

**ESSAYS MORAL  
AND  
POLITE, 1660-1714**

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Essays moral and polite, 1660-1714 by John Masefield & Constance Masefield

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Selected and Edited by  
JOHN AND CONSTANCE  
MASEFIELD



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ROUGHLY speaking, the authors included in this volume flourished between the Restoration and the death of Queen Anne. The fifty-four years may be divided into two periods, of which the first was dominated by the Court-party, the Earl of Rochester, the Earl of Roscommon, and Sir Charles Sedley ; and the second by Addison and Steele, and the greater genius of Dean Swift. The age as a whole was a critical age. During the earlier period the human intellect took stock of its past achievements, and determined for itself certain rules very proper for things stationary. There was never an age in which intellectual matters were more highly prized. Nor has there ever been an age more certain of its own surpassing merit, on grounds more slender. Soon after the Revolution, however, the criticism that had been directed on Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton, and in personal attack, was turned on the depravities and flippancies of polite society. This change of attitude was due, as far as

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such a change can be due to the influence of one man, to the righteous invective of Jeremy Collier. The essayists who followed him maintained his high motive, though their prose was as elegant as the verse of the poets of Charles's court, and though they still adhered to the French rules for drama, which these poets had introduced.

It was not a creative age; for the creative age had ended in the confusion of the civil wars, and in the large utterance of the Protectorate. With the Restoration had come excess, and consequent disease. With the Revolution began a more salutary course—a course, as it were, of physic, and rule-of-life—to enable the debauched intellect to recover its ancient strength of nerve. The rules it imposed upon itself were rules only proper to conditions of the kind. To a literary society, inspired only by the grossest of physical appetites, the dictum that

'Want of decency is want of sense,'

is at once purgative and wholesome. To a literary society, drawing frankly and sanely from the whole of life, such a statement would be useless, as implying an absurd limitation. It is one thing to stamp a Tom D'Urfey, or

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an Earl of Rochester, into his merited sewer, but quite another to order Juliet's Nurse into the kitchen, and Mercutio to a sporting club. Again, a literary society, brought up, not upon life, and the pageants and stress of life, like the Elizabethans, but upon ancient authors, and rules deduced from those authors, is qualified only for the appreciation of itself, and of things like itself. It condemns things unlike itself, for their unlikeness, as sparrows attack escaped canaries.

By the time of the Revolution, the duties of