor his intrigues would draw together ten women in Paris. If Oliver Cromwell, who beheaded his sovereign ²⁷ and seized upon the kingly dignity, were to rise from the dead, he would be a wealthy City trader, and no more.

²⁴ Dr. Samuel Clarke (1675-1725) – English unitarian and mathematician, known for his work in metaphysics and his defense of Newtonian physics. He became a prominent figure in 18th-century English theology and philosophy, delivering influential lectures on the existence of God and natural religion.

²⁵ Jean Le Clerc (1657-1736) - Genevan theologian, biblical scholar, and journalist. He was famous for promoting exegesis, or critical interpretation of the Bible. He parted with Calvinism over his interpretations and left Geneva for that reason. He was a propagator of John Locke's philosophy and of Isaac Newton's physics.

²⁶ Jean-François-Paul de Gondî, or cardinal de Retz (1648-53), was one of the leaders of the aristocratic rebellion known as the Fronde, whose memoirs remain a classic of 17th-century French literature. While still a student, he sympathized with the opposition to the infamous Cardinal de Richelieu, who sought to weaken the power of the nobility.

²⁷ Oliver Cromwell was one of the 59 commissioners who signed Charles' death warrant.

LETTER 8. — ON THE PARLIAMENT

The members of the English Parliament are fond of comparing themselves to the old Romans. Not long ago Mr. Shippen ²⁸ opened a speech in the House of Commons with these words, “The majesty of the people of England would be wounded.” The singularity of the expression occasioned a loud laugh; but this gentleman, so far from being disconcerted, repeated the same words with a resolute tone of voice, and the laughter ceased. In my opinion, the majesty of the people of England has nothing in common with that of the people of Rome; much less is there any affinity between their Governments. There is in London a senate, some of the members of which are accused (doubtless very unjustly) of selling their voices on certain occasions, as was done in Rome; this is the only resemblance. Besides, the two nations appear to me quite opposite in character with regard both to good and evil. The Romans never knew the dreadful folly of religious wars, an abomination reserved for devout preachers of patience and humility. Marius and Sylla, Caesar and Pompey, Anthony and Augustus, did not draw their swords and set the world in a blaze merely to determine whether the flamen ²⁹ should wear his shirt over his robe, or his robe over his shirt, or whether the sacred chickens should eat and drink, or eat only, in order to take the augury.³⁰ The English have hanged one another by law, and cut one another to pieces in pitched battles, for quarrels of just as trifling a nature. The sects of the Episcopalians and Presbyterians quite distracted these very serious heads for a time. But I fancy they will hardly ever be so silly again, seeming to have grown wiser at their own expense. And I do not perceive the least inclination in them to murder one another merely about syllogisms, as some zealots among them once did.

But here follows a more essential difference between Rome and England, which gives the advantage entirely to the latter — viz., that the civil wars of Rome ended in slavery, and those of the English in liberty. The English are the only people upon earth who have been able to prescribe limits to the power of kings by resisting them; and who, by a series of struggles, have at last established that wise Government where the Prince is all-powerful to do good, and at the same time is restrained from committing evil; where the nobles are great without insolence, even if there are no vassals; and where the people share in the Government without confusion.

The House of Lords and that of the Commons, divide the legislative power under the king, but the Romans had no such balance. The patricians and plebeians in Rome were perpetually at variance, and there was no intermediate power to reconcile them. The Roman senate, who were so unjustly, so criminally proud as not to suffer the plebeians to share with them in anything, could find no other artifice to keep the latter out of the administration than by employing them in foreign wars. They considered the plebeians as a wild beast, whom it behoved them to let loose upon their neighbours for fear they might devour their masters. Thus the greatest defect in the Government of the Romans raised them to be conquerors. By

²⁸ William Shippen was an English Jacobite and Tory politician who served in the House of Commons from 1707 to 1743. He strongly supported the Stuart cause. The Stuarts ruled England from 1603 to 1714; Queen Anne was the last Stuart monarch. This period included the union of England and Scotland, and the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

²⁹ *Flamen*: a priest who served a particular deity in ancient Rome.

³⁰ *Augury*: a divination based on the appearance and behaviour of animals.

being unhappy at home, they triumphed over and possessed themselves of the world, till at last their divisions sunk them to slavery.

The Government of England will never rise to so exalted a pitch of glory, nor will its end be so fatal. The English are not fired with the splendid folly of making conquests, but would only prevent their neighbours from conquering. They are not only jealous of their own liberty, but even of that of other nations. The English were exasperated against Louis XIV, for no other reason than because he was ambitious; and they declared war against him merely out of levity, not from any interested motives.

The English have doubtless purchased their liberties at a very high price, and waded through seas of blood to drown the idol of arbitrary power. Other nations have been involved in as great calamities, and have shed as much blood; but then the blood they spilt in defence of their liberties only enslaved them more.

That which rises to a revolution in England is no more than a sedition in other countries. A city in Spain, in Barbary, or in Turkey, takes up arms in defence of its privileges, when immediately it is stormed by mercenary troops; it is punished by executioners; and the rest of the nation kiss the chains they are loaded with. The French are of the opinion that the government of this island is more tempestuous than the sea which surrounds it, which indeed is true. But then it is never so but when the king raises the storm — when he attempts to seize the ship of which he is only the chief pilot. The civil wars of France lasted longer, were more cruel, and productive of greater evils than those of England. But none of these civil wars had a wise and prudent liberty for their object.

In the detestable reigns of Charles IX and Henry III, the whole affair was only whether the people should be slaves to the Guises.³¹ With regard to the last war of Paris, it deserves only to be hooted at. I think I see a crowd of schoolboys rising up in arms against their master, and afterwards whipped for it. Cardinal de Retz, who was witty and brave (but to no purpose), rebellious without a cause, factious without design, and head of a defenceless party, caballed for caballing's sake, and seemed to foment the civil war merely out of diversion. The Parliament did not know what he intended, nor what he did not intend. He levied troops by an Act of Parliament, and the next moment he cashiered them. He threatened, he begged pardon; he set a price upon Cardinal Mazarin's head,³² and afterwards congratulated him in a public manner. Our civil wars under Charles VI were bloody and cruel; those of the League were execrable; and that of the Frondeurs was ridiculous.

That for which the French chiefly reproach the English nation is the murder of King Charles I, whom his subjects treated exactly as he would have treated them had his reign been prosperous. After all, consider on one side Charles I, defeated in a pitched battle, imprisoned, tried, sentenced to die in Westminster Hall, and then beheaded. And on the other, consider the Emperor Henry VII, poisoned by his chaplain at his receiving the Sacrament; Henry III

³¹ The Guises were a prominent French noble family, whose influence and political intrigues during the French Wars of Religion between Catholics and Protestants (Huguenots) led to the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572.

³² Cardinal Mazarin, was an Italian cardinal and statesman who served as the chief minister of France from 1642 until his death in 1661. He played a crucial role in the early reign of King Louis XIV. His diplomatic achievements included the Peace of Westphalia and the Treaty of the Pyrenees, which helped establish France's power in Europe.

stabbed by a monk; thirty assassinations projected against Henry IV, several of them put into execution, the last one bereaving that great monarch of his life. Weigh, I say, all these wicked attempts, and then judge.

LETTER 9. — ON THE GOVERNMENT

That mixture in the English Government, that harmony between King, Lords, and commons, did not always subsist. England was enslaved for a long series of years by the Romans, the Saxons, the Danes, and the French successively. William the Conqueror particularly ruled them with a rod of iron. He disposed as absolutely of the lives and fortunes of his conquered subjects as an eastern monarch; and he forbade the English, upon pain of death, either fire or candle in their houses after eight o'clock; whether this was to prevent their nocturnal meetings, or only to test by an odd and whimsical prohibition, how far it was possible for one man to extend his power over his fellow-creatures. It is true, indeed, that the English had Parliaments before and after William the Conqueror, and they boast of them, as though these assemblies, then called *Parliaments*, composed of ecclesiastical tyrants and of plunderers entitled *barons*, had been the guardians of the public liberty and happiness.

The barbarians who came from the shores of the Baltic, and settled in the rest of Europe, brought with them the form of government called States or Parliaments, about which so much noise is made, and which are so little understood. Kings, indeed, were not absolute in those days; but then the people were more wretched upon that very account, and more completely enslaved. The chiefs of these savages who had laid waste France, Italy, Spain, and England, made themselves monarchs. Their generals divided among themselves the several countries they had conquered, from which sprung those margraves, those peers, those barons, those petty tyrants, who often contested with their sovereigns for the spoils of whole nations. These were birds of prey fighting with an eagle for doves, whose blood the victorious was to suck. Every nation, instead of being governed by one master, was trampled upon by a hundred tyrants. The priests soon played a part among them. Before this it had been the fate of the Gauls, the Germans, and the Britons, to always be governed by their Druids and the chiefs of their villages — an ancient kind of barons, not so tyrannical as their successors. These Druids pretended to be mediators between God and man. They enacted laws, they fulminated their excommunications, and sentenced to death. The bishops succeeded, by insensible degrees, to their temporal authority in the Goth and Vandal governments. The popes set themselves at their head; and armed with their briefs, their bulls, and reinforced by monks, they made even kings tremble, deposed and assassinated them at pleasure, and employed every artifice to draw into their own purses moneys from all parts of Europe. The weak Ina, one of the tyrants of the Saxon Heptarchy in England, was the first monarch who submitted, in his pilgrimage to Rome, to pay St. Peter's penny³³ (very nearly equivalent to a French crown) for every house in his dominions. The whole island soon followed his example; England became insensibly one of the Pope's provinces; and the Holy Father used to send his legates there from time to time to levy exorbitant taxes. At last, by a public instrument, King John delivered up the kingdom of England to the Pope, who had excommunicated him. But the barons, not finding

³³ St. Peter's Pence was a regular donation (tax) made to the pope for each household in the land; it began in the 7th century with the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. A French Crown in 1725 was worth approximately 4.5 Euros.

their account in this resignation, dethroned the wretched King John and seated Louis in his place; he was father to St. Louis, King of France. However, they were soon weary of their new monarch, and accordingly obliged him to return to France.

While the barons, the bishops, and the popes, all laid waste England, where all were for ruling the most numerous, the most useful, even the most virtuous, and consequently the most venerable part of mankind — which consisted of those who study the laws and the sciences, of traders, of craftsmen, in a word, of all who were not tyrants — that is, of those who are called *the people*. These, I say, were looked upon by them as so many animals beneath the dignity of the human species. The Commons in those ages were far from sharing in the government, being villains or peasants, whose labour, whose blood, were the property of their masters who entitled themselves *the nobility*. The major part of men in Europe were at that time what they are to this day in several parts of the world — they were villains or bondsmen of lords — that is, they were a kind of cattle bought and sold with the land. Many ages passed by before justice could be done to human nature — before mankind were conscious that it was abominable for many to sow, and only a few to reap. And was not France very happy when the power and authority of those petty robbers was abolished by the lawful authority of kings and of the people?

Happily, in the violent shocks which the divisions between kings and the nobles gave to empires, the chains of nations were more or less heavy. Liberty in England sprang from the quarrels of tyrants. The barons forced King John and King Henry III to grant the famous Magna Charta, the chief design of which was indeed to make kings dependent on the Lords. But then the rest of the nation were a little favoured in it, so that they might join on proper occasions with their pretended masters. This great Charter, which is considered as the sacred origin of the English liberties, shows in itself how little liberty was known.

The title alone proves that the king thought he had a just right to be absolute; and that the barons, and even the clergy, forced him to give up the pretended right, for no other reason than because they were the most powerful.

Magna Charta begins in this style: “We grant, of our own free will, the following privileges to the archbishops, bishops, priors, and barons of our kingdom,” etc.

The House of Commons is not once mentioned in the articles of this Charter — a proof that it did not yet exist, or that it existed without power. Mention is made therein, by name, of the *freemen of England* — a melancholy proof that some of them were not so. It appears, by Article XXXII, that these pretended freemen owed service to their lords. Such a liberty as this was not many removes from slavery.

By Article XXI, the king ordains that his officers shall not henceforward seize upon, unless they pay for them, the horses and carts of freemen. The people considered this ordinance as a real liberty, though it was a greater tyranny. Henry VII, that happy usurper and great politician who pretended to love the barons, though in reality he hated and feared them, got their lands alienated. By this means the villains, afterwards acquiring riches by their industry, purchased the estates and country seats of the illustrious peers who had ruined themselves by their folly and extravagance, and all the lands got by insensible degrees into other hands.

The power of the House of Commons increased every day. The families of the ancient peers were at last extinct; and as peers are properly noble only in England, there would be no such thing in strictness of law as nobility in that island, had not the kings created new barons from time to time, and preserved the body of peers (once a terror to them) to oppose them to the Commons, who had since become so formidable.

All these new peers who compose the Higher House receive nothing but their titles from the king, and very few of them have estates in those places from where they take their titles. One shall be Duke of D____, though he does not have a foot of land in Dorsetshire; and another is Earl of a village, though he scarcely knows where it is situated. The peers have power, but it is only in the Parliament House.

There is no such thing here as *haute, moyenne, and basse justice* — that is, a power to judge in all matters civil and criminal; nor a right or privilege to hunt in the grounds of a citizen who at the same time is not permitted to fire a gun in his own field.

No one is exempted in this country from paying certain taxes because he is a nobleman or a priest. All duties and taxes are settled by the House of Commons, whose power is greater than that of the Peers, though inferior to it in dignity. The spiritual as well as temporal Lords have the liberty to reject a Money Bill brought in by the Commons; but they are not allowed to alter anything in it, and must either pass it, or throw it out without restriction. When the Bill has passed the Lords and is signed by the king, then the whole nation pays — every man in proportion to his revenue or estate, not according to his title, which would be absurd. There is no such thing as an arbitrary subsidy or poll-tax, but a real tax on the lands, all of which an estimate was made in the reign of the famous King William III.

The land-tax still continues upon the same footing, even though the revenue of the lands has increased. Thus no one is tyrannised over, and everyone is easy. The feet of the peasants are not bruised by wooden shoes; they eat white bread, are well clothed, and are not afraid of increasing their stock of cattle, nor of tiling their houses, from any apprehension that their taxes will be raised the following year. The annual income of the estates of a great many commoners in England amounts to two hundred thousand livres,³⁴ and yet these do not think it beneath them to plough the lands which enrich them, and on which they enjoy their liberty.

LETTER 10. — ON TRADE

As trade enriched the citizens in England, so it contributed to their freedom, and this freedom on the other side extended their commerce, from which arose the grandeur of the State. Trade raised by insensible degrees the naval power, which gives the English a superiority over the seas, and they are now masters of very nearly two hundred ships of war. Posterity will very probably be surprised to hear that an island whose only produce is a little lead, tin, fuller's-earth, and coarse wool, should become so powerful by its commerce, as to be able to send, in 1723, three fleets at the same time to three different and far distanced parts of the globe. One fleet before Gibraltar, conquered and still possessed by the English; a second to Portobello,

³⁴ A livre was equivalent to 20 sous, or roughly 2 Euros today. So this is 400,000 Euros. For perspective, in 1725 the annual income for a typical agricultural laborer in England was around £18, or 21 Euros.

to dispossess the King of Spain of the treasures of the West Indies; and a third into the Baltic, to prevent the Northern Powers from coming to an engagement.

At the time when Louis XIV made all Italy tremble, and his armies which had already possessed themselves of Savoy and Piedmont were upon the point of taking Turin, Prince Eugene was obliged to march from the middle of Germany in order to succour Savoy. Having no money, without which cities cannot either be taken or defended, he addressed himself to some English merchants. These, upon an hour and half's warning, lent him five millions, whereby he was enabled to deliver Turin and to beat the French. After this, he wrote the following short letter to the persons who had disbursed to him the above-mentioned sums: "Gentlemen, I have received your money, and flatter myself that I have laid it out to your satisfaction." Such a circumstance as this raises a just pride in an English merchant, and makes him presume (not without some reason) to compare himself to a Roman citizen; and indeed, a peer's brother does not think commerce is beneath him. When the Lord Townshend was Minister of State, a brother of his was content to be a City merchant. And at the time that the Earl of Oxford governed Great Britain, a younger brother was no more than a factor ³⁵ in Aleppo, where he chose to live, and where he died. This custom which begins, however, to be laid aside, appears monstrous to Germans, vainly puffed up with their extraction. These think it morally impossible that the son of an English peer should be no more than a rich and powerful citizen, for all are princes in Germany. There have been thirty highnesses of the same name, all whose patrimony consisted only in their escutcheons ³⁶ and their pride.

In France the title of *marquis* is given *gratis* to anyone who will accept it; and whoever arrives at Paris from the midst of the most remote provinces with money in his purse, and a name terminating in *ac* or *ille*, may strut about and cry, "Such a man as I! A man of my rank and figure!" and he may look down upon a trader with sovereign contempt. While the trader, on the other side, by thus often hearing his profession treated so disdainfully, is fool enough to blush at it. However, I need not say which is most useful to a nation — a *lord* powdered in the tip of the mode,³⁷ who knows exactly at what o'clock the king rises and goes to bed, and who gives himself airs of grandeur and state, at the same time that he is acting the slave in the ante-chamber of a prime minister — or a *merchant* who enriches his country, dispatches orders from his counting-house to Surat and Grand Cairo,³⁸ and contributes to the well-being of the world.

LETTER 11. — ON INOCULATION

It is inadvertently affirmed in the Christian countries of Europe, that the English are fools and madmen. Fools, because they give their children the smallpox to prevent their catching it; and madmen, because they wantonly communicate a certain and dreadful disease to their children, merely to prevent an uncertain evil. The English, on the other side, call the rest of the Europeans cowardly and unnatural. Cowardly, because they are afraid of putting their

³⁵ *Factor*: a businessman who buys or sells for another in exchange for a commission.

³⁶ *Escutcheon*: here it is a shield displaying a coat of arms.

³⁷ *Mode*: the current fashion or style.

³⁸ *Surat*: A city in western India on the Tapi River.

children to a little pain; unnatural, because they expose them to die one time or other of the smallpox. But that the reader may be able to judge whether the English or those who differ from them in opinion are in the right, here follows the history of the famed inoculation, which is mentioned with so much dread in France.

Circassian women,³⁹ from time immemorial, have communicated the smallpox to their children when not above six months old, by making an incision in the arm, and by putting into this incision a pustule, taken carefully from the body of another child. This pustule produces the same effect in the arm it is laid in, as yeast does in a piece of dough: it ferments, and diffuses through the whole mass of blood, the qualities with which it is impregnated. The pustules of the child in whom the artificial smallpox has been thus inoculated are employed to communicate the same disease to others. There is an almost perpetual circulation of it in Circassia; and when the smallpox has quite left the country, its inhabitants, unhappily, are in as great trouble and perplexity as other nations when their harvest has fallen short.

The circumstance that introduced a custom in Circassia, which appears so singular to others, is nevertheless a cause common to all nations, I mean maternal tenderness and interest.

The Circassians are poor and their daughters are beautiful; indeed, they chiefly trade in their daughters. They furnish with beauties the seraglios (harems) of the Turkish Sultan, of the Persian Sophy, and all those who are wealthy enough to purchase and maintain such precious merchandise. These maidens are very honourably and virtuously instructed to fondle and caress men; are taught dances of a very polite and effeminate kind; and how to heighten by the most voluptuous artifices the pleasures of their disdainful masters for whom they are designed. These unhappy creatures repeat their lesson to their mothers, in the same manner as little girls among us repeat their catechism without understanding one word they say.

Now it often happened that, after a father and mother had taken the utmost care of the education of their children, they were frustrated of all their hopes in an instant. The smallpox getting into the family, one daughter died of it, another lost an eye, a third had a great nose at her recovery, and the unhappy parents were completely ruined. Frequently, even when the smallpox became epidemical, trade was suspended for several years, which thinned very considerably the seraglios of Persia and Turkey.

A trading nation is always watchful over its own interests, and grasps at every discovery that may be of advantage to its commerce. The Circassians observed that scarcely one person in a thousand was ever attacked by smallpox of a violent kind. Some, indeed, had this disease very favourably three or four times, but never twice so as to prove fatal; in a word, no one ever had it in a violent degree twice in his life. They observed further, that when the smallpox is of the milder sort, and the pustules have only a tender, delicate skin to break through, they never leave the least scar in the face. From these natural observations they concluded that in case an infant of six months or a year old were to have a milder sort of smallpox, he would not die of it, would not be marked, nor ever be afflicted with it again.

Therefore, in order to preserve the life and beauty of their children, the only thing remaining was to give them the smallpox in their infant years. This they did by inoculating in the body

³⁹ *Circassian*: Sunni Muslims living in Caucasia, near the Black Sea.

of a child a pustule taken from the most regular, and at the same time, the most favourable sort of smallpox that could be procured.

The experiment could not possibly fail. The Turks, who are people of good sense, soon adopted this custom, insomuch that at this time there is not a *bassa* in Constantinople ⁴⁰ that does not communicate the smallpox to his children of both sexes immediately upon their being weaned.

Some pretend that the Circassians borrowed this custom anciently from the Arabians; but we will leave the clearing up of this point of history to some learned Benedictine, who will not fail to compile a great many folios on this subject, with several proofs or authorities. All I have to say upon it is that, in the beginning of the reign of King George I, the Lady Wortley Montague, a woman of as fine a genius, and endued with as great a strength of mind as any of her sex in the British Kingdoms, being with her husband, who was ambassador at the Porte, made no scruple to communicate the smallpox to an infant of which she was delivered in Constantinople. The chaplain represented to his lady, but to no purpose, that this was an unchristian operation, and therefore it could succeed with none but infidels. However, it had the most happy effect upon the son of the Lady Wortley Montague who, at her return to England, communicated the experiment to the Princess of Wales, now Queen of England. It must be confessed that this princess, abstracted from her crown and titles, was born to encourage the whole circle of arts, and to do good to mankind. She appears as an amiable philosopher on the throne, having never let slip one opportunity to improve the great talents she received from Nature, nor to exert her beneficence. It is she who, being informed that a daughter of Milton was living, but in miserable circumstances, immediately sent her a considerable present. It is she who protects the learned Father Courayer.⁴¹ It is she who condescended to attempt a reconciliation between Dr. Clark and Mr. Leibnitz.⁴² The moment this princess heard of inoculation, she caused an experiment of it to be made on four criminals sentenced to die, and by that means preserved their lives doubly. For she not only saved them from the gallows, but by means of this artificial smallpox, prevented their ever having that distemper in a natural way, with which they would very probably have been attacked one time or other, and might have died of it in a more advanced age.

The princess being assured of the usefulness of this operation, had her own children inoculated. A great part of the kingdom followed her example, and since that time ten

⁴⁰ *Bassa*: an official or commander in the Ottoman Empire; but also the head of a household there.

⁴¹ Pierre François le Courayer (1681–1776) – French Catholic theological writer, and expatriate in England.

⁴² Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz (1646–1716) – German polymath. He was credited, alongside Isaac Newton, with the creation of calculus, and other branches of mathematics. The Leibniz–Clarke correspondence was a scientific, theological, and philosophical debate. Clarke was a supporter of Isaac Newton. The exchange began because of a letter Leibniz wrote to Caroline of Ansbach, Princess of Wales, in which he remarked that Newtonian physics was detrimental to natural theology. Their correspondence continued until the death of Leibniz in 1716. The dispute was between the absolute theory of space favoured by Newton and Clarke, and Leibniz' relational approach. Leibniz argued that space is not a *substance*, but a system of *relations* between objects, specifically relations of distance and order, and that space would not exist if all objects were removed. There was also a conflict between their opinions on free will, and whether God must create “the best of all possible worlds” (a song in the 1956 musical *Candide*, mocking Leibniz' view).

thousand children with this condition, at least, owe their lives to her Majesty and to the Lady Wortley Montague; and as many of the fair sex are obliged to them for their beauty.

Upon a general calculation, sixty persons in every hundred have the smallpox. Of these sixty, twenty die of it in the most favourable season of life, and as many more wear the disagreeable remains of it in their faces so long as they live. Thus, a fifth of mankind either die or are disfigured by this disease. But it does not prove fatal to so much as one among those who are inoculated in Turkey or in England, unless the patient is infirm, or would have died had not the experiment been made upon him. Besides, no one is disfigured, no one has the smallpox a second time, if the inoculation was perfect. It is therefore certain that had the lady of some French ambassador brought this secret from Constantinople to Paris, the nation would have been forever obliged to her. Then the Duke de Villequier, father to the Duke d'Aumont, who enjoys the most vigorous constitution, and is the healthiest man in France, would not have been cut off in the flower of his age.

The Prince of Soubise, happy in the finest flush of health, would not have been snatched away at twenty-five, nor the Dauphin, grandfather to Louis XV, have been laid in his grave in his fiftieth year. Twenty thousand persons whom the smallpox swept away at Paris in 1723 would have been alive at this time. But are the French not fond of life, and is beauty so inconsiderable an advantage as to be disregarded by the ladies? It must be confessed that we are an odd kind of people. Perhaps our nation will imitate ten years from now this practice of the English, if the clergy and the physicians will but give them leave to do it; or possibly our countrymen may introduce inoculation in France three months from now out of mere whim, in case the English might discontinue it through fickleness.

I am informed that the Chinese have practised inoculation these past hundred years, a circumstance that argues very much in its favour, since they are thought to be the wisest and best governed people in the world. The Chinese, indeed, do not communicate this disease by inoculation, but at the nose, in the same manner as we take snuff. This is a more agreeable way, but then it produces like effects; and proves at the same time that had inoculation been practised in France, it would have saved the lives of thousands.

LETTER 12. — ON THE LORD BACON

Not long ago, the following trite and frivolous question was debated in a very polite and learned company, viz., Who was the greatest man, Caesar, Alexander, Tamerlane, Cromwell, etc.?

Somebody answered that Sir Isaac Newton excelled them all. The gentleman's assertion was very just; for if true greatness consists in having received from heaven a mighty genius, and in having employed it to enlighten our own mind and that of others, a man like Sir Isaac Newton, whose equal is hardly found in a thousand years, is the truly great man. And those politicians and conquerors named above (and all ages produce some) were generally so many illustrious wicked men. That man claims our respect who commands the minds of the rest of the world by the force of *truth*, not those men who enslave their fellow-creatures: he who is acquainted with the universe, not those who deface it.

Since, therefore, you desire me to give you an account of the famous personages whom England has given birth to, I will begin with Lord Bacon, Mr. Locke, Sir Isaac Newton, etc. Afterwards the warriors and Ministers of State will come in their order.

I must begin with the celebrated Viscount Verulam, known in Europe by the name of Bacon, which was that of his family.⁴³ His father had been Lord Keeper, and he himself was, for a great many years, Lord Chancellor under King James I. Nevertheless, amidst the intrigues of a Court, and the affairs of his exalted employment, which alone were enough to engross his whole time, he yet found so much leisure for study as to make himself a great philosopher, a good historian, and an elegant writer. And a still more surprising circumstance is that he lived in an age in which the art of writing justly and elegantly was little known, much less true philosophy. Lord Bacon, as is the fate of man, was more esteemed *after* his death than in his lifetime. His enemies were in the British Court, and his admirers were foreigners.

When the Marquis d'Effiat attended upon the Princess Henrietta Maria in England, daughter to Henry IV, whom King Charles I had married, that Minister went and visited Lord Bacon who, being sick in his bed at that time, received him with the curtains closed shut. "You resemble the angels," the Marquis says to him. "We hear those beings spoken of perpetually, and we believe them to be superior to men, but are never allowed the consolation to see them."

You know that this great man was accused of a crime very unbecoming a philosopher: I mean bribery and extortion. You know that he was sentenced by the House of Lords to pay a fine of about four hundred thousand French livres, and to lose his peerage and the dignity of Chancellor. But in the present age, the English revere his memory to such a degree that they will scarcely admit him to have been guilty. In case you should ask what are my thoughts on this topic, I will answer you in the words which I heard the Lord Bolingbroke use on another occasion. Several gentlemen were speaking in his company of the avarice with which the late Duke of Marlborough had been charged,⁴⁴ some examples of which being given, the Lord Bolingbroke was appealed to (having been in the opposite party, he might perhaps, without the imputation of indecency, have been allowed to clear up that matter): "He was so great a man," replied his lordship, "that I have forgotten his vices."

I will therefore confine myself to those things which so justly gained Lord Bacon the esteem of all Europe.

The most singular and the best of all his pieces is that which, at this time, is the most useless and the least read — I mean his *Novum Scientiarum Organum*. This is the scaffold with which the new philosophy was raised; and when the edifice was built, at least part of it, the scaffold was no longer of service.

The Lord Bacon was not yet acquainted with Nature, but then he knew and pointed out the several paths that lead to it. He had despised in his younger years the thing called *philosophy* in the Universities. And he did all that lay in his power to prevent those societies of men

⁴³ That is, Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626), developer of the Scientific Method.

⁴⁴ John Churchill (1650–1722), better known as the Duke of Marlborough, is sometimes spoken of as the greatest general in English history, primarily due to his performance in the War of the Spanish Succession.

instituted to improve human reason, from depraving it by their quiddities,⁴⁵ their horrors of the vacuum, their substantial forms, and all those impertinent terms which ignorance had not only rendered venerable, but which had been made sacred by their being ridiculously blended with religion.

He is the father of experimental philosophy. It must, indeed, be confessed that very surprising secrets had been found out before his time. The sea-compass, printing, engraving on copper plates, oil-painting, looking-glasses; the art of restoring sight, in some measure, to old men by spectacles; gunpowder, etc., had already been discovered. A new world had been fought for, found, and conquered. Would not one suppose that these sublime discoveries had been made by the greatest philosophers, and in ages much more enlightened than the present? But it was far otherwise; all these great changes happened in the most stupid and barbarous times. Chance alone gave birth to most of those inventions; and it is very probable that what is called *chance* contributed very much to the discovery of America. At least, it has been always thought that Christopher Columbus undertook his voyage merely on the relation of a captain of a ship which a storm had driven as far westward as the Caribbean Islands. Be this as it will, men had sailed round the world, and could destroy cities by an artificial thunder more dreadful than the real one. But then, they were not acquainted with the circulation of the blood, the weight of the air, the laws of motion, light, the number of our planets, etc. And a man who maintained a thesis on Aristotle's "Categories," on *universals a parte rei*,⁴⁶ or such-like nonsense, was looked upon as a prodigy.

The most astonishing, the most useful inventions, are not those which reflect the greatest honour on the human mind. Most arts ⁴⁷ owe their origin to a mechanical instinct, which is found in many men, and not to true philosophy. The discovery of fire, the art of making bread, of melting and preparing metals, of building houses, and the invention of the shuttle, are infinitely more beneficial to mankind than printing or the sea-compass: and yet these arts were invented by uncultivated, savage men.

What a prodigious use the Greeks and Romans afterwards made of mechanics! Nevertheless, they believed that there were crystal heavens, that the stars were small lamps which sometimes fell into the sea, and one of their greatest philosophers, after long researches, found that the stars were so many flints which had been detached from the earth.

In a word, no one before Lord Bacon was acquainted with experimental philosophy, nor with the several physical experiments which have been made since his time. Scarcely one of them is not hinted at in his work, and he himself had made several. He made a kind of pneumatic engine, by which he guessed the elasticity of the air. He approached on all sides, as it were, to the discovery of its weight, and had very nearly attained it, but some time after Torricelli seized upon this truth. In a little time experimental philosophy began to be cultivated all of a

⁴⁵ *Quiddity*: An evasion of the point of an argument by raising irrelevant distinctions or objections.

⁴⁶ *Universals a parte rei* refers to the theory that universals exist as real entities in the world, independent of human thought, and correspond to the common properties shared by particular things. It suggests that universals are not just mental constructs but have an objective reality that can be observed in the physical world.

⁴⁷ Here "arts" refers to technology, engineering, or craftsmanship – the mechanical arts.

sudden in most parts of Europe. It was a hidden treasure which Lord Bacon had some notion of, and which all the philosophers, encouraged by his promises, endeavoured to dig up.

But that which surprised me most was to read in his work, in express terms, *the new attraction*, the invention of which is ascribed to Sir Isaac Newton.

We must search, says Lord Bacon, whether there may not be a kind of magnetic power ⁴⁸ which operates between the earth and heavy bodies, between the moon and the ocean, between the planets, etc. In another place he says either heavy bodies must be carried towards the centre of the earth, or they must be reciprocally attracted by it. And in the latter case, it is evident that the nearer bodies draw towards the earth as they are falling, the stronger they will attract one another. We must, he says, make an experiment to see whether the same clock will go faster on the top of a mountain than at the bottom of a mine; whether the strength of the weights decreases on the mountain, and increases in the mine. It is probable that the earth has a true attractive power.

This forerunner in philosophy was also an elegant writer, an historian, and a wit.

His moral essays are greatly esteemed, but they were drawn up with the view of instructing rather than of pleasing; and as they are not a satire upon mankind, like Rochefoucauld's "Maxims," nor written upon a sceptical plan, like Montaigne's "Essays," they are not so much read as those two ingenious authors.

Lord Bacon's History of Henry VII was looked upon as a masterpiece, but how is it possible that some persons can presume to compare so little a work with the history of our illustrious Thuanus? ⁴⁹

The Lord Bacon wrote of the famous impostor Perkin, son of a converted Jew, who boldly assumed the name and title of Richard IV, King of England at the instigation of the Duchess of Burgundy, and who disputed the crown with Henry VII. Bacon writes as follows:

"At this time the King began again to be haunted with sprites, by the magic and curious arts of the Lady Margaret, who raised up the ghost of Richard, Duke of York, second son to King Edward IV, to walk and to vex the King.

"After such time as she (Margaret of Burgundy) thought he (Perkin Warbeck) was perfect in his lesson, she began to cast with herself from what coast this blazing star should first appear, and at what time it must be upon the horizon of Ireland; for there the like meteor had strong influence before."

I think our sagacious Thuanus does not give in to such fustian,⁵⁰ which formerly was looked upon as sublime, but in this age is justly called *nonsense*.

⁴⁸ Which in 1687 Newton would call the *Law of Universal Gravitation*, as Voltaire just alluded to.

⁴⁹ Thuanus: Jacques Auguste de Thou (1553-1617) – French historian, and president of the Parlement of Paris.

⁵⁰ *Fustian*: pompous or pretentious talk or writing.

LETTER 13. — ON MR. LOCKE

Perhaps no man ever had a more judicious or more methodical genius, or was a more acute logician, than Mr. Locke; and yet he was not deeply skilled in mathematics. This great man could never subject himself to the tedious fatigue of calculations, nor to the dry pursuit of mathematical truths, which do not at first present any sensible objects to the mind. And no one has given better proofs than he, that it is possible for a man to have a geometrical head without the assistance of geometry. Before his time, several great philosophers had declared, in the most positive terms, what the soul of man is. But as these men knew absolutely nothing about it, they might very well be allowed to differ entirely in opinion from one another.

In Greece, the infant seat of arts and of errors, and where the grandeur as well as folly of the human mind went to such prodigious lengths, the people used to reason about the soul in the very same manner as we do.

The divine Anaxagoras, in whose honour an altar was erected for his having taught mankind that the sun was greater than Peloponnesus, that snow was black, and that the heavens were made of stone, affirmed that the soul was an aerial spirit, but at the same time immortal. Diogenes (not the cynical philosopher), after having coined base money, declared that the soul was a portion of the substance of God — an idea which we must confess was very sublime. Epicurus maintained that it was composed of parts, in the same manner as the body.

Aristotle, who has been explained a thousand ways because he is unintelligible, was of the opinion, according to some of his disciples, that the understanding in all men is one and the same substance.

The divine Plato, master of the divine Aristotle — and the divine Socrates, master of the divine Plato — used to say that the soul was corporeal and eternal. No doubt the demon of Socrates had instructed him in the nature of it. Some people, indeed, pretend that a man who boasted of his being attended by a familiar genius, must infallibly be either a knave or a madman; but this kind is seldom satisfied with anything but reason.

With regard to the Fathers of the Church, several in the primitive ages believed that the soul was human, and the angels and God are corporeal. Men naturally improve upon every system. St. Bernard,⁵¹ as Father Mabillon confesses, taught that the soul after death does not see God in the celestial regions, but converses with Christ's human nature only. However, he was not believed at this time on his bare word, the adventure of the crusade having sunk the credit of his oracles a little. Afterwards a thousand schoolmen arose, such as the Irrefragable Doctor, the Subtle Doctor, the Angelic Doctor, the Seraphic Doctor, and the Cherubic Doctor, who were all sure that they had a very clear and distinct idea of the soul, and yet wrote in such a manner that one would conclude they were resolved that no one should understand a word in their writings. Our Descartes, born to discover the errors of antiquity, and at the same time to substitute his own — hurried away by that systematic spirit which throws a cloud over the minds of the greatest men — thought he had demonstrated that the soul is the same thing as thought, in the same manner as matter, and in his opinion, it is the same as extension. He

⁵¹ That is, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) – abbot, mystic, and co-founder of the Knights Templar.

asserted that man thinks eternally, and that the soul, at its coming into the body, is informed with the whole series of metaphysical notions: knowing God, infinite space, possessing all abstract ideas — in a word, completely endued with the most sublime lights, which it unhappily forgets upon its issuing from the womb.

Father Malebranche,⁵² in his sublime illusions, not only admitted innate ideas, but he did not doubt our living wholly in God, and that God is, as it were, our soul.

Such a multitude of reasoners having written the *romance* of the soul, a sage at last arose who gave, with an air of the greatest modesty, the *history* of it. Mr. Locke has displayed the human soul in the same manner as an excellent anatomist explains the springs of the human body. He takes the light of physics everywhere for his guide. He sometimes presumes to speak affirmatively, but then he also presumes to doubt. Instead of concluding at once what we do not know, he examines gradually what we *would* know. He takes an infant at the instant of his birth, and traces, step by step, the progress of his understanding. He examines what things he has in common with beasts, and what he possesses above them. Above all, he consults himself: being conscious that he himself thinks. He says,

“I will leave to those who know more of this matter than myself, the examination of whether the soul exists before or after the organisation of our bodies. But I confess that it is my lot to be animated with one of those heavy souls which do not think always; and I am even so unhappy as not to conceive that it is more necessary that the soul should think perpetually, than that bodies should forever be in motion.”

With regard to myself, I will boast that I have the honour to be as stupid in this particular as Mr. Locke. No one will ever make me believe that I think always: and I am as little inclined as he could be to fancy that some weeks after I was conceived, I was a very learned soul; knowing at that time a thousand things which I forgot at my birth; and possessing knowledge when in the womb (though to no manner of purpose) which I lost the instant I had occasion for it; and which I have never since been able to recover perfectly.

Mr. Locke, after having destroyed innate ideas; after having fully renounced the vanity of believing that we think always; after having laid down from the most solid principles, that ideas enter the mind through the senses; having examined our simple and complex ideas; having traced the human mind through its several operations; having shown that all the languages in the world are imperfect, and the great abuse that is made of words at every moment — he at last comes to consider the extent (or rather the narrow limits) of human knowledge. It was in this chapter that he presumed to advance, but very modestly, the following words: “We shall, perhaps, never be capable of knowing whether a being, purely material, thinks or not.” This sage assertion was looked upon by more divines than one, as a scandalous declaration that the soul is material and mortal.

Some Englishmen, devout in their way, sounded an alarm. The superstitious are the same in society, as cowards are in an army. They themselves are seized with a panicked fear, and

⁵² Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) – French rationalist philosopher who developed *occasionalism*, a theory that all events are directly caused by God, with created things having no real causal power of their own. He offered an original synthesis of the views of St. Augustine and René Descartes.

communicate it to others. It was loudly exclaimed that Mr. Locke intended to destroy religion; nevertheless, religion had nothing to do in the affair, it being a purely philosophical question, altogether independent of faith and revelation. Mr. Locke's opponents needed but to examine, calmly and impartially, whether declaring that matter can think, implies a contradiction; and whether God is able to communicate thought to matter. But divines are too apt to begin their declarations with saying that God is offended when people differ from themselves in opinion. In this they resemble too much the bad poets who used to declare publicly that Boileau spoke irreverently of Louis XIV because he ridiculed their stupid productions. Bishop Stillingfleet⁵³ got the reputation of a calm and unprejudiced divine because he did not expressly make use of injurious terms in his dispute with Mr. Locke. That divine entered the lists against him, but was defeated. For he argued like a schoolman, and Locke argued like a philosopher who was perfectly acquainted with the strong as well as the weak side of the human mind, and who fought with weapons whose temper he knew.

If I might presume to give my opinion on so delicate a subject after Mr. Locke, I would say that men have long disputed on the nature and the immortality of the soul. With regard to its immortality, it is impossible to give a demonstration of it, since its nature is still the subject of controversy. This, however, must be thoroughly understood before a person can be able to determine whether it is immortal or not. Human reason is so little able, merely by its own strength, to demonstrate the immortality of the soul, that it was absolutely necessary that religion should reveal it to us. It is of advantage to society in general, that mankind should believe the soul to be immortal — faith commands us to do this; nothing more is required, and the matter is cleared up at once. But it is otherwise with respect to its *nature*; it is of little importance to religion, which only requires the soul to be virtuous, whatever substance it may be made of. It is a clock which is given us to regulate, but the artist has not told us of what materials the spring of this chock is composed.

I am a body, and I think that's all I know of the matter. Shall I ascribe to an unknown cause, what I can so easily impute to the only second cause I am acquainted with? Here all the school philosophers interrupt me with their arguments, and declare that there is only extension and solidity in bodies, and that there they can have nothing but motion and figure. Now, motion, figure, extension, and solidity cannot form a thought; and consequently the soul cannot be matter. All of this so-often-repeated mighty series of reasoning, amounts to no more than this:

- I am absolutely ignorant of what matter is.
- I guess some properties of it, but only imperfectly.
- Now, I absolutely cannot tell whether these properties may be joined to thought.
- Therefore, because I know nothing, I maintain positively that matter cannot think.

The scholastics reason in this manner. Mr. Locke addressed these gentlemen in the following candid, sincere manner: At least confess yourselves to be as ignorant as I am. Neither your imaginations nor mine are able to comprehend in what manner a body is capable of ideas;

⁵³ Edward Stillingfleet (1635–1699) was an English Christian theologian and scholar who served as the Bishop of Worcester. He was known for his influential writings defending Anglicanism, and was regarded as one of the most learned men of his time.

and do you better conceive in what manner a substance, of whatever kind, is capable of them? As you cannot comprehend either matter or spirit, why will you presume to assert *anything*?

The superstitious man comes afterwards and declares that all those must be burnt for the good of their souls, who so much as suspect that it is possible for the body to think without any foreign assistance. But what would these people say if they themselves were proved irreligious? And indeed, what man can presume to assert, without being guilty at the same time of the greatest impiety, that it is impossible for the Creator to form matter with thought and sensation? Consider only, I beg you, what a dilemma you bring yourselves into, you who in this manner confine the power of the Creator. Beasts have the same organs, the same sensations, the same perceptions as we; they have memory, and combine certain ideas. In case it was not in the power of God to animate matter, and to inform it with sensation, the consequence would be either that beasts are mere machines, or they have a spiritual soul.

I think it is clearly evident that beasts cannot be mere machines, which I prove thus: God has given to them the very same organs of sensation as to us. Therefore, if they have no sensation, God has created a useless thing. Now, according to your own confession, God does nothing in vain. He therefore did not create so many organs of sensation merely for them to be uninformed with this faculty. Consequently, beasts are not mere machines. Beasts, according to your assertion, cannot be animated with a spiritual soul. You will, therefore, in spite of yourself, be reduced to this sole assertion, viz., that God has endued the organs of beasts, who are mere matter, with the faculties of sensation and perception, which you call *instinct* in them. But why may not God, if He pleases, communicate to our more delicate organs, that faculty of feeling, perceiving, and thinking, which we call *human reason*? To whatever side you turn, you are forced to acknowledge your own ignorance, and the boundless power of the Creator. Therefore, exclaim no more against the sage, the modest philosophy of Mr. Locke, which so far from interfering with religion, would be of use to demonstrate the *truth* of it, in case religion wanted any such support. For what philosophy can be of a more religious nature than that which — affirming nothing but what it conceives clearly, and conscious of its own weakness — declares that we must always have recourse to God in our examining of the first principles?

Besides, we must not be apprehensive that any philosophical opinion will ever prejudice the religion of a country. Though our demonstrations clash directly with our mysteries, that is nothing to the purpose, for the latter are not less revered on that account by our Christian philosophers, who know very well that the objects of *reason* and those of *faith* are of a very different nature. Philosophers will never form a religious sect. The reason for this is that their writings are not calculated for the vulgar (common), and they themselves are free from enthusiasm. If we divide mankind into twenty parts, it will be found that nineteen of these consist of persons employed in manual labour, who will never know that such a man as Mr. Locke existed. In the remaining twentieth part, how few are readers? And among those who are so, twenty amuse themselves with romances, to the one who studies philosophy. The thinking part of mankind is confined to a very small number, and these will never disturb the peace and tranquillity of the world.

Neither Montaigne,⁵⁴ Locke, Bayle,⁵⁵ Spinoza,⁵⁶ Hobbes,⁵⁷ the Lord Shaftesbury,⁵⁸ Collins,⁵⁹ nor Toland ⁶⁰ lit the firebrand of discord in their countries. This has generally been the work of divines, who being at first puffed up with the ambition of becoming chiefs of a religious *sect*, soon grew very desirous of being at the head of a political *party*. But what do I say? All the works of the modern philosophers put together will never make so much noise as even the dispute which arose among the Franciscans, merely about the fashion of their sleeves and of their cowls.

LETTER 14. — ON DESCARTES AND SIR ISAAC NEWTON

A Frenchman who arrives in London will find that philosophy, like everything else, very much changed there. He had left the world a plenum,⁶¹ and he now finds it a vacuum. At Paris the universe is seen composed of vortices of subtle matter; but nothing like it is seen in London. In France, it is the pressure of the moon that causes the tides; but in England it is the sea that gravitates towards the moon; so that when you think that the moon should make it flood with us, those gentlemen fancy it should ebb, which very unluckily cannot be proved. For to be able to do this, it is necessary the moon and the tides should have been inquired into at the very instant of the creation.

You will observe further that the sun, which in France is said to have nothing to do in the affair, comes in here for very near a quarter of its assistance. According to your Cartesians, everything is performed by an impulsion, of which we have very little notion; and according to Sir Isaac Newton, it is by an attraction, the cause of which is as much unknown to us. At Paris you imagine that the earth is shaped like a melon, or of an oblique figure; at London it has an oblate one.⁶² A Cartesian declares that light exists in the air; but a Newtonian asserts that it comes from the sun in six and a half minutes. The several operations of your chemistry are performed by acids, alkalies, and subtle matter; but attraction prevails even in chemistry among the English.

⁵⁴ Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) was known for popularizing the essay as a literary form. He was a significant figure in modern individualism and skepticism.

⁵⁵ Pierre Bayle was a French philosopher, author, and lexicographer (1647–1706) best known for his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, which challenged orthodox beliefs, and advocated religious toleration.

⁵⁶ Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) was a Dutch-Jewish philosopher known for his contributions to rationalism and the Enlightenment. He is recognized for his pantheistic view of God and nature, asserting that everything is a modification of a single substance.

⁵⁷ Thomas Hobbes was best known for his political philosophy articulated in his 1651 book, *Leviathan*. In it he articulated his ideas on the social contract and the necessity of a strong central authority to maintain peace and order.

⁵⁸ Lord Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper), 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), was an English philosopher and politician who was recognized for his contributions to the concepts of sociability and moral beauty, drawing on ideas from the Cambridge Platonists and John Locke.

⁵⁹ Anthony Collins (1676–1729) was known for being an early proponent of Deism in Great Britain.

⁶⁰ John Toland (1670–1722) was an Irish rationalist philosopher known for his contributions to political philosophy and the philosophy of religion. He is best known for his work "Christianity Not Mysterious," which argued that biblical doctrines can be understood through human reason without divine revelation.

⁶¹ *Plenum*: a state in which space is completely filled with matter or substance.

⁶² *Oblate*: Having the equatorial diameter greater than the polar diameter; being flattened at the poles.

The very essence of things is totally changed. You neither are agreed upon the definition of the soul, nor on that of matter. Descartes, as I observed in my last letter, maintains that the soul is the same thing with thought, and Mr. Locke has given a pretty good proof of the contrary. Descartes asserts further, that extension alone constitutes matter, but Sir Isaac adds solidity to it. How furiously contradictory are these opinions!

“Non nostrum inter vos tantas componere lites.”

— VIRGIL, *Eclog. III.*

“’Tis not for us to end such great disputes.”

This famous Newton, this destroyer of the Cartesian system, died in March, anno 1727. His countrymen honoured him in his lifetime, and interred him as though he had been a king who had made his people happy.

The English read with the highest satisfaction, and translated into their tongue, the *Eulogium* of Sir Isaac Newton, which M. de Fontenelle ⁶³ spoke in the Academy of Sciences. M. de Fontenelle presides as judge over philosophers; and the English expected his decision, as a solemn declaration of the superiority of the English philosophy over that of the French. But when it was found that this gentleman had compared Descartes to Sir Isaac, the whole Royal Society in London rose up in arms. So far from acquiescing with M. Fontenelle’s judgment, they criticised his discourse. And several (who were not the ablest philosophers in that body, however) were even offended at the comparison — and for no other reason than because Descartes was a Frenchman.

It must be confessed that these two great men differed very much in conduct, in fortune, and in philosophy.

Nature had indulged Descartes with a shining and strong imagination, from which he became a very singular person both in private life and in his manner of reasoning. This imagination could not conceal itself even in his philosophical works, which are everywhere adorned with very shining, ingenious metaphors and figures. Nature had almost made him a poet; and indeed he wrote a piece of poetry for the entertainment of Christina, Queen of Sweden, which however was suppressed in honour to his memory.

He embraced a military life for some time, and afterwards becoming a complete philosopher, he did not think the passion of love derogatory to his character. By his mistress, he had a daughter called Froncine, who died young, and was very much regretted by him. Thus he experienced every passion incident to mankind.

He was a long time of the opinion that it would be necessary for him to fly from the society of his fellow creatures, and especially from his native country, in order to enjoy the happiness of cultivating his philosophical studies in full liberty.

Descartes was very right, for his contemporaries were not knowing enough to improve and enlighten his understanding, and were capable of little else than of giving him uneasiness.

⁶³ Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657-1757) – French writer and a member of three of the academies of the Institut de France, noted for his accessible treatment of scientific topics during the unfolding of the Age of Enlightenment.

He left France purely to go in search of truth, which was then persecuted by the wretched philosophy of the schools. However, he found that reason was as much disguised and depraved in the universities of Holland, into which he withdrew, as in his own country. For at the time that the French condemned the only propositions of his philosophy which were true, he was persecuted by the pretended philosophers of Holland, who understood him no better — and who, having a nearer view of his glory, hated his person even more, so that he was obliged to leave Utrecht. Descartes was injuriously accused of being an atheist, the last refuge of religious scandal. And he who had employed all the sagacity and penetration of his genius, in searching for new proofs of the existence of a God, was suspected to believe there was no such Being.

Such a persecution from all sides, must necessarily suppose a most exalted merit as well as a very distinguished reputation, and indeed he possessed both. Reason at that time darted a ray upon the world through the gloom of the schools and the prejudices of popular superstition. At last his name spread so universally, that the French were desirous to bring him back into his native country by rewards, and accordingly offered him an annual pension of a thousand crowns. Upon these hopes Descartes returned to France; he paid the fees of his patent, which was sold at that time, but no pension was settled upon him. Thus disappointed, he returned to his solitude in North Holland, where he again pursued the study of philosophy, while the great Galileo, at eighty years of age, was groaning in the prisons of the Inquisition, only for having demonstrated the earth's motion.

At last Descartes was snatched from the world in the flower of his age at Stockholm. His death was owing to a bad regimen, and he expired in the midst of some literati who were his enemies, and under the hands of a physician to whom he was odious.

The progress of Sir Isaac Newton's life was quite different. He lived happy, and very much honoured in his native country, to the age of eight-five years.

It was his peculiar felicity, not only to be born in a country of liberty, but in an age when all scholastic impertinences were banished from the world. Reason alone was cultivated, and mankind could only be his pupil, not his enemy.

One very singular difference in the lives of these two great men is that Sir Isaac, during the long course of years he enjoyed, was never sensible to any passion, was not subject to the common frailties of mankind, nor ever had any commerce with women — a circumstance which was assured me by the physician and surgeon who attended him in his last moments.

We may admire Sir Isaac Newton on this occasion, but then we must not censure Descartes.

The opinion that generally prevails in England with regard to these new philosophers, is that the latter was a dreamer, and the former was a sage.

Very few people in England read Descartes, whose works indeed are now useless. On the other side, only a small number peruse those of Sir Isaac, because to do this the student must be deeply skilled in mathematics; otherwise those works will be unintelligible to him. But notwithstanding this, these great men are the subject of everyone's discourse. Sir Isaac Newton is allowed every advantage, while Descartes is not indulged a single one. According to some, it is to the former that we owe the discovery of a vacuum, that the air is a heavy body,

and the invention of telescopes. In a word, Sir Isaac Newton is here as the Hercules of fabulous story, to whom the ignorant ascribed all the feats of ancient heroes.

In a critique that was made in London on Mr. de Fontenelle's discourse, the writer presumed to assert that Descartes was not a great geometrician. Those who make such a declaration may justly be reproached with flying in their master's face. Descartes extended the limits of geometry as far beyond the place where he found them, as Sir Isaac did after him. The former first taught the method of expressing curves by equations. This geometry which (thanks to him has now grown common) was so abstruse in his time, that not so much as one professor would undertake to explain it; Schotten in Holland,⁶⁴ and Format in France,⁶⁵ were the only men who understood it.

He applied this geometrical and inventive genius to dioptrics, which, when treated of by him, became a new art.⁶⁶ And if he was mistaken in some things, the reason for that is, a man who discovers a new tract of land cannot at once know all the properties of the soil. Those who come after him, and make these lands fruitful, are at least obliged to him for the discovery. I will not deny that there are innumerable errors in the rest of Descartes' works.

Geometry was a guide that he himself had in some measure fashioned, which would have conducted him safely through the several paths of natural philosophy. Nevertheless, he at last abandoned this guide, and gave entirely into the humour of forming hypotheses; and then philosophy was no more than an ingenious romance, fit only to amuse the ignorant. He was mistaken in the nature of the soul, the proofs of the existence of a God, matter, the laws of motion, and the nature of light. He introduced innate ideas; he invented new elements; he created a world; he made man according to his own fancy. And it is justly said that the man Descartes is, in fact, that of Descartes alone, very different from the real one.

He pushed his metaphysical errors so far as to declare that two and two make four for no other reason than because God would have it so. However, it will not be making too great a compliment of him if we affirm that he was valuable even in his mistakes. He deceived himself; but then it was at least in a methodical way. He destroyed all the absurd chimeras⁶⁷ with which youth had been infatuated for two thousand years. He taught his contemporaries how to reason, and he enabled them to employ his own weapons against himself. If Descartes did not pay in good money, he did great service, however, in crying down that of a base alloy.

I indeed believe that very few will presume to compare his philosophy in any respect with that of Sir Isaac Newton. The former is an essay, the latter a masterpiece. But then the man who

⁶⁴ Frans van Schooten Jr. (1615-1660) – Dutch mathematician most known for popularizing the analytic geometry of René Descartes. He had a significant influence on the science and mathematics of Europe at the time; especially on the development of calculus by Gottfried Leibniz and Isaac Newton.

⁶⁵ Pierre de Fermat (1601-1665) – French mathematician often called the founder of the modern theory of numbers. Together with René Descartes, Fermat was one of the two leading mathematicians of the first half of the 17th century. Independently of Descartes, Fermat discovered the fundamental principle of analytic geometry. He was regarded as the inventor of differential calculus, and with Blaise Pascal, was a co-founder of the theory of probability.

⁶⁶ *Dioptrics*: the branch of optics dealing with the refraction of light, especially by lenses.

⁶⁷ *Chimeras*: unrealistic or impossible ideas or hopes; grotesque products of the imagination.

first brought us to the path of truth, was perhaps as great a genius as the one who afterwards conducted us through it.

Descartes gave sight to the blind. These saw the errors of antiquity and of the sciences. The path he struck out has since become boundless. Rohault's little work was, during some years, a complete system of physics;⁶⁸ but now all the Transactions ⁶⁹ of the several academies in Europe put together do not form so much as the beginning of a system. In fathoming this abyss, no bottom has been found. We are now to examine what discoveries Sir Isaac Newton has made in it.

LETTER 15. — ON ATTRACTION

The discoveries which gained Sir Isaac Newton so universal a reputation, relate to the system of the world, to light, to geometrical infinities, and lastly, to chronology, with which he used to amuse himself after the fatigue of his severer studies.

I will now acquaint you (without prolixity if possible) with the few things I have been able to comprehend of all these sublime ideas. With regard to the system of our world, disputes were maintained a long time, on the cause that turns the planets, and keeps them in their orbits; and on those causes which make all bodies here below descend towards the surface of the earth.

The system of Descartes, explained and improved since his time, seemed to give a plausible reason for all those phenomena; and this reason seemed more just, as it is simple and intelligible to all capacities. But in philosophy, a student ought to doubt the things he fancies that he understands too easily, as much as of those he does not understand.

Gravity, the falling of accelerated bodies on the earth, the revolution of the planets in their orbits, their rotations round their axis, all this is mere motion. Now motion cannot perhaps be conceived in any other way than by impulsion; therefore all those bodies must be impelled. But by what are they impelled? All space is full;⁷⁰ it therefore is filled with a very subtle matter, since this is imperceptible to us. This matter goes from west to east, since all the planets are carried from west to east. Thus from hypothesis to hypothesis, from one appearance to another, philosophers have imagined a vast whirlpool of subtle matter, in which the planets are carried round the sun. They have also created another particular vortex which floats in the great one, and which turns daily round the planets. When all this is done, it is pretended that gravity depends on this diurnal motion; for (these say) the velocity of the subtle matter that turns round our little vortex, must be seventeen times more rapid than that of the earth; or, in case its velocity is seventeen times greater than that of the earth, its centrifugal force must be vastly greater, and consequently it impels all bodies towards the earth. This is the cause of gravity, according to the Cartesian system. But the theorist, before he calculated the

⁶⁸ Jacques Rohault (1618–1672) – French philosopher, physicist, and mathematician known for popularizing Cartesian physics, and for his influential textbook, *Traité de Physique*, which became a standard work in 17th-century physics.

⁶⁹ *Transactions*: here it is the formal records or proceedings of business conducted by the various academies.

⁷⁰ It was then believed that space is not a vacuum, but is filled with *ether*. “Dark matter” is the current theory.

centrifugal force and velocity of the subtle matter, should first have been certain that it existed.

Sir Isaac Newton, seems to have destroyed all these great and little vortices, both that which carries the planets round the sun, as well as the other which supposes every planet to turn on its own axis.

First, with regard to the pretended little vortex of the earth, it is demonstrated that it must lose its motion by insensible degrees. It is demonstrated that if the earth swims in a fluid, its density must be equal to that of the earth; and in case its density is the same, all the bodies we endeavour to move must meet with an insuperable resistance.

With regard to the great vortices, they are still more chimerical, and it is impossible to make them agree with Kepler's law, the truth of which has been demonstrated. Sir Isaac shows that the revolution of the fluid in which Jupiter is supposed to be carried, is not the same with regard to the revolution of the fluid of the earth, as the revolution of Jupiter with respect to that of the earth. He proves that as the planets make their revolutions in ellipses, and consequently being at a much greater distance one from the other in their Aphelia, and a little nearer in their Perihelia;⁷¹ the earth's velocity, for instance, ought to be greater when it is nearer Venus and Mars, because the fluid that carries it along, being then more pressed, ought to have a greater motion; and yet it is even then that the earth's motion is *slower*.

He proves that there is no such thing as a celestial matter which goes from west to east since the comets traverse those spaces, sometimes from east to west, and at other times from north to south.

In fine, the better to resolve every difficulty, if possible, he proves (even by experiments) that it is impossible that there should be a plenum; and he brings back the vacuum, which Aristotle and Descartes had banished from the world.

Having destroyed the Cartesian vortices by these and several other arguments, he despaired of ever being able to discover whether there is a secret principle in nature which, at the same time, is the cause of the motion of all celestial bodies, and that of gravity on the earth. But having retired to a solitude near Cambridge in 1666, on account of the Plague,⁷² as he was walking in his garden one day, and saw some fruits fall from a tree, he fell into a profound meditation on that gravity, the cause of which had so long been sought, but in vain, by all the philosophers, while the vulgar think there is nothing mysterious in it. He said to himself that from whatever height those bodies might descend in our hemisphere, their fall would certainly be in the progression discovered by Galileo; and the spaces they run through would be as the square of the times. Why may not this power which causes heavy bodies to descend, and is the same without any sensible diminution at the remotest distance from the centre of the earth, or on the summits of the highest mountains, why, asked Sir Isaac, may not this power extend as high as the moon? And in case its influence reaches so far, is it not very

⁷¹ *Aphelia* is the farthest points from the sun in the orbits of celestial bodies; *perihelia* is the point in an orbit where an object is closest to the Sun.

⁷² The Great Plague of London ran from 1665 to 1666 and was the last major outbreak of bubonic plague in England. Over 68,000 people died in London in 1665, and the real death toll may have exceeded 100,000.

probable that this power retains it in its orbit, and determines its motion? But in case the moon obeys this principle (whatever it is) may we not conclude very naturally that the rest of the planets are equally subject to it? In case this power exists (which besides is proved) it must increase in an inverse ratio of the squares of the distances. All that remains, therefore, is to examine how far a heavy body would go, which might fall upon the earth from a moderate height; and how far in the same time, a body which might fall from the orbit of the moon, would descend. To find this, nothing is wanted but the measure of the earth, and the distance of the moon from it.

Thus Sir Isaac Newton reasoned. But at that time the English had but a very imperfect measure of our globe, and they depended on the uncertain supposition of mariners, who computed a degree to contain but sixty English miles; whereas in reality it consists of nearly seventy. As this false computation did not agree with the conclusions which Sir Isaac intended to draw from them, he laid aside this pursuit. A half-learned philosopher, remarkable only for his vanity, would have made the measure of the earth agree with his system anyhow. Sir Isaac, however, chose rather to quit the researches he was then engaged in. But after Mr. Picard ⁷³ had measured the earth exactly, by tracing that meridian which redounds so much to the honour of the French, Sir Isaac Newton resumed his former reflections, and found his account in Mr. Picard's calculation.

A circumstance which has always appeared wonderful to me, is that such sublime discoveries should have been made by the sole assistance of a quadrant and a little arithmetic.

The circumference of the earth is 123,249,600 feet (23,342.73 miles). This, among other things, is necessary to prove the system of attraction.

The instant we know the earth's circumference, and the distance to the moon, we know that of the moon's orbit, and the diameter of this orbit. The moon performs its revolution in that orbit in twenty-seven days, seven hours, forty-three minutes. It is demonstrated that the moon in its mean motion makes 187,960 feet (of Paris) in a minute. It is likewise demonstrated, by a known theorem, that the central force which should make a body fall from the height of the moon, would make its velocity no more than fifteen Paris feet in a minute of time. Now, if the law by which bodies gravitate and attract one another in an inverse ratio to the squares of the distances be true, if the same power acts according to that law throughout all nature, it is evident that as the earth is sixty semi-diameters distant from the moon, a heavy body must necessarily fall (on the earth) fifteen feet in the first second, and fifty-four thousand feet in the first minute.

Now, a heavy body falls, in reality, fifteen feet in the first second, and goes fifty-four thousand feet in the first minute, which number is the square of sixty multiplied by fifteen. ⁷⁴ Bodies, therefore, gravitate in an inverse ratio of the squares of the distances. Consequently, what causes gravity on earth, and keeps the moon in its orbit, is one and the same power. For it being demonstrated that the moon gravitates on the earth, which is the centre of its particular

⁷³ Jean Picard (1620-1682) was a French astronomer known for accurately measuring the size of the Earth through a survey of one degree of latitude along the Paris Meridian.

⁷⁴ An object falls at 32 feet per second squared, assuming air resistance is negligible.

motion, it is demonstrated that the earth and the moon gravitate on the sun, which is the centre of their annual motion.

The rest of the planets must be subject to this general law; and if this law exists, these planets must follow the laws which Kepler discovered.⁷⁵ All these laws, all these relations are indeed observed by the planets with the utmost exactness. Therefore, the power of attraction causes all the planets to gravitate towards the sun, in like manner as the moon gravitates towards our globe.

Finally, as in all bodies re-action is equal to action, it is certain

- that the earth also gravitates towards the moon.
- that the sun gravitates towards both.
- that every one of the satellites of Saturn gravitates towards the other four.⁷⁶
- that the other four gravitate towards it, all five towards Saturn, and Saturn towards all.
- that it is the same with regard to Jupiter; and
- that all these globes are attracted by the sun, which is reciprocally attracted by them.

This power of gravitation acts proportionably to the quantity of matter (mass) in bodies, a truth which Sir Isaac has demonstrated by experiments. This new discovery has been of use to show that the sun (the centre of the planetary system) attracts them all in a direct ratio of their quantity of matter combined with their nearness. From this Sir Isaac, rising by degrees to discoveries which seemed not to be formed for the human mind, is bold enough to compute the quantity of matter contained in the sun and in every planet. And in this manner he shows, from the simple laws of mechanics, that every celestial globe should necessarily be where it is placed.

His bare principle of the laws of gravitation accounts for all the apparent inequalities in the course of the celestial globes. The variations of the moon are a necessary consequence of those laws. Moreover, the reason is evidently seen why the nodes of the moon perform their revolutions in nineteen years, and those of the earth in about twenty-six thousand. The several appearances observed in the tides are also a very simple effect of this attraction. The proximity of the moon, when at the full, and when it is new, and its distance in the quadratures or quarters, combined with the action of the sun, exhibit a sensible reason why the ocean swells and sinks.

After having shown by his sublime theory the course and inequalities of the planets, he subjects comets to the same law. The orbit of these fires (unknown for so great a series of years), which was the terror of mankind and the rock against which philosophy split, placed by Aristotle below the moon, and sent back by Descartes above the sphere of Saturn, is at last placed in its proper seat by Sir Isaac Newton.

⁷⁵ Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) – German astronomer who formulated the three laws of planetary motion: (1) planets move in elliptical orbits with the Sun at one focus, (2) a planet sweeps out equal areas in equal times, and (3) a planet's orbital period squared is proportional to its orbit's semi-major axis cubed.

⁷⁶ In 1725, only five moons of Saturn were known.

He proves that comets are solid bodies which move in the sphere of the sun's activity, and that they describe an ellipsis so very eccentric, and so near to parabolas, that certain comets must take over five hundred years in their revolution.

The learned Dr. Halley is of opinion that the comet seen in 1680 is the same which appeared in Julius Caesar's time. This shows more than any other that comets are hard, opaque bodies; for it descended so near to the sun, as to come within a sixth part of the diameter of this planet from it, and consequently might have contracted a degree of heat two thousand times stronger than that of red-hot iron; and it would soon have been dispersed in vapour, had it not been a firm, dense body. Guessing the course of comets then began to be very much in vogue. The celebrated Bernoulli concluded by his system that the famous comet of 1680 would appear again the 17th of May, 1719. Not a single astronomer in Europe went to bed that night. However, they need not have broken their rest, for the famous comet never appeared. There is at least more cunning, if not more certainty, in fixing its return to so remote a distance as five hundred and seventy-five years. As for Mr. Whiston, he affirmed very seriously that in the time of the Deluge a comet overflowed the terrestrial globe.⁷⁷ And he was so unreasonable as to wonder that people laughed at him for making such an assertion. The ancients had almost the same way of thinking as Mr. Whiston, and fancied that comets were always the forerunners of some great calamity which was to befall mankind. Sir Isaac Newton, on the contrary, suspected that they are very beneficent, and that vapours exhale from them merely to nourish and vivify the planets, which imbibe in their course the several particles that the sun has detached from the comets — an opinion which, at least, is more probable than the former. But this is not all. If this power of gravitation or attraction acts on all the celestial globes, it undoubtedly acts on the several *parts* of these globes. For in case bodies attract one another in proportion to the quantity of matter contained in them, it can only be in proportion to the quantity of their parts; and if this power is found in the whole, then it is undoubtedly in the half; in the quarters, in the eighth part, and so on in *infinitum*.

This is *attraction*, the great spring by which all Nature is moved. Sir Isaac Newton, after having demonstrated the existence of this principle, plainly foresaw that its very name would offend. And therefore this philosopher, in more places than one of his books, gives the reader some caution about it. He bids him beware of confounding this name with what the ancients called *occult qualities*, but to be satisfied with knowing that there is in all bodies a central force which acts to the utmost limits of the universe, according to the invariable laws of mechanics.

It is surprising, after the solemn protestations Sir Isaac made, that such eminent men as Mr. Sorin and Mr. de Fontenelle should have imputed to this great philosopher the verbal and

⁷⁷ William Whiston (1667–1752) – English physicist, mathematician, and theologian. He became the third Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University, succeeding Isaac Newton. He is best known for his 1696 work *A New Theory of the Earth*, in which he proposed that the Great Flood described in the Book of Genesis was caused by a comet passing very close to Earth — an attempt to reconcile a literal interpretation of the Bible with current science.

chimerical way of reasoning of the Aristotelians — Mr. Sorin in the *Memoirs of the Academy of 1709*,⁷⁸ and Mr. de Fontenelle in the very eulogium of Sir Isaac Newton.

Most of the French (the learned and others) have repeated this reproach. These are forever crying out, “Why did he not employ the word *impulsion*, which is so well understood, rather than that of *attraction*, which is unintelligible?”

Sir Isaac might have answered these critics thus:

“First, you have as imperfect an idea of the word *impulsion* as you have of *attraction*; and in case you cannot conceive how one body tends towards the centre of another body, neither can you conceive by what power one body can impel another.

“Secondly, I could not admit *impulsion*; for to do this I must have known that a celestial matter was the agent. But so far from knowing that there is any such matter, I have proved it to be merely imaginary.

“Thirdly, I use the word *attraction* for no other reason than to express an effect which I discovered in Nature — a certain and indisputable effect of an unknown principle — a quality inherent in matter, the cause of which persons of greater abilities than I can pretend to, may find out if they can.”

“What have you, then, taught us?” these people will say further; “and to what purpose are so many calculations to tell us about what you yourself do not comprehend?”

“I have taught you,” may Sir Isaac rejoin, “that all bodies gravitate towards one another in proportion to their quantity of matter; that these central forces alone keep the planets and comets in their orbits, and cause them to move in the proportion previously set down. I demonstrate to you that it is impossible there should be any other cause which keeps the planets in their orbits than that general phenomenon of gravity. For heavy bodies fall on the earth according to the proportion demonstrated of central forces; and the planets finishing their course according to these same proportions. In case there were another power that acted upon all those bodies, it would either increase their velocity or change their direction. Now, not one of those bodies ever has a single degree of motion or velocity, or has any direction but what is demonstrated to be the effect of the central forces. Consequently, it is impossible that there should be any other principle.”

Give me leave once more to introduce Sir Isaac speaking. Shall he not be allowed to say,

“My case and that of the ancients is very different. They saw, for instance, water ascend in pumps, and said, ‘The water rises because it abhors a vacuum.’ But with regard to myself, I am in the case of a man who should first have observed that water ascends in pumps, but should leave others to explain the cause of this effect. The anatomist who first declared that the motion of the arm is owing to the contraction of the muscles, taught mankind an indisputable truth. But are they less obliged to him because he did not know the reason *why* the muscles contract? The cause of the elasticity of the air is unknown, but he who first discovered this spring performed a very signal service to natural philosophy. The spring that

⁷⁸ Perhaps referring to Joseph Saurin (1659–1737), a French mathematician and a converted Protestant minister. He was the first to show how the tangents at the multiple points of curves could be determined by mathematical analysis.

I discovered was more hidden and more universal, and for that very reason mankind ought to thank me all the more. I have discovered a new property of matter — one of the secrets of the Creator — and have calculated and discovered the effects of it. After this, will people quarrel with me about the name I give it?”

Vortices may be called an *occult quality* because their existence was never proved. Attraction, on the contrary, is a real thing, because its effects are demonstrated, and its proportions are calculated. The cause of this cause is among the *Arcana* of the Almighty.⁷⁹

“Precedes huc, et non amplius.”

(Thus far shall you go, and no farther.) Job 38.11

LETTER 16. — ON SIR ISAAC NEWTON’S OPTICS

The philosophers of the last age found out a new universe; and a circumstance which made its discovery more difficult was that no one had so much as suspected its existence. The most sage and judicious were of the opinion that it was a frantic rashness to dare so much as to imagine it was possible to guess the laws by which the celestial bodies move, and the manner how light acts. Galileo, by his astronomical discoveries, Kepler, by his calculation, Descartes (at least in his dioptrics), and Sir Isaac Newton, in all his works, severally saw the mechanism of the springs of the world. The geometricians have subjected infinity to the laws of calculation. The circulation of the blood in animals, and of the sap in vegetables, have changed the face of Nature with regard to us. A new kind of existence has been given to bodies in the air-pump. By the assistance of telescopes, bodies have been brought nearer to one another. Finally, the several discoveries which Sir Isaac Newton has made on light are equal to the boldest things which the curiosity of man could expect after so many philosophical novelties.

Till Antonio de Dominis, the rainbow had been considered an inexplicable miracle. This philosopher guessed that it was a necessary effect of the sun and rain. Descartes gained immortal fame by his mathematical explication of this so natural a phenomenon. He calculated the reflections and refractions of light in drops of rain. And his sagacity on this occasion was at that time looked upon as next to divine.

But what would he have said had it been proved to him that he was mistaken in the nature of light; that he had not the least reason to maintain that it is a globular body? That it is false to assert that this matter, spreading itself through the whole, waits only to be projected forward by the sun in order to be put into action, in a like manner as a long staff acts at one end when pushed forward by the other. That light is certainly darted by the sun — in fine, that light is transmitted from the sun to the earth in about seven minutes, though a cannonball, if it were not to lose any of its velocity, could not go that distance in less than twenty-five years. How great would have been his astonishment if he had been told that light does not reflect directly by impinging against the solid parts of bodies, that bodies are not transparent when they have large pores, and that a man should arise who would demonstrate all these paradoxes, and anatomise a single ray of light with more dexterity than the ablest artist dissects a human body. This man has come. Sir Isaac Newton has demonstrated to the eye, by the bare

⁷⁹ *Arcana*: mysterious or secret matters known only to God.

assistance of the prism, that light is a composition of coloured rays which, being united, form white colour. A single ray is divided into seven by him, which all fall upon a piece of linen, or a sheet of white paper, in their order, one above the other, and at unequal distances. The first is red, the second orange, the third yellow, the fourth green, the fifth blue, the sixth indigo, the seventh a violet-purple. Each of these rays, transmitted afterwards by a hundred other prisms, will never change the colour it bears. Gold, in like manner, when completely purged of its dross, will never change afterwards in the crucible. As a superabundant proof that each of these elementary rays has inherently in itself that which forms its colour to the eye, take a small piece of yellow wood, for instance, and set it in the ray of a red colour; this wood will instantly be tinged red. But set it in the ray of a green colour, and it will assume a green colour, and so with all the rest.

From what cause, therefore, do colours arise in Nature? It is nothing but the disposition of bodies to reflect the rays of a certain order and to absorb all the rest.

What, then, is this secret disposition? Sir Isaac Newton demonstrates that it is nothing more than the density of the small constituent particles of which a body is composed. And how is this reflection performed? It was supposed to arise from the rebounding of the rays, in the same manner as a ball on the surface of a solid body. But this is a mistake; for Sir Isaac taught the astonished philosophers that bodies are opaque for no other reason than because their pores are large, and that light reflects on our eyes from the very bosom of those pores — the smaller the pores of a body are, the more transparent such a body is. Thus paper, which reflects the light when dry, transmits it when oiled, because the oil, by filling its pores, makes them much smaller.

It is there that examining the vast porosity of bodies — every particle having its pores, and every particle of those particles having its own — he shows we are not certain that there is a cubic inch of solid matter in the universe, so far are we from conceiving what matter is. Having thus divided, as it were, light into its elements, and carried the sagacity of his discoveries so far as to prove the method of distinguishing compound colours from primitive colours, he shows that these elementary rays, separated by the prism, are ranged in their order for no other reason than because they are refracted in that very order. And it is this property (unknown till he discovered it) of breaking or splitting in this proportion — it is this unequal refraction of rays, this power of refracting the red less than the orange colour, etc. — which he calls different *refrangibility*.⁸⁰ The most reflexible rays are the most refrangible, and from this he evinces that the same power is the cause of both the *reflection* and *refraction* of light.

But all these wonders are merely but the opening of his discoveries. He found out the secret to see the vibrations or fits of light which come and go incessantly, and which either transmit light or reflect it, according to the density of the parts they meet with. He has presumed to calculate the density of the particles of air necessary between two glasses, the one flat, the other convex on one side, set one upon the other, in order to operate such a transmission or reflection, or to form such and such a colour.

⁸⁰ *Refrangibility*: the degree to which light is refracted differently depending on its wavelength.

From all these combinations he discovers the proportion in which light acts on bodies, and bodies act on light.

He saw light so perfectly, that he has determined to what degree of perfection the art of increasing it, and of assisting our eyes by telescopes, can be carried.

Descartes, from a noble confidence that was very excusable — considering how strongly he was inspired at the first discoveries he made in an art which he, almost first, found out — Descartes, I say, hoped to discover in the stars, by the assistance of telescopes, objects as small as those we discern upon the earth.

But Sir Isaac has shown that dioptric telescopes cannot be brought to a greater perfection because of that refraction, and of that very refrangibility which at the same time that they bring objects nearer to us, scatter the elementary rays too much. He has calculated in these glasses the proportion of the scattering of the red and of the blue rays. And proceeding so far as to demonstrate things which were not supposed even to exist, he examines the inequalities which arise from the shape or figure of the glass, and that which arises from the refrangibility. He finds that the object glass of the telescope, being convex on one side and flat on the other, lest the flat side be turned towards the object, the error which arises from the construction and position of the glass is above five thousand times less than the error which arises from the refrangibility. Therefore, the shape or figure of the glasses is not the reason why telescopes cannot be carried to a greater perfection, but it arises wholly from the nature of light.

For this reason he invented a telescope which discovers objects by *reflection*, and not by *refraction*. Telescopes of this new kind are very hard to make, and their use is not easy. But according to the English, a reflective telescope of but five feet in length, has the same effect as another of a hundred feet in length.

LETTER 17. — ON INFINITES IN GEOMETRY, AND SIR ISAAC NEWTON’S CHRONOLOGY

The labyrinth and abyss of infinity is also a new course Sir Isaac Newton has gone through, and we are obliged to him for the clue, by whose assistance we are enabled to trace its various windings.

Descartes got the start on him also in this astonishing invention. He advanced with mighty steps in his geometry, and had arrived at the very borders of infinity, but went no further. Dr. Wallis,⁸¹ about the middle of the last century, was the first to reduce a fraction by perpetual division, into an infinite series.

The Lord Brouncker employed this series to square the hyperbola.⁸²

⁸¹ John Wallis (1616-1703) – English mathematician known for his contributions to calculus and for introducing the symbol ∞ to represent infinity. He served as the Savilian Professor of Geometry at Oxford, and was also a chief cryptographer for Parliament during the English Civil War.

⁸² Lord William Brouncker (1616-1703), was an Anglo-Irish mathematician and the first president of the Royal Society, serving from 1662 to 1677. He was known for his work in mathematics, particularly Brouncker's formula for fractions, and was involved in various civil service roles, including commissioner for the Royal Navy.

Mercator published a demonstration of this quadrature.⁸³ This was about the time Sir Isaac Newton, then twenty-three years of age, had invented a general method to perform on all geometrical curves what had just before been tried on the hyperbola.

It is to this method of everywhere subjecting infinity to algebraical calculations, that the name is given of *differential calculations*, or of *fluxions* and *integral calculation*. It is the art of exactly numbering and measuring a thing whose existence cannot be conceived.

And indeed, would you not imagine that a man laughed at you who would declare

- That there are lines infinitely great which form an angle infinitely little?
- That a right line, which is a right line so long as it is finite, by changing its direction infinitely little, becomes an infinite curve; and that a curve may become infinitely less than another curve?
- That there are infinite squares, infinite cubes, and infinites of infinites, all greater than one another, and the last is but one of which there is nothing in comparison to the last?

All these things, which at first appear to be the utmost excess of frenzy, are in reality an effort of the subtlety and extent of the human mind, and the art of finding truths which till then had been unknown.

Such a bold edifice is even founded on simple ideas. The business is to measure the diagonal of a square, to give the area of a curve, to find the square root of a number, which has none in common arithmetic. After all, the imagination should not be startled any more at so many orders of infinites than at the so well-known proposition that curved lines may always be made to pass between a circle and a tangent; or at that other proposition, namely, that matter is divisible in *infinitum*. These two truths have been demonstrated for many years, and are no less incomprehensible than the things we have been speaking of.

For many years the invention of this famous calculation was denied to Sir Isaac Newton. In Germany, Mr. Leibnitz was considered the inventor of the differences or moments, called *fluxions*, and Mr. Bernouilli⁸⁴ claimed *integral calculus*. However, Sir Isaac is now thought to have first made the discovery, and the other two have the glory of having once made the world doubt whether it was to be ascribed to him or them. Thus some contested with Dr. Harvey the invention of the circulation of the blood,⁸⁵ as others disputed with Mr. Perrault the circulation of sap.⁸⁶

⁸³ Gerardus Mercator (1512-1594) - Flemish polymath, known primarily as a geographer/cartographer. He invented the Mercator projection of maps of the globe. His interests included theology, philosophy, history, mathematics, and geomagnetism. He was also an accomplished engraver and calligrapher.

⁸⁴ Daniel Bernoulli (1700-1782) – Swiss mathematician and physicist known for his work in fluid dynamics, particularly for formulating *Bernoulli's Principle*, which describes the relationship between pressure and velocity in fluid flow.

⁸⁵ William Harvey (1578-1657) – English physician best known for discovering the circulation of blood in the human body, demonstrating that the heart acts as a pump to circulate blood throughout the body.

⁸⁶ Pierre Perrault (c. 1608-1680). He was a Receiver General of Finances for Paris, and later a scientist. In 1667 he introduced the theory of circulation as a way to explain how plants are nourished. The following year he cast his entire analysis in the context of whether plants and animals are nourished similarly.

Hartsocher⁸⁷ and Leuwenhoek⁸⁸ disputed with each other the honour of having first seen the *vermiculi* from which mankind are formed. This Hartsocher also contested with Huygens⁸⁹ the invention of a new method of calculating the distance of a fixed star. It is not yet known to which philosopher we owe the invention of the cycloid.⁹⁰

Be this as it will, it is by the help of this geometry of infinites that Sir Isaac Newton attained the most sublime discoveries. I will now speak of another work which, though more adapted to the capacity of the human mind, nevertheless displays some marks of that creative genius with which Sir Isaac Newton was informed in all his researches. The work I mean is a *chronology* of a new kind, for whatever province he undertook, he was sure to change the ideas and opinions received by the rest of men.

Accustomed to unravel and disentangle chaos, he was resolved to convey at least some light into that chaos of the fables of antiquity which are blended and confounded with history, and to fix an uncertain chronology. It is true that there is no family, city, or nation that does not endeavour to remove its origin as far back as possible. Besides, the first historians were the most negligent in setting down the eras. Books were infinitely less common than they are at this time, and consequently, authors not being so liable to censure, they therefore imposed upon the world with greater impunity. And as it is evident that these have related a great number of fictitious particulars, it is probable enough that they also gave us several false eras.

It appeared in general to Sir Isaac that the world was five hundred years younger than chronologers declare it to be. He grounds his opinion on the ordinary course of Nature, and on the observations which astronomers have made.

By the course of Nature we here understand the time that every generation of men lives upon the earth. The Egyptians first employed this vague and uncertain method of calculating when they began to write the beginning of their history. These computed 341 generations from Menes to Sethon;⁹¹ and having no fixed era, they supposed three generations to consist of a hundred years. In this manner they computed 11,340 years from Menes's reign to that of Sethon.

The Greeks, before they counted by Olympiads, followed the method of the Egyptians, and even gave a little more extent to generations, making each to consist of forty years.

Now, here both the Egyptians and the Greeks made an erroneous computation. It is true indeed, that according to the usual course of Nature, three generations last about a hundred

⁸⁷ Nicolaas Hartsoeker (1656–1725) – Dutch mathematician and physicist who invented the screw-barrel simple microscope c. 1694.

⁸⁸ Antonie Philips van Leeuwenhoek (1632–1723) – Dutch microbiologist and microscopist. A largely self-taught man in science, he is commonly known as "the Father of Microbiology."

⁸⁹ Christiaan Huygens (1629–1695) – Dutch mathematician, physicist, engineer, astronomer, and inventor who first formulated the wave theory of light.

⁹⁰ *Cycloid*: a curve traced by a point on the edge of a circle as it rolls along a straight line. The cycloid was studied and named by Galileo in 1599. He was the first to make a serious study of the curve.

⁹¹ Menes (c. 3200–3000 BC) was a pharaoh traditionally credited with uniting Upper and Lower Egypt and with founding the First Dynasty. Sethon (or Sethos) is most associated with Seti I, who ruled from 1290 to 1279 BC, and was the father of Ramesses II. If these are the intended pharaohs, the period is roughly 1921 years, not 11,340.

and twenty years; but three *reigns* are far from taking up so many years. It is very evident that mankind in general live longer than kings are found to reign. So that an author who might write a history in which there are no fixed dates, and would know that nine kings had reigned over a nation, such an historian would commit a great error if he were to allow three hundred years to these nine monarchs. Every *generation* takes about thirty-six years; every *reign* is, one with the other, about twenty. Thirty kings of England have swayed the sceptre from William the Conqueror to George I. The years of their reigns added together amount to 648 years which, being divided equally among the thirty kings, give to each one a reign of very near twenty-one and a half years. Sixty-three kings of France have sat upon the throne; these have, one with another, reigned about twenty years each. This is the usual course of Nature. The ancients, therefore, were mistaken when they supposed the durations in general of *reigns*, to equal that of *generations*. They therefore allowed too great a number of years, and consequently some years must be subtracted from their computation.

Astronomical observations seem to have lent a still greater assistance to our philosopher. He appears to us stronger when he fights upon his own ground.

You know that the earth, besides its annual motion which carries it round the sun from west to east in the space of a year, also has a singular revolution which was quite unknown till these recent years. Its poles have a very slow retrograde motion from east to west, from which it happens that their position every day does not correspond exactly with the same point of the heavens. This difference, which is so insensible in a year, becomes pretty considerable in time; and in 72 years the difference is found to be of one degree — that is to say, the three hundred and sixtieth part of the circumference of the whole heaven. Thus after 72 years, the colure⁹² of the vernal equinox which passed through a fixed star, corresponds with another fixed star. Hence it is that the sun, instead of being in that part of the heavens in which the *Ram* was situated in the time of Hipparchus,⁹³ is found to correspond with that part of the heavens in which the *Bull* is situated; and the *Twins* are placed where the Bull then stood. All the signs have changed their situation, and yet we still retain the same manner of speaking as the ancients did. In this age, we say that the sun is in the Ram in the spring, from the same principle of condescension that we say the sun turns round.

Hipparchus was the first among the Greeks who observed some change in the constellations with regard to the equinoxes, or rather who learnt it from the Egyptians. Philosophers ascribed this motion to the stars; for in those ages people were far from imagining such a revolution in the earth, which was supposed to be immovable in every respect. They therefore created a heaven in which they fixed the several stars, and gave this heaven a particular motion by which it was carried towards the east, while that of all the stars seemed to perform their diurnal revolution from east to west. To this error they added a second of much greater consequence, by imagining that the pretended heaven of the fixed stars advanced one degree eastward every hundred years. In this manner they were no less mistaken in their astronomical calculation than in their system of natural philosophy. For instance, an

⁹² *Colure*: either of two great circles (meridians) that intersect at the poles, and either the equinoxes or solstices.

⁹³ Hipparchus (2nd century BC) – Greek astronomer and mathematician who discovered the precession of the equinoxes, and made the first known star-chart. He is said to have developed trigonometry.

astronomer in that age would have said that the vernal equinox was in the time of such and such an observation, in such a sign, and in such a star. It has advanced two degrees of each since the time that observation was made, to the present. Now, two degrees are equivalent to two hundred years; consequently the astronomer who made that observation lived just so many years before me. It is certain that an astronomer who had argued in this manner would have mistook just fifty-four years. Hence it is that the ancients, who were doubly deceived, made their great year of the world, that is, the revolution of the whole heavens, to consist of 36,000 years. But the moderns are sensible that this imaginary revolution of the heaven of stars is nothing else than the revolution of the poles of the earth, which is performed in 25,900 years.⁹⁴ It may be proper to observe transiently in this place, that Sir Isaac, by determining the figure of the earth, has very happily explained the cause of this revolution.

All this being laid down, the only thing remaining to settle chronology is to see through what star the colure of the equinoxes passes, and where it intersects (at *this* time) the ecliptic in the spring; and to discover whether some ancient writer does not tell us at what point the ecliptic was intersected in *his* time, by the same colure of the equinoxes.

Clemens Alexandrinus⁹⁵ informs us that Chiron,⁹⁶ who went with the Argonauts, observed the constellations at the time of that famous expedition, and fixed the vernal equinox to the middle of the Ram; the autumnal equinox to the middle of Libra; our summer solstice to the middle of Cancer, and our winter solstice to the middle of Capricorn.

A long time after the expedition of the Argonauts, and a year before the Peloponnesian war, Methon⁹⁷ observed that the point of the summer solstice passed through the eighth degree of Cancer.

Now every sign of the zodiac contains thirty degrees. In Chiron's time, the solstice had arrived at the middle of the sign; that is to say, at the fifteenth degree. A year before the Peloponnesian war it was at the eighth, and therefore it had retarded seven degrees. A degree is equivalent to 72 years. Consequently, from the beginning of the Peloponnesian war to the expedition of the Argonauts, there is no more than an interval of seven times 72 years, which makes 504 years, and not 700 years as the Greeks computed. Thus in comparing the position of the heavens at this time with their position in that age, we find that the expedition of the Argonauts ought to be placed about 900 years before Christ, and not about 1400.

⁹⁴ The rotation of the stars relative to the Earth is measured as a *sidereal day*. It is approximately 23 hours, 56 minutes, and 4 seconds. This is about four minutes shorter than a solar day. That means it takes 25,772 years for the stars to complete their rotation relative to a fixed spot on earth, very close to the 25,900 years Voltaire mentions. Curiously, the Great Pyramid of Giza has a 4-inch "star-shaft" (discovered in 1993) from the center to the outside, fixed on the north star. In 2600 BC, that star was Thuban; it is now Polaris...

⁹⁵ Clement of Alexandria, c. 147-215 AD - He became the head of the Catechetical School of Alexandria and is known for his works that combined Christian teachings with Hellenistic philosophy.

⁹⁶ *Greek mythology*: Chiron was an immortal centaur and a renowned teacher in Greek mythology, known for mentoring many heroes, including Jason and the Argonauts. He was the son of the Titan Kronos, and half-brother of Zeus. Chiron was famous for his wisdom and skills in medicine.

⁹⁷ Meton of Athens – a Greek mathematician, astronomer, geometer, and engineer in the 5th century BC. He is best known for calculations involving the eponymous 19-year Metonic cycle, which he introduced in 432 BC. He discovered that 19 solar years and 235 lunar months are very nearly of the same duration.

Consequently, the world is not so old by 500 years as it was generally supposed to be. By this calculation all the eras are drawn nearer, and the several events are found to have happened later than is computed. I do not know whether this ingenious system will be favourably received, and whether these notions will prevail with the learned, so far as to prompt them to reform the chronology of the world. Perhaps these gentlemen would think it too great a condescension to allow one and the same man the glory of having improved both natural philosophy, geometry, and history. This would be a kind of universal monarchy, with which the principle of self-love that is in man will scarcely allow him to indulge his fellow-creature. And indeed, at the same time that some very great philosophers attacked Sir Isaac Newton's attractive principle, others fell upon his chronological system. Time that might reveal to which of these the victory is due, may perhaps only leave the dispute still more undetermined.

LETTER 18. — ON TRAGEDY

The English as well as the Spaniards were possessed of theatres at a time when the French had no more than moving, itinerant stages. Shakespeare, who was considered as the Corneille of the first-mentioned nation,⁹⁸ was pretty nearly contemporary with Lopez de Vega,⁹⁹ and he created, as it were, the English theatre. Shakespeare boasted a strong fruitful genius. He was natural and sublime, but did not have so much as a single spark of good taste, or knew one rule of drama. I will now hazard a random but, at the same time, true reflection, which is, that the great merit of this dramatic poet has been the ruin of the English stage. There are such beautiful, such noble, such dreadful scenes in this writer's monstrous farces, to which the name of *tragedy* is given, that they have always been exhibited with great success. Time, which alone gives reputation to writers, at last makes their very faults venerable. Most of the whimsical gigantic images of this poet, have, through length of time (it being 150 years since they were first drawn) acquired a right of passing for sublime. Most of the modern dramatic writers have copied him. But the touches and descriptions which are applauded in Shakespeare, are hissed at in these writers; and you will easily believe that the veneration in which this author is held, increases in proportion to the contempt which is shown to the moderns. Dramatic writers don't consider that they should not imitate him; and the ill-success of Shakespeare's imitators produces no other effect than to make him considered as inimitable. You remember that in the tragedy of *Othello, Moor of Venice*, a most tender piece, a man strangles his wife on the stage, and that the poor woman, while she is strangling, cries aloud that she dies very unjustly. You know that in *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, two grave-diggers make a grave, and are all the time drinking, singing ballads, and making humorous reflections (natural indeed enough to persons of their profession) on the several skulls they throw up with their spades; but a circumstance which will surprise you is, that this ridiculous incident has been imitated.

In the reign of King Charles II — which was that of politeness, and the Golden Age of the liberal arts — Otway, in his *Venice Preserved*, introduces Antonio the senator, and Naki, his courtesan, in the midst of the horrors of the Marquis of Bedemar's conspiracy. Antonio, the

⁹⁸ Pierre Corneille (1606-1674) — French dramatist known for heroic tragedies and comedies.

⁹⁹ Felix Lope de Vega (1562-1635) — Spanish playwright, poet, and novelist; a key figure in the Spanish Golden Age. He was second only to Cervantes, who called him "The Phoenix of Wits."

superannuated (old-fashioned) senator plays, in his mistress's presence, all the apish tricks of a lewd, impotent debauchee, who is quite frantic and out of his senses. He mimics a bull and a dog, and bites his mistress's legs, who kicks and whips him. However, the players have struck these buffooneries (which indeed were calculated merely for the dregs of the people) out of Otway's tragedy; but they have still left in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* the jokes of the Roman shoemakers and cobblers, who are introduced in the same scene with Brutus and Cassius. You will undoubtedly complain that those who have up to now discoursed with you on the English stage, and especially on the celebrated Shakespeare, have taken notice only of his errors; and that no one has translated any of those strong, those forcible passages which atone for all his faults. But to this I will answer that nothing is easier than to exhibit in prose all the silly impertinences which a poet may have thrown out; but also that it is a very difficult task to translate his fine verses. All your junior academical sophs, who set up for censors of the eminent writers, compile whole volumes. But I think two pages which display some of the beauties of great geniuses, are of infinitely more value than all the idle rhapsodies of those commentators. And I will join with the opinion of all persons of good taste, in declaring that greater advantage may be reaped from a dozen verses of Homer or Virgil, than from all the critiques put together which have been made on those two great poets.

I have ventured to translate some passages of the most celebrated English poets, and will now give you one from Shakespeare. Pardon the blemishes of the translation for the sake of the original; and remember always that when you see a version, you see merely a faint print of a beautiful picture. I have chosen part of the celebrated soliloquy in *Hamlet*, which you may remember is as follows:

“To be, or not to be? that is the question!
Whether 't is nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing, end them? To die! to sleep!
No more! and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to! 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die! to sleep!
To sleep; perchance to dream! O, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life:
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the poor man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin. Who would fardels bear
To groan and sweat under a weary life,

But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have,
Than fly to others that we know not of?

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought:
And enterprises of great weight and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action — “

My version of it runs thus:

“Demeure, il faut choisir et passer a l’instant
De la vie, a la mort, ou de l’etre au neant.
Dieux cruels, s’il en est, eclairez mon courage.
Faut-il vieillir courbe sous la main qui m’outrage,
Supporter, ou finir mon malheur et mon sort?

Qui suis je? Qui m’arrete! et qu’est-ce que la mort?
C’est la fin de nos maux, c’est mon unique asile
Apres de longs transports, c’est un sommeil tranquile.
On s’endort, et tout meurt, mais un affreux reveil
Doit succeder peut etre aux douceurs du sommeil!

On nous menace, on dit que cette courte vie,
De tourmens eternels est aussi-tot suivie.
O mort! moment fatal! affreuse eternite!
Tout coeur a ton seul nom se glace epouvante.

Eh! qui pourroit sans toi supporter cette vie,
De nos pretres menteurs benir l’hypocrisie:
D’une indigne maitresse encenser les erreurs,
Ramper sous un ministre, adorer ses hauteurs;

Et montrer les langueurs de son ame abattue,
A des amis ingrats qui detournent la vue?
La mort seroit trop douce en ces extremittez,
Mais le scrupule parle, et nous crie, arretez;
Il defend a nos mains cet heureux homicide
Et d’un heros guerrier, fait un Chretien timide,” etc.

Do not imagine that I have translated Shakespeare in a servile manner. Woe to the writer who gives a literal version; who by rendering every word of his original, by that very means enervates the sense, and extinguishes all the fire of it. It is on such an occasion one may justly affirm that the letter kills, but the Spirit quickens. ^{2Cor 3.6}

Here follows another passage copied from a celebrated tragic writer among the English. It is Dryden, a poet in the reign of Charles II — a writer whose genius was too exuberant, and not

accompanied with enough judgment. Had he written only a tenth of the works he left behind him, his character would have been conspicuous in every part; but his great fault is his having endeavoured to be universal. The passage in question is as follows:

“When I consider life, ‘t is all a cheat,
Yet fooled by hope, men favour the deceit;
Trust on and think, to-morrow will repay;
Tomorrow’s falser than the former day;
Lies more; and while it says we shall be blest
With some new joy, cuts off what we possessed;
Strange cozenage! none would live past years again,
Yet all hope pleasure in what yet remain,
And from the dregs of life think to receive
What the first sprightly running could not give.
I’m tired with waiting for this chymic gold,
Which fools us young, and beggars us when old.”

I shall now give you my translation:

“De desseins en regrets et d’erreurs en desirs
Les mortals insenses promenant leur folie.
Dans des malheurs presents, dans l’espoir des plaisirs
Nous ne vivons jamais, nous attendons la vie.
Demain, demain, dit-on, va combler tous nos vœux.
Demain vient, et nous laisse encore plus malheureux.
Quelle est l’erreur, hélas! du soin qui nous devore,
Nul de nous ne voudroit recommencer son cours.
De nos premiers momens nous maudissons l’aurore,
Et de la nuit qui vient nous attendons encore,
Ce qu’ont en vain promis les plus beaux de nos jours,” etc.

It is in these detached passages that the English have previously excelled. Their dramatic pieces, most of which are barbarous and without decorum, order, or verisimilitude, dart such resplendent flashes through this gleam, as amaze and astonish. The style is too much inflated, too unnatural, too closely copied from the Hebrew writers, who abound so much with the Asiatic fustian.¹⁰⁰ But then it must be also confessed that the stilts of the figurative style on which the English tongue is lifted up, raises the genius very far aloft at the same time, though with an irregular pace. The first English writer who composed a regular tragedy, and infused a spirit of elegance through every part of it, was the illustrious Mr. Addison.¹⁰¹ His “Cato” is a masterpiece, both with regard to the diction and to the beauty and harmony of the numbers. The character of Cato is, in my opinion, vastly superior to that of Cornelia in the “Pompey” of Corneille, for Cato is great without anything like fustian, and Cornelia, who besides is not a necessary character, sometimes tends to bombast. Mr. Addison’s Cato appears to me the greatest character that was ever brought upon any stage; but then the rest of them do not

¹⁰⁰ *Fustian*: pompous or pretentious talk or writing.

¹⁰¹ Joseph Addison (1672-1719) – an English playwright and essayist, best known for his 1713 play “Cato, a Tragedy,” which dramatizes the last days of the Roman senator Cato the Younger, and explores themes of liberty and tyranny.

correspond to the dignity of it, and this dramatic piece, so excellently well writ, is disfigured by a dull love plot, which spreads a certain languor over the whole, that quite murders it.

The custom was to introduce love at random, and at any cost, in the drama passed from Paris to London about 1660, with our ribbons and our perruques (wigs). The ladies who adorn the theatrical circle there, in like manner as in this city, will suffer love to be the sole theme of every conversation. The judicious Mr. Addison had the effeminate complaisance to soften the severity of his dramatic character, so as to adapt it to the manners of the age, and from an endeavour to please, he quite ruined a masterpiece in its kind. Since his time the drama has become more regular, the audience more difficult to please, and writers more correct and less bold. I have seen some new pieces that were written with great regularity, but which, at the same time, were very flat and insipid. One would think that the English had been formed up till then, to produce only irregular beauties. The shining monsters of Shakespeare give infinite more delight than the judicious images of the moderns. Up to now the poetical genius of the English resembles a tufted tree planted by the hand of Nature, that throws out a thousand branches at random, and spreads unequally, but with great vigour. It dies if you attempt to force its nature, and to lop and dress it in the same manner as the trees of the Garden of Marli.¹⁰²

LETTER 19. — ON COMEDY

I am surprised that the judicious and ingenious Mr. de Muralt,¹⁰³ who has published some letters on the English and French nations, should have confined himself in studying comedy, merely to censure Shadwell, the comic writer.¹⁰⁴ This author was held in pretty great contempt in Mr. de Muralt's time, and was not the poet of the polite part of the nation. His dramatic pieces, which pleased some time in acting, were despised by all persons of taste. They might be compared to many plays which I have seen in France, that drew crowds to the playhouse, at the same time that they were intolerable to read. It might be said that the whole city of Paris decried them, and yet all flocked to see them represented on the stage. I think Mr. de Muralt should have mentioned an excellent comic writer (living when he was in England) — I mean Mr. Wycherley,¹⁰⁵ who was a long time known publicly to be happy in the good graces of the most celebrated mistress of King Charles II. This gentleman, who passed his life among persons of the highest distinction, was perfectly well acquainted with their lives and their follies, and painted them with the strongest pencil, and in the truest colours. He has drawn a misanthrope or man-hater, in imitation of that of Moliere.¹⁰⁶ All Wycherley's strokes are stronger and bolder than those of our misanthrope, but then they are less delicate, and the

¹⁰² The Château de Marly was a French royal residence located in what is now Marly-le-Roi, the commune on the northern edge of the royal park. This was situated west of the palace and garden complex at Versailles.

¹⁰³ B  at Louis de Muralt (1665-1749) – Swiss military officer and travel author; he wrote studies of national character.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Shadwell – 17th-century English playwright and Poet Laureate, best known for his satirical comedies and his rivalry with John Dryden.

¹⁰⁵ William Wycherley (1641–1716) – English dramatist best known for Restoration comedies like *The Country-Wife* (1675) and *The Plain-Dealer* (1676) that satirized hypocrisy and social pretenses.

¹⁰⁶ Moli  re (1622-1673), born Jean-Baptiste Poquelin – French playwright and actor renowned for his comedies that satirized society and human behavior. He is considered one of the greatest writers in the French language.

rules of decorum are not so well observed in this play. The English writer has corrected the only defect that is in Moliere's comedy, the thinness of the plot, which also is so disposed that the characters in it do not raise our concern enough. The English comedy affects us, and the contrivance of the plot is very ingenious, but at the same time it is too bold for the French manners. The fable is this:

A captain of a man-of-war, who is very brave, open-hearted, and inflamed with a spirit of contempt for all mankind, has a prudent, sincere friend, whom he yet is suspicious of; and a mistress that loves him with the utmost excess of passion. The captain, so far from returning her love, will not even condescend to look upon her, but confides entirely in a false friend, who is the most worthless wretch living. At the same time, he has given his heart to a creature who is the greatest coquette and the most perfidious of her sex, and he is so credulous as to be confident she is a Penelope, and his false friend a Cato. He embarks on board his ship in order to go and fight the Dutch, having left all his money, his jewels, and everything he had in the world, to this virtuous creature, whom at the same time he recommends to the care of his supposed faithful friend. Nevertheless the real man of honour, whom he suspects so unaccountably, goes on board the ship with him, and the mistress, on whom he would not bestow so much as one glance, disguises herself in the attire of a page, and is with him the whole voyage, without his once knowing that she is of a different sex from what she attempts to pass for, which, by the way, is not over natural.

The captain having blown up his own ship in an engagement, returns to England abandoned and undone, accompanied by his page and his friend, without knowing the friendship of the one, or the tender passion of the other. Immediately he goes to the jewel among women, who he expected had preserved her fidelity to him, and the treasure he had left in her hands. He meets with her indeed, but she is married to the honest knave in whom he had reposed so much confidence, and finds she had acted as treacherously with regard to the casket he had entrusted her with. The captain can scarcely think it possible that a woman of virtue and honour can act so vile a part. But to convince him still more of the reality of it, this very worthy lady falls in love with the little page, and will force him to her embraces. But as it is requisite that justice should be done, and that in a dramatic piece, virtue ought to be rewarded and vice punished, it is at last found that the captain takes his page's place, and lies with his faithless mistress, cuckolds his treacherous friend, thrusts his sword through his body, recovers his casket, and marries his page.

You will observe that this play is also larded with a petulant, litigious old woman (a relation of the captain), who is the most comical character that was ever brought upon the stage.

Wycherley has also copied from Moliere another play, of as singular and bold a cast, which is a kind of *Ecole des Femmes*, or *School for Married Women*.

The principal character in this comedy is one Homer, a sly fortune hunter, and the terror of all the City husbands. This fellow, in order to play a surer game, causes a report to be spread that in his last illness, the surgeons had found it necessary to have him made a eunuch. Upon his appearing in this noble character, all the husbands in town flock to him with their wives, and now poor Homer is only puzzled about his choice. However, he gives the preference particularly to a little female peasant, a very harmless, innocent creature, who enjoys a fine flush of health, and cuckolds her husband with a simplicity that has infinitely more merit than

the witty malice of the most experienced ladies. This play cannot indeed be called the school of good morals, but it is certainly the school of wit and true humour.

Sir John Vanbrugh ¹⁰⁷ has written several comedies, which are more humorous than those of Mr. Wycherley, but not so ingenious. Sir John was a man of pleasure, and likewise a poet and an architect. The general opinion is that he is as sprightly in his writings as he is heavy in his buildings. It is he who raised the famous Castle of Blenheim, a ponderous and lasting monument of our unfortunate Battle of Hochstet.¹⁰⁸ If only the apartments were as spacious as the walls are thick, this castle would be commodious enough. Some wag,¹⁰⁹ in an epitaph he made on Sir John Vanbrugh, has these lines:

“Earth lie light on him, for he
Laid many a heavy load on thee.”

Sir John having taken a tour into France before the glorious war that broke out in 1701, was thrown into the Bastille, and detained there for some time, without ever being able to discover the motive which had prompted our ministry to indulge him with this mark of their distinction. He wrote a comedy during his confinement. And a circumstance which appears to me very extraordinary, is that we don't meet with so much as a single satirical stroke against the country in which he had been so injuriously treated.

The late Mr. Congreve ¹¹⁰ raised the glory of comedy to a greater height than any English writer before or since his time. He wrote only a few plays, but they are all excellent in their kind. The laws of the drama are strictly observed in them. They abound with characters all of which are shadowed with the utmost delicacy, and we don't meet with so much as one low or coarse jest. The *language* is everywhere that of men of honour, but their *actions* are those of knaves — a proof that he was perfectly well acquainted with human nature, and frequented what we call polite company. He was infirm and had come to the verge of life when I knew him. Mr. Congreve had one defect, which was his entertaining too mean an idea of his first profession (that of a writer), though it was to this that he owed his fame and fortune. He spoke of his works as trifles that were beneath him; and hinted to me in our first conversation, that I should visit him upon no other footing than that of a gentleman who led a life of plainness and simplicity. I answered that had he been so unfortunate as to be a mere gentleman, I would never have come to see him; and I was very much disgusted at so unseasonable a piece of vanity.

¹⁰⁷ Sir John Vanbrugh (1664-1726) – English architect and dramatist, best known for his designs of notable buildings like Blenheim Palace and Castle Howard, as well as for his influential Restoration comedies such as "The Relapse" and "The Provoked Wife." He played a significant role in developing the English Baroque architectural style.

¹⁰⁸ The First Battle of Höchstädt (20 Sept 1703) was a Franco-Bavarian victory in the War of the Spanish Succession. It secured the Danube line for the French coalition and threatened the Habsburg capital of Vienna. The French suffered 1500 casualties, as against 4500 by the Imperial forces, but it weakened their position in the war. The battle did not lead to a decisive strategic advantage, since the Imperial forces managed to escape and regroup.

¹⁰⁹ *Wag*: a witty or mischievous person.

¹¹⁰ William Congreve (1670-1729) was an English playwright and poet known for his influential works in the comedy of manners during the Restoration period, following the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in which James II was replaced by his daughter Mary II and her husband, William III of Orange. Parliament became the ruling power over the Crown.

Mr. Congreve's comedies are the most witty and regular, those of Sir John Vanbrugh most gay and humorous, and those of Mr. Wycherley have the greatest force and spirit. It may be proper to observe that these fine geniuses never spoke disadvantageously of Moliere; and that none but the *contemptible* writers among the English have endeavoured to lessen the character of that great comic poet. Those Italian musicians who despise Lully ¹¹¹ are themselves persons of no character or ability; but a Buononcini ¹¹² esteems that great artist (Lully), and does justice to his merit.

The English have some other good comic writers living, such as Sir Richard Steele ¹¹³ and Mr. Cibber,¹¹⁴ who is an excellent player, and also Poet Laureate — a title which, however ridiculous it may be thought, is yet worth a thousand crowns a year (besides some considerable privileges) to the person who enjoys it. Our illustrious Corneille did not have so much.

To conclude. Don't desire me to descend to particulars with regard to these English comedies which I am so fond of applauding; nor to give you a single smart saying or humorous stroke from Wycherley or Congreve. We don't laugh in rendering a translation. If you have a mind to understand the English comedy, the only way to do this will be for you to go to England, to spend three years in London, to make yourself master of the English tongue, and to frequent the playhouse every night. I receive but little pleasure from the perusal of Aristophanes ¹¹⁵ and Plautus,¹¹⁶ and for this reason, because I am neither a Greek nor a Roman. The delicacy of the humour, the allusion, the *a propos* — all these are lost to a foreigner.

But it is different with respect to tragedy, this treating only of exalted passions and heroical follies, which the antiquated errors of fable or history have made sacred. OEdipus, Electra, and such-like characters, may with as much propriety be treated of by the Spaniards, the English, or us, as by the Greeks. But true comedy is the speaking picture of the follies and ridiculous foibles of a nation; so that he only is able to judge of the painting who is perfectly acquainted with the people it represents.

¹¹¹ Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687) – Italian-born composer who became a prominent figure in French music, serving in the court of Louis XIV and significantly shaping the French opera style. He is often referred to as the father of French opera due to his influential works and collaborations, particularly with playwright Molière.

¹¹² Buononcini, also known as Giovanni Bononcini, was an Italian Baroque composer, cellist, and singer born on July 18, 1670, in Modena. He is best remembered as a rival of George Frideric Handel in England, where he gained significant popularity for his operas and compositions until his departure in disgrace in 1727. He left London after charges of plagiarism were proven against him: he had palmed off a madrigal by Antonio Lotti as his own work.

¹¹³ Richard Steele was an Anglo-Irish writer and playwright born around 1671, best known for co-founding the magazines *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. He was influential in the development of English journalism and wrote several notable plays, including *The Conscious Lovers*.

¹¹⁴ Colley Cibber (1671-1757) was known for his comedies and his autobiography. He was a significant figure in British theatre, managing Drury Lane and writing 25 plays, many of which were adaptations.

¹¹⁵ Aristophanes – Greek comic playwright from Athens, c. 427-386 BC, known for his sharp political satire and bold fantasy in the genre of Old Comedy. He wrote approximately 40 plays, of which 11 have survived. His works often addressed contemporary social and political issues, including the Peloponnesian War.

¹¹⁶ Titus Maccius Plautus (c. 254-184 BC) – Roman comic playwright of the Old Latin period; his surviving comedies are the earliest intact Latin literary works.

LETTER 20. — ON SUCH OF THE NOBILITY AS CULTIVATE THE BELLES LETTRES ¹¹⁷

There once was a time in France when the polite arts were cultivated by persons of the highest rank in the state. The courtiers particularly were conversant in them, although indolence, a taste for trifles, and a passion for intrigue, were the divinities of the country. I think the Court at this time seems to have given into a taste quite opposite to that of polite literature, but perhaps the mode of thinking may be revived in a little time. The French are of so flexible a disposition, and may be moulded into such a variety of shapes, that the monarch needs but command and he is immediately obeyed. The English generally *think*, and learning is held in greater honour among them than in our country — an advantage that results naturally from the form of their government. There are about eight hundred persons in England who have a right to speak in public, and to support the interest of the kingdom; and nearly five or six thousand may in their turns aspire to the same honour. The whole nation set themselves up as judges over these, and every man has the liberty of publishing his thoughts with regard to public affairs — which shows that all the people in general are indispensably obliged to cultivate their understandings. In England, the governments of Greece and Rome are the subject of every conversation, so that every man is under a necessity to peruse those authors who discuss them, however disagreeable it may be to him; and this study leads naturally to that of polite literature. Mankind in general speak well in their respective professions. What is the reason that our magistrates, our lawyers, our physicians, and a great number of the clergy, are abler scholars, have a finer taste, and more wit, than persons of all other professions? The reason is because their condition of life requires a cultivated and enlightened mind, in the same manner as a merchant is obliged to be acquainted with his commerce. Not long ago an English nobleman, who was very young, came to see me at Paris on his return from Italy. He had written a poetical description of that country, which, for delicacy and politeness, may vie with anything we meet with in the Earl of Rochester,¹¹⁸ or in our Chaulieu, our Sarrasin, or Chapelle.¹¹⁹ The translation I have given of it is so inexpressive of the strength and delicate humour of the original, that I am obliged seriously to ask pardon of the author and of all who understand English. However, as this is the only method I have to make his lordship's verses known, I shall here present you with them in our tongue:

“Qu’ay je donc vu dans l’Italie?
Orgueil, astuce, et pauvreté,
Grands compliments, peu de bonté
Et beaucoup de cérémonie.

¹¹⁷ Belles-lettres (Fr. pronunciation *bel letʁ*) — a category of writing, meaning beautiful or fine literature.

¹¹⁸ John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester, was a prominent English poet and courtier known for his sharp wit and libertine lifestyle during the Restoration court of King Charles II. He is celebrated for his satirical poetry and was considered one of the most significant poets of his time.

¹¹⁹ **Guillaume Amfrye de Chaulieu** (1639 – 1720) – French poet and wit. He gained recognition for his poetry and was a prominent figure in the literary circles of his time. **Jean-François Sarasin** (1614-1654) – French author of elegant verse, best known for the mock epic *Dulot vaincu* (“Dulot Defeated”). **Jean de La Chapelle** (1651-1723) – French writer and dramatist born into minor nobility, who wrote and staged tragedies inspired by classical antiquity.

“L’extravagante comedie
Que souvent l’Inquisition
Vent qu’on nomme religion
Mais qu’ici nous nommons folie.

“La Nature en vain bienfaisante
Vent enrichir ses lieux charmans,
Des pretres la main desolante
Etouffe ses plus beaux presens.

“Les monsignors, soy disant Grands,
Seuls dans leurs palais magnifiques
Y sont d’illustres faineants,
Sans argent, et sans domestiques.

“Pour les petits, sans liberte,
Martyrs du joug qui les domine,
Ils ont fait voeu de pauvrete,
Priant Dieu par oisivete
Et toujours jeunant par famine.

“Ces beaux lieux du Pape benis
Semblent habitez par les diables;
Et les habitans miserables
Sont damnes dans le Paradis.”

LETTER 21. — ON THE EARL OF ROCHESTER AND MR. WALLER

The Earl of Rochester’s name is universally known. Mr. de St. Evremont has made very frequent mention of him; but then he has represented this famous nobleman in no other light than as the man of pleasure, as one who was the idol of the fair; but with regard to myself, I would willingly describe in him the man of genius, the great poet. Among other pieces which display the shining imagination, his lordship could only boast he wrote some satires on the same subjects as those which our celebrated Boileau chose.¹²⁰ I do not know any better method of improving the taste, than to compare the productions of such great geniuses as have exercised their talent on the same subject. Boileau declaims as follows against human reason in his “Satire on Man:”

“Cependant a le voir plein de vapeurs legeres,
Soi-meme se bercer de ses propres chimeres,
Lui seul de la nature est la baze et l’appui,
Et le dixieme ciel ne tourne que pour lui.
De tous les animaux il est ici le maitre;
Qui pourroit le nier, poursuis tu? Moi peut-etre.

¹²⁰ Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux (1636–1711) – French satirist and poet known for his influential satires that critiqued contemporary society and literature, particularly during the reign of Louis XIV.

Ce maitre pretendu qui leur donne des loix,
Ce roi des animaux, combien a-t'il de rois?"

Translation:

"Yet, pleased with idle whimsies of his brain,
And puffed with pride, this haughty thing would fain
Be think himself the only stay and prop
That holds the mighty frame of Nature up.
The skies and stars his properties must seem,

Of all the creatures he's the lord, he cries.

And who is there, say you, that dares deny
So owned a truth? That may be, sir, do I.

This boasted monarch of the world who awes
The creatures here, and with his nod gives laws
This self-named king, who thus pretends to be
The lord of all, how many lords has he?"

OLDHAM, *a little altered.*

The Lord Rochester expresses himself, in his "Satire against Man," in pretty near the following manner. But I must first desire you to always remember that the versions I give you from the English poets are written with freedom and latitude, and that the restraint of our versification, and the delicacies of the French tongue, will not allow a translator to convey into it the licentious impetuosity and fire of the English numbers:

"Cet esprit que je hais, cet esprit plein d'erreur,
Ce n'est pas ma raison, c'est la tienne, docteur.
C'est la raison frivole, inquiete, orgueilleuse
Des sages animaux, rivale dedaigneuse,
Qui croit entr'eux et l'Ange, occuper le milieu,
Et pense etre ici bas l'image de son Dieu.
Vil atome imparfait, qui croit, doute, dispute
Rampe, s'eleve, tombe, et nie encore sa chute,
Qui nous dit je suis libre, en nous montrant ses fers,
Et dont l'oeil trouble et faux, croit percer l'univers.
Allez, reverends fous, bienheureux fanatiques,
Compilez bien l'amas de vos riens scholastiques,
Peres de visions, et d'enigmes sacres,
Auteurs du labyrinthe, ou vous vous egarez.
Allez obscurément eclaircir vos misteres,
Et courez dans l'ecole adorer vos chimeres.
Il est d'autres erreurs, il est de ces devots
Condamne par eux memes a l'ennui du repos.
Ce mystique encloitre, fier de son indolence
Tranquille, au sein de Dieu. Que peut il faire? Il pense.
Non, tu ne penses point, miserable, tu dors:
Inutile a la terre, et mis au rang des morts.

Ton esprit enerve croupit dans la molesse.
Reveille toi, sois homme, et sors de ton ivresse.
L'homme est ne pour agir, et tu pretens penser?" etc.

The original runs thus:

"Hold mighty man, I cry all this we know,
And 'tis this very reason I despise,
This supernatural gift that makes a mite
Think he's the image of the Infinite;
Comparing his short life, void of all rest,
To the eternal and the ever blest.
This busy, puzzling stirrer up of doubt,
That frames deep mysteries, then finds them out,
Filling, with frantic crowds of thinking fools,
Those reverend bedlams, colleges, and schools;
Borne on whose wings each heavy sot can pierce
The limits of the boundless universe.
So charming ointments make an old witch fly,
And bear a crippled carcass through the sky.
'Tis this exalted power, whose business lies
In nonsense and impossibilities.
This made a whimsical philosopher
Before the spacious world his tub prefer;
And we have modern cloistered coxcombs, who
Retire to think, 'cause they have naught to do.
But thoughts are given for action's government,
Where action ceases, thought's impertinent."

Whether these ideas are true or false, it is certain they are expressed with an energy and fire which form the poet. I will be very far from attempting to philosophically examine these verses — to lay down the pencil and take up the rule and compass on this occasion. My only design in this letter is to display the genius of the English poets, and therefore I will continue in the same view.

The celebrated Mr. Waller ¹²¹ has been very much talked about in France; and Mr. De la Fontaine,¹²² St. Evremont,¹²³ and Bayle ¹²⁴ have written his eulogium. But still, only his name

¹²¹ Edmund Waller (1606-1687) – English poet whose adoption of smooth, regular versification prepared the way for the heroic couplet's emergence by the end of the century as the dominant form of poetic expression. His importance was fully recognized by his age. "Mr. Waller reformed our numbers," said John Dryden, who, with Alexander Pope, followed him and raised the couplet to its most concentrated form. — *Ency. Brit.*

¹²² Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695) – French writer best known for his Fables, a collection of verse fables that became masterpieces of French literature.

¹²³ Charles de Saint-Évremond (1613-1703) – French writer and moralist born in 1613, known for his essays and literary criticism. He lived in exile in England after criticizing French policy and became a prominent figure in London society.

¹²⁴ Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) – French philosopher and writer, best known for his work "Historical and Critical Dictionary," which began publication in 1697. He is recognized for his contributions to skepticism and religious toleration, influencing the Enlightenment thinkers that followed him.

is known. He had much the same reputation in London as Voiture had in Paris,¹²⁵ and in my opinion deserved it better. Voiture was born in an age that was just emerging from barbarity; an age that was still rude and ignorant, the people of which aimed at wit, though they did not have the least pretensions to it, and sought for points and conceits instead of sentiments. Bristol stones are more easily found than diamonds. Voiture, born with an easy and frivolous, genius, was the first who shone in this aurora of French literature. Had he come into the world after those great geniuses who spread such a glory over the age of Louis XIV, he would either have been unknown, been despised, or would have corrected his style. Boileau applauded him, but it was in his first satires, at a time when the taste of that great poet was not yet formed. He was young, and in an age when persons form a judgment about men from their reputation, and not from their writings. Besides, Boileau was very partial both in his encomiums ¹²⁶ and his censures. He applauded Segrais,¹²⁷ whose works nobody reads; he abused Quinault,¹²⁸ whose poetical pieces everyone has learned by heart; and is wholly silent upon La Fontaine. Waller, though a better poet than Voiture, was not yet a finished poet. The graces breathe in such of Waller's works as are written in a tender strain; but then they are languid through negligence, and often disfigured with false thoughts. The English had not attained in his time the art of correct writing. But his serious compositions exhibit a strength and vigour which could not have been expected from the softness and effeminacy of his other pieces. He wrote an elegy on Oliver Cromwell, which, with all its faults, is nevertheless looked upon as a masterpiece. To understand this copy of verses you are to know that the day Oliver Cromwell died was remarkable for a great storm. Waller's poem begins in this manner:

“Il n'est plus, s'en est fait, soumettons nous au sort,
Le ciel a signale ce jour par des tempetes,
Et la voix des tonnerres eclatant sur nos tetes
Vient d'annoncer sa mort.

“Par ses derniers soupirs il ebranle cet ile;
Cet ile que son bras fit trembler tant de fois,
Quand dans le cours de ses exploits,
Il brisoit la tete des Rois,
Et soumettoit un peuple a son joug seul docile.

“Mer tu t'en es trouble; O mer tes flots emus
Semblent dire en grondant aux plus lointains rivages
Que l'effroi de la terre et ton maitre n'est plus.

“Tel au ciel autrefois s'envola Romulus,
Tel il quitta la Terre, au milieu des orages,

¹²⁵ Vincent Voiture (1597-1648) – French poet and prose writer known for his witty letters and light verse; an early member of the Académie française.

¹²⁶ *Encomium*: a formal expression of praise and admiration.

¹²⁷ Jean Regnault de Segrais (1624-1701) – French poet and novelist who made significant contributions to French poetry. He was elected a member of the Académie française in 1662.

¹²⁸ Philippe Quinault (1635–1688) – a prominent French playwright and opera librettist known for his influential contributions to 17th-century French theater and the development of French opera, particularly through his collaborations with composer Jean-Baptiste Lully.

Tel d'un peuple guerrier il recut les hommages;
Obei dans sa vie, sa mort adore,
Son palais fut un Temple," etc.

Original English:

"We must resign! heaven his great soul does claim
In storms as loud as his immortal fame;
His dying groans, his last breath shakes our isle,
And trees uncut fall for his funeral pile:
About his palace their broad roots are tossed
Into the air; so Romulus was lost!
New Rome in such a tempest missed her king,
And from obeying fell to worshipping.
On OEta's top thus Hercules lay dead,
With ruined oaks and pines about him spread.
Nature herself took notice of his death,
And, sighing, swelled the sea with such a breath,
That to remotest shores the billows rolled,
Th' approaching fate of his great ruler told."

WALLER.

It was this eulogium that gave occasion to the reply (taken notice of in *Bayle's Dictionary*), which Waller made to King Charles II. This king, to whom Waller had a little earlier (as is usual with bards and monarchs) presented a copy of verses embroidered with praises, reproached the poet for not writing with so much energy and fire as when he had applauded the Usurper (meaning Oliver). "Sir," replied Waller to the king, "we poets succeed better in fiction than in truth." This answer was not so sincere as that which a Dutch ambassador made when the same monarch complained that his masters paid less regard to him than they had done to Cromwell. "Ah, sir!" says the Ambassador, "Oliver was quite another man." It is not my intent to give a commentary on Waller's character, nor on that of any other person. For I consider men after their death in no other light than as they were writers, and I wholly disregard everything else. I will only observe that Waller, though born in a court, and to an estate of five or six thousand pounds sterling a year,¹²⁹ was never so proud or so indolent as to lay aside the happy talent which Nature had indulged him. The Earls of Dorset and Roscommon, the two Dukes of Buckingham, the Lord Halifax, and so many other noblemen, did not think the reputation that they obtained of very great poets and illustrious writers, was in any way derogatory to their quality. They are more glorious for their works, than for their titles. These cultivated the polite arts with as much assiduity as though they had been their whole dependence.

They have also made learning appear venerable in the eyes of the vulgar, who need to be led in all things by the great; and who nevertheless fashion their manners less after those of the nobility (in England I mean) than in any other country in the world.

¹²⁹ £5,000 in 1650 would be worth about £1,034,000 in 2026.

LETTER 22. — ON MR. POPE AND SOME OTHER FAMOUS POETS

I intended to speak of Mr. Prior,¹³⁰ one of the most amiable English poets, whom you saw as Plenipotentiary and Envoy Extraordinary at Paris in 1712. I also designed to have given you some idea of the Lord Roscommon's ¹³¹ and the Lord Dorset's muse;¹³² but I find that to do this I would be obliged to write a large volume — and I find that, after much pains and trouble, you would have but an imperfect idea of all those works. Poetry is a kind of music in which a man should have some knowledge before he pretends to judge it. When I give you a translation of some passages from those foreign poets, I only prick down their music,¹³³ and do it imperfectly; but then, I cannot express the taste of their harmony.

There is one English poem especially which I should despair of ever making you understand, the title of which is “Hudibras.” ¹³⁴ The subject of it is the Civil War in the time of the grand rebellion, and in which the principles and practice of the Puritans are ridiculed. It is *Don Quixote*, it is our “Satire Menippe” blended together.¹³⁵ I never found so much wit in one single book as in that, which at the same time is the most difficult to be translated. Who would believe that a work which paints in such lively and natural colours the several foibles and follies of mankind, and where we meet with more sentiments than words, should baffle the endeavours of the ablest translator? But the reason for this, is that almost every part of it alludes to particular incidents. The clergy there are made the principal object of ridicule, which is understood only by few among the laity. To explain this, a commentary would be requisite — and when humour is explained, it is no longer humour. Whoever sets himself up to be a commentator of smart sayings and repartees, is himself a blockhead. This is why the works of the ingenious Dean Swift,¹³⁶ who has been called the English Rabelais, will never be well understood in France. This gentleman has the honour (in common with Rabelais) of being a priest, and like him, laughs at everything. But in my humble opinion, the title of the English Rabelais which is given the dean, is highly derogatory to his genius. The former has interspersed his unaccountably fantastic and unintelligible book with the most gay strokes of

¹³⁰ Matthew Prior (1664-1721) — an important English poet recognized for his diverse poetic styles, including philosophical poems and polished lyrics, bridging the gap between John Dryden and Alexander Pope.

¹³¹ Wentworth Dillon, 4th Earl of Roscommon (1637-1685) — Anglo-Irish soldier and poet. His *Essay on Translated Verse* (1684) contained the first definite enunciation of the principles of poetic diction, which were to be fully developed in the reign of Queen Anne. Alexander Pope seems to have learned something from his carefully balanced phrases and the regular cadence of his verse. He said of him, “In all Charles's days, Roscommon alone boasts unspotted bays.”

¹³² Thomas Sackville, 1st Earl of Dorset (1536-1608) — English statesman, poet, and dramatist. He was the son of Richard Sackville, a cousin to Anne Boleyn. He was a Member of Parliament and Lord High Treasurer.

¹³³ That is, to highlight or emphasize specific points; to make a concise or pointed summary of something.

¹³⁴ *Hudibras* — a satirical poem written in a mock-heroic style by Samuel Butler (1613–1680), published in three parts in 1663, 1664 and 1678. The action is set in the last years of the Interregnum, around 1658–60, after the death of Cromwell in 1558, and immediately before the restoration of Charles II as king in May 1660.

¹³⁵ The *Satire Ménippée* was a political and satirical work in prose and verse that mercilessly parodied the Catholic League and Spanish pretensions during the Wars of Religion in France. It championed the idea of an independent but Catholic France. It was written in 1593, a collaborative effort of various functionaries, lawyers, clerics, and scholars.

¹³⁶ Dean Swift, or Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) was an Anglo-Irish writer, essayist, and satirist, best known for his book *Gulliver's Travels*. He is regarded as one of the greatest satirists in English literature.

humour; but which, at the same time, has a greater proportion of impertinence. He has been vastly lavish of erudition, of smut, and insipid raillery. An agreeable tale of two pages is purchased at the expense of whole volumes of nonsense. There are but few persons, and those of a grotesque taste, who pretend to understand and to esteem this work. For, as to the rest of the nation, they laugh at the pleasant and diverting touches which are found in Rabelais, and yet despise his book. He is looked upon as the prince of buffoons. The readers are vexed to think that a man who was master of so much wit should have made so wretched a use of it; he is an intoxicated philosopher who never wrote except when he was drunk.

Dean Swift is Rabelais in his senses, and frequenting the politest company. The former, indeed, is not so gay as the latter, but then he possesses all the delicacy, the justness, the choice, and the good taste in all of which particulars our giggling rural Vicar Rabelais is wanting. The poetical numbers of Dean Swift are of a singular and almost inimitable taste; true humour, whether in prose or verse, seems to be his peculiar talent. But whoever desires to understand him perfectly must visit the island in which he was born.

It will be much easier for you to form an idea of Mr. Pope's works.¹³⁷ He is, in my opinion, the most elegant, the most correct poet; and at the same time, he is the most harmonious that England ever gave birth to (a circumstance which redounds very much to the honour of this muse). He has mellowed the harsh sounds of the English trumpet to the soft accents of the flute. His compositions may be easily translated, because they are vastly clear and perspicuous; besides this, most of his subjects are general, and relative to all nations.

His "Essay on Criticism" will soon be known in France by the translation which l'Abbe de Resnel has made of it.¹³⁸

Here is an extract from his poem entitled the "Rape of the Lock," which I just now translated with the latitude I usually take on these occasions; for once again nothing can be more ridiculous than to translate a poet literally:

"Umbriel, a l'instant, vieil gnome rechigne,
Va d'une aile pesante et d'un air renfrogne
Chercher en murmurant la caverne profonde,
Ou loin des doux raions que repand l'oeil du monde
La Deesse aux Vapeurs a choisi son sejour,
Les Tristes Aquilons y sifflent a l'entour,
Et le souffle mal sain de leur aride haleine
Y porte aux environs la fievre et la migraine.
Sur un riche sofa derriere un paravent
Loin des flambeaux, du bruit, des parleurs et du vent,
La quinteuse deesse incessamment repose,

¹³⁷ Alexander Pope (1688–1744) – English poet, translator, and satirist of the Enlightenment era who is considered one of the most prominent English poets of the early 18th century. An exponent of Augustan literature, Pope is best known for his satirical and discursive poetry, and for his translations of Homer. His *Essay on Man* is an affirmative statement of faith: life seems chaotic and confusing to man in the centre of it, but according to Pope it is truly divinely ordered. In Pope's world, God exists and he centres the Universe around Himself as an ordered structure.

¹³⁸ Jean-François Du Resnel du Bellay (1692-1761) was a French ecclesiastic, writer, and translator.

Le coeur gros de chagrin, sans en savoir la cause.
 N'ayant pense jamais, l'esprit toujours trouble,
 L'oeil charge, le teint pale, et l'hypocondre enfle.
 La medisante Envie, est assise aupres d'elle,
 Vieil spectre feminin, decrepite pucelle,
 Avec un air devot dechirant son prochain,
 Et chansonnant les Gens l'Evangile a la main.
 Sur un lit plein de fleurs negligemment panchee
 Une jeune beaute non loin d'elle est couchee,
 C'est l'Affectation qui grassaie en parlant,
 Ecoute sans entendre, et lorgne en regardant.
 Qui rougit sans pudeur, et rit de tout sans joie,
 De cent maux differens pretend qu'elle est la proie;
 Et pleine de sante sous le rouge et le fard,
 Se plaint avec molesse, et se pame avec art."

Original English:

"Umbriel, a dusky, melancholy sprite
 As ever sullied the fair face of light,
 Down to the central earth, his proper scene,
 Repairs to search the gloomy cave of Spleen.
 Swift on his sooty pinions flits the gnome,
 And in a vapour reached the dismal dome.
 No cheerful breeze this sullen region knows,
 The dreaded east is all the wind that blows.
 Here, in a grotto, sheltered close from air,
 And screened in shades from day's detested glare,
 She sighs for ever on her pensive bed,
 Pain at her side, and Megrim at her head,
 Two handmaids wait the throne. Alike in place,
 But differing far in figure and in face,
 Here stood Ill-nature, like an ancient maid,
 Her wrinkled form in black and white arrayed;
 With store of prayers for mornings, nights, and noons,
 Her hand is filled; her bosom with lampoons.
 There Affectation, with a sickly mien,
 Shows in her cheek the roses of eighteen,
 Practised to lisp, and hang the head aside,
 Faints into airs, and languishes with pride;
 On the rich quilt sinks with becoming woe,
 Wrapt in a gown, for sickness and for show."

This extract, in the original (not in the faint translation I have given you of it), may be compared to the description of *la Molesse* (softness or effeminacy), in Boileau's "Lutrin."

I think that I have now given you specimens enough from the English poets. I have made some transient mention of their philosophers, but as for good historians among them, I don't know of any; and indeed, a Frenchman was forced to write their history. Possibly the English

genius, which is either languid or impetuous, has not yet acquired that unaffected eloquence, that plain but majestic air which history requires. Possibly too, the spirit of party which exhibits objects in a dim and confused light may have sunk the credit of their historians. One half of the nation is always at variance with the other half. I have met with people who assured me that the Duke of Marlborough was a coward, and that Mr. Pope was a fool; just as some Jesuits in France declare Pascal to have been a man of little or no genius, and some Jansenists affirm Father Bourdaloue to have been a mere babbler. The Jacobites consider Mary Queen of Scots as a pious heroine, but those of an opposite party look upon her as a prostitute, an adulteress, a murderer. Thus the English have memorials of the several reigns, but no such thing as a history. There is indeed, now living, one Mr. Gordon (the public are obliged to him for a translation of Tacitus), who is very capable of writing the history of his own country, but Rapin de Thoyras got the start on him.¹³⁹

To conclude, in my opinion the English do not have such good historians, just as the French have no such thing as a real tragedy. They have several delightful comedies, some wonderful passages in certain of their poems, and boast of philosophers who are worthy of instructing mankind. The English have reaped very great benefit from the writers of our nation, and therefore we should (since they have not scrupled to be in our debt) borrow from them. Both the English and we came after the Italians, who have been our instructors in all the arts, and whom we have surpassed in some. I cannot determine which of the three nations ought to be honoured with the palm — but happy is the writer who could display their various merits.

LETTER 23. — ON THE REGARD THAT OUGHT TO BE SHOWN TO MEN OF LETTERS

Neither the English nor any other people have foundations established in favour of the polite arts like those in France. There are Universities in most countries, but it is in France alone that we meet with so beneficial an encouragement for astronomy and all the parts of mathematics, for physics, for researches into antiquity, for painting, sculpture, and architecture. Louis XIV has immortalised his name by these several foundations, and this immortality did not cost him two hundred thousand livres a year.¹⁴⁰

I must confess that one of the things I very much wonder at is, that as the Parliament of Great Britain has promised a reward of 20,000 pounds sterling to any person who may discover the *longitude*, they should never have once thought to imitate Louis XIV in his munificence with regard to the *arts and sciences*.

Merit, indeed, meets in England with rewards of another kind, which redound more to the honour of the nation. The English have so great a veneration for exalted talents, that a man of merit in their country is always sure of making his fortune. In France, Mr. Addison would have been elected a member of one of the academies, and by the credit of some women, he might have obtained a yearly pension of twelve hundred livres, or else might have been

¹³⁹ Rapin de Thoyras (1661-1724), born Paul de Rapin – Huguenot historian known for his influential work "History of England." He wrote under English patronage and provided a Whig perspective on English history.

¹⁴⁰ 200,000 livres in 1725 is equivalent to approximately €1.5 million today (\$1.74 million),

imprisoned in the Bastille upon the pretence that certain strokes in his tragedy of *Cato* had been discovered which glanced at the porter of some man in power.¹⁴¹ Mr. Addison was raised to the post of Secretary of State in England. Sir Isaac Newton was made Master of the Royal Mint. Mr. Congreve had a considerable employment. Mr. Prior was Plenipotentiary. Dr. Swift is Dean of St. Patrick in Dublin, and is more revered in Ireland than the Primate himself. The religion which Mr. Pope professes (Catholicism) excludes him, indeed, from preferments of every kind, but then it did not prevent his gaining two hundred thousand livres by his excellent translation of Homer. I myself saw a long time in France the author of *Rhadamistus* ready to perish for hunger.¹⁴² And the son of one of the greatest men our country ever gave birth to, and who was beginning to run the noble career which his father had set for him, would have been reduced to the extremes of misery had he not been patronised by Monsieur Fagon.¹⁴³

But the circumstance which mostly encourages the arts in England is the great veneration which is paid them. The picture of the Prime Minister hangs over the chimney of his own closet, but I have seen the picture of Mr. Pope in twenty noblemen's houses. Sir Isaac Newton was revered in his lifetime, and had a due respect paid to him after his death — the greatest men in the nation disputed who would have the honour of holding up his pall. Go into Westminster Abbey, and you will find that what raises the admiration of the spectator is not the mausoleums of the English kings, but the monuments which the gratitude of the nation has erected to perpetuate the memory of those illustrious men who contributed to its glory. We view their statues in that abbey in the same manner as those of Sophocles, Plato, and other immortal personages were viewed in Athens. And I am persuaded that the bare sight of those glorious monuments has inflamed more than one breast, and been the occasion of their becoming great men.

The English have even been reproached with paying too extravagant honours to mere merit, and been censured for interring the celebrated actress Mrs. Oldfield ¹⁴⁴ in Westminster Abbey, with almost the same pomp as Sir Isaac Newton. Some pretend that the English had purposely paid her these great funeral honours, to make us more strongly sensible of the barbarity and injustice which they object against us, for having buried Mademoiselle Le Couvreur ignominiously in the fields.¹⁴⁵

But be assured from me, that the English were prompted by no other principle in burying Mrs. Oldfield in Westminster Abbey than their good sense. They are far from being so ridiculous as to brand with infamy an art which has immortalised a Euripides and a

¹⁴¹ That is, he made an incidental and unfavorable comment about the servant of a powerful person.

¹⁴² "Rhadamistus and Zenobia" was authored by Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon (1674-1762). He was considered by many to be superior to Voltaire as a tragic poet.

¹⁴³ Monsieur Fagon was a patron of notable playwrights and poets such as Molière and Jean Racine.

¹⁴⁴ Anne Oldfield (1683-1730) was an English actress, and one of the highest paid actresses of her time.

¹⁴⁵ Known as Adrienne Lecouvreur (1692-1730) — a celebrated French actress. She gained fame for her naturalistic acting style at the Comédie-Française. She is often regarded as one of the greatest actresses of her time, known for her tragic roles, and her tumultuous personal life.

Sophocles; or to exclude from the body of their citizens a set of people whose business is to set off with the utmost grace of speech and action those pieces which the nation is proud of.

Under the reign of Charles I, and in the beginning of the civil wars raised by a number of rigid fanatics who at last were its victims, a great many pieces were published against theatrical and other shows, which were attacked with greater virulence because that monarch and his queen, daughter to Henry I of France, were passionately fond of them.

One Mr. Prynne,¹⁴⁶ a man of most furiously scrupulous principles, who would have thought himself damned had he worn a cassock instead of a short cloak, and have been glad to see one-half of mankind cut the other to pieces for the glory of God, and the *Propaganda Fide*.¹⁴⁷ He took it into his head to write a most wretched satire against some pretty good comedies, which were exhibited very innocently every night before their majesties. He quoted the authority of the Rabbis, and some passages from St. Bonaventure, to prove that the Oedipus of Sophocles was the work of the evil spirit; that Terence¹⁴⁸ was excommunicated *ipso facto*; and added that doubtless Brutus, who was a very severe Jansenist,¹⁴⁹ assassinated Julius Caesar for no other reason than because he, who was Pontifex Maximus,¹⁵⁰ presumed to write a tragedy the subject of which was Oedipus. Lastly, he declared that all who frequented the theatre were excommunicated, as they thereby renounced their baptism. This was casting the highest insult on the king and all the royal family. And as the English loved their prince at that time, they could not bear to hear a writer talk of excommunicating him, though they themselves afterwards cut his head off.¹⁵¹ Prynne was summoned to appear before the Star Chamber.¹⁵² His wonderful book, from which Father Le Brun stole his,¹⁵³ was sentenced to be burnt by the common hangman, and himself was to lose his ears. His trial is now extant.

The Italians are far from attempting to cast a blemish on the opera, or to excommunicate Signor Senesino or Signora Cuzzoni.¹⁵⁴ With regard to myself, I could presume to wish that

¹⁴⁶ William Prynne (1600–1669) –English lawyer, voluble author, polemicist and political figure. He was a prominent Puritan opponent of church policy under William Laud, who was Archbishop of Canterbury (1633–1645). His views were Presbyterian, but he became known as an Erastian, arguing for overall state control of religious matters.

¹⁴⁷ The Propaganda Fide, officially known as the *Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith*, was established in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV to oversee and promote missionary work and the spread of Catholicism worldwide.

¹⁴⁸ That is, Publius Terentius Afer (c. 195/185–c. 159 BC) – a playwright during the Roman Republic, author of six comedies based on Greek originals by Menander or Apollodorus of Carystus.

¹⁴⁹ *Jansenism*: The Roman Catholic doctrine of Cornelis Jansen and his disciples; salvation is limited to those who are subject to supernatural determinism, and the rest are assigned to perdition (double-predestination).

¹⁵⁰ Pontifex maximus is a title that originally referred to the chief high priest of the College of Pontiffs in ancient Rome.

¹⁵¹ Speaking of King Charles I, beheaded by the Parliamentarians under Oliver Cromwell (1649).

¹⁵² *Star Chamber*: in English law, the court made up of judges and privy councillors that grew out of the medieval king's council as a supplement to the regular justice of the common-law courts. It achieved great popularity under Henry VIII for its ability to enforce the law when other courts were unable to do so because of corruption and influence, and to provide remedies when others were inadequate. When, however, it was used by Charles I to enforce unpopular political and ecclesiastical policies, it became a symbol of oppression to the parliamentary and Puritan opponents of Charles and Archbishop William Laud. It was therefore abolished by the Long Parliament in 1641. – *Ency. Brit.*

¹⁵³ Father Pierre Lebrun (1661-1729) wrote "Explication littérale, historique et dogmatique des prières et cérémonies de la Messe," a four-volume work published between 1716 and 1726.

¹⁵⁴ **Signor Senesino**, whose real name was Francesco Bernardi, was an Italian contralto castrato born in 1686. He is particularly noted for his long collaboration with the composer George Frideric Handel. **Signora Cuzzoni**, also known

the magistrates would suppress I know not what contemptible pieces written against the stage. For when the English and Italians hear that we French brand with the greatest mark of infamy an art in which we excel; that we excommunicate persons who receive salaries from the king; that we condemn as impious a spectacle exhibited in convents and monasteries; that we dishonour sports in which Louis XIV and Louis XV performed as actors; that we give the title of *the devil's works* to pieces which are received by magistrates of the most severe character, and represented before a virtuous queen — when, I say, foreigners are told of this insolent conduct, this contempt for royal authority, and this Gothic rusticity which some presume to call *Christian severity*, what ideas must they entertain about our nation? And how will it be possible for them to conceive either that our laws give a sanction to an art which is declared infamous, or that some persons dare to stamp with infamy an art which receives a sanction from the laws — which is rewarded by kings, cultivated and encouraged by the greatest men, and admired by whole nations? And that Father Le Brun's impertinent libel against the stage may be seen in a bookseller's shop, standing next to the immortal labours of Racine, of Corneille, of Moliere, etc.

LETTER 24. — ON THE ROYAL SOCIETY AND OTHER ACADEMIES

The English had an Academy of Sciences many years before us, but then it is not under such prudent regulations as ours. The only reason for this is very possibly because it was founded before the Academy of Paris; for had it been founded after, it would very probably have adopted some of the sage laws of the former, and improved upon others.

Two things, and those which are the most essential to man, are wanting in the Royal Society of London — I mean rewards and laws. A seat in the Academy at Paris is a small but secure fortune to a geometrician or a chemist. But this is so far from being the case at London, that the several members of the Royal Society are at a continual, though indeed small expense. Any man in England who declares himself a lover of mathematics and natural philosophy, and expresses an inclination to be a member of the Royal Society, is immediately elected into it. But in France, it is not enough that a man who aspires to the honour of being a member of the Academy, and of receiving the royal stipend, has a love for the sciences. He must at the same time be deeply skilled in them; and he is obliged to dispute the seat with competitors who are so much more formidable as they are fired by a principle of glory, by interest, by the difficulty itself — and by that inflexibility of mind which is generally found in those who devote themselves to that pertinacious study, mathematics.

The Academy of Sciences is prudently confined to the study of Nature; and indeed, this is a field spacious enough for fifty or sixty persons to range about in. That of London mixes literature with physics indiscriminately; but I think founding an academy merely for the polite arts is more judicious, as it prevents confusion; and in some measure, the joining of

as Francesca Cuzzoni (1696-1778), was an Italian operatic soprano. She is best known for her performances in Handel's operas, particularly her debut role as Teofane in "Ottone" in 1723.

heterogeneals, such as a dissertation on the head-dresses of the Roman ladies with a hundred or more new curves.

As there is very little order and regularity in the Royal Society, and not the least encouragement; and considering that the Academy of Paris is on a quite different footing, it is no wonder that our transactions are drawn up in a more just and beautiful manner than those of the English. Soldiers who are under a regular discipline, and well-paid besides, must necessarily at last perform more glorious achievements than others who are mere volunteers. It must indeed be confessed that the Royal Society boast their Newton, but then he did not owe his knowledge and discoveries to that body. It was so far from it, that the latter were intelligible to very few of his fellow members. A genius like that of Sir Isaac belonged to all the academies in the world, because all had a thousand things to learn from him.

The celebrated Dean Swift formed a design in the latter end of the late Queen's reign, to found an academy for the English tongue on the French model. This project was promoted by the late Earl of Oxford, Lord High Treasurer, and much more by Lord Bolingbroke, Secretary of State, who had the happy talent of speaking without premeditation in the Parliament House with as much purity as Dean Swift wrote in his closet, and who would have been the ornament and protector of that academy. Those alone would have been chosen members of it whose works will last as long as the English tongue, such as Dean Swift, Mr. Prior, whom we saw here invested with a public character, and whose fame in England is equal to that of La Fontaine in France; Mr. Pope, the English Boileau, Mr. Congreve, who may be called their Moliere, and several other eminent persons whose names I have forgotten. All of these would have raised the glory of that body to a great height even in its infancy. But Queen Anne being snatched suddenly from the world,¹⁵⁵ the Whigs were resolved to ruin the protectors of the intended academy, a circumstance that was of the most fatal consequence to polite literature. The members of this academy would have had a very great advantage over those who first formed that of the French, for Swift, Prior, Congreve, Dryden, Pope, Addison, etc. had fixed the English tongue by their writings; whereas Chapelain, Colletet, Cassaigne, Faret, Perrin, Cotin,¹⁵⁶ our first academicians, were a disgrace to their country. And so much ridicule is now attached to their very names, that if an author of some genius in this age had the misfortune to be called Chapelain or Cotin, he would need to change his name.

One circumstance, to which the English Academy should especially have attended, is to have prescribed to themselves occupations of a quite different kind from those with which our academicians amuse themselves. A wit of this country asked me for the memoirs of the French

¹⁵⁵ Queen Anne died from a stroke at the age of 49, having ruled only 12 years.

¹⁵⁶ **Jean Chapelain** (1595-1674) – French poet and literary critic, founding member of the Académie Française, and known for his epic poem "La Pucelle," which focused on Joan of Arc. **Guillaume Colletet** (1598–1659) – French poet and a founding member of the Académie française. Cardinal Richelieu was his patron. **Jacques Cassagne** (1636-1679) – a French clergyman, poet, and moralist; he was 'garde' of the king's library and entered the Académie française aged 29 in 1663. **Nicolas Faret** (c. 1596-1646) – French statesman, writer, scholar and translator; he translated Eutropius's *Roman History*. **Pierre Perrin** was a French poet and librettist known for writing the libretto for the first French opera, "Pomone" in 1671; he was the first director of what later became the Paris Opera, and founded the Académie d'Opéra in 1669. **Jean Cotin** – French writer and poet known for his contributions to literature during the Baroque period. He was associated with the literary circles of his time and recognized for his works reflecting the themes and styles of that era.

Academy. I answered, they have no memoirs, but have printed threescore or fourscore volumes in quarto of compliments. The gentleman perused one or two of them, but without being able to understand the style in which they were written, though he understood all our good authors perfectly. He says,

“All I see in these elegant discourses is, that the member elect having assured the audience that his predecessor was a great man, that Cardinal Richelieu was a very great man, that the Chancellor Seguier ¹⁵⁷ was a pretty great man, that Louis XIV was a more than great man, the director answers in the very same strain, and adds that the member elect may also be a sort of great man, and that himself, in quality of director, must also have some share in this greatness.”

The reason why all these academic discourses have unhappily done so little honour to this body is evident enough. *Vitium est temporis potius quam hominis* (the fault is owing to the age, rather than to particular persons). It grew up insensibly into a custom for every academician to repeat these elogiums ¹⁵⁸ at his reception. It was laid down as a kind of law that the public should be indulged from time to time, in the sullen satisfaction of yawning over these productions. If the reason were to be sought afterwards, why the greatest geniuses who have been incorporated into that body have sometimes made the worst speeches, I answer that it is wholly owing to a strong propensity that the gentlemen in question had to shine, and to display a thread-bare, worn-out subject in a new and uncommon light. The necessity of saying something, with the perplexity of having nothing to say, and a desire to be witty, are three circumstances which alone are capable of making even the greatest writer ridiculous. These gentlemen, not being able to strike out with any new thoughts, hunted for a new play on words, and delivered themselves without thinking at all, This was like people who seem to chew with great eagerness, and make as though they are eating, at the same time that they are just starved.

It is a law in the French Academy, to publish all those discourses by which alone they are known; but they should instead make a law never to print any of them.

But the Academy of the *Belles Lettres* have a more prudent and more useful object, which is to present the public with a collection of transactions that abound with curious researches and critiques. These transactions are already esteemed by foreigners; and it could only be wished that some subjects in them had been more thoroughly examined, and that others had not been treated at all. For instance, we should have been very well satisfied if they had omitted I know not what dissertation on the prerogative of the right hand over the left; and some others which, though not published under so ridiculous a title, are yet written on subjects that are almost as frivolous and silly.

The Academy of Sciences, in their researches of a more difficult kind, and more sensible use, embrace the knowledge of nature and the improvements of the arts. We may presume that such profound, such uninterrupted pursuits as these, such exact calculations, such refined

¹⁵⁷ Chancellor Pierre Séguier (1588-1672) – a prominent French statesman who served as chancellor of France from 1635 until his death in 1672. He played a significant role during the reigns of Louis XIII and Louis XIV, particularly in consolidating monarchical power.

¹⁵⁸ An *elogium* is an inscription in honor of a deceased person, while *eulogium* is an archaic term for a eulogy.

discoveries, such extensive and exalted views, will at last produce something that may prove of advantage to the universe. Up to now, as we have observed together, the most useful discoveries have been made in the most barbarous times. One would conclude that the business of the most enlightened ages and the most learned bodies, is to argue and debate on things which were invented by ignorant people. We know exactly the angle which the sail of a ship is to make with the keel in order to sail better; and yet Columbus discovered America without having the least idea of the property of this angle. However, I am far from inferring from this, that we are to confine ourselves merely to a blind practice, but happy it would be if naturalists and geometricians united, as much as possible, the *practice* with the *theory*.

Strange, but so it is, that those things which reflect the greatest honour on the human mind are frequently of the least benefit to it! A man who understands the four fundamental rules of arithmetic, aided by a little good sense, will amass prodigious wealth in trade, become a Sir Peter Delme, a Sir Richard Hopkins, a Sir Gilbert Heathcote — while a poor algebraist spends his whole life searching for astonishing properties and relations in numbers, which at the same time are of no manner of use, and will not acquaint him with the nature of exchanges. This is very nearly the case with most of the arts. There is a certain point beyond which all researches serve no other purpose than merely to delight an inquisitive mind. Those ingenious and useless truths may be compared to stars which, by being placed at too great a distance, cannot afford us the least light.

With regard to the French Academy, how great a service they would do to literature, to the language, and to the nation, if instead of publishing a set of compliments annually, they would give us new editions of the valuable works written in the age of Louis XIV, purged of the several errors of diction which have crept into them. There are many of these errors in Corneille and Moliere, but those in La Fontaine are very numerous. Those which could not be corrected might at least be pointed out. By this means, as all the Europeans read those works, it would teach them our language in its utmost purity. By that means, they would be fixed to a lasting standard; and valuable French books then being printed at the King's expense, would prove one of the most glorious monuments the nation could boast. I have been told that Boileau formerly made this proposal, and that it has since been revived by a gentleman who is eminent for his genius, his fine sense, and just taste for criticism. But this thought has met with the fate of many other useful projects — of being applauded, and then neglected.

FINIS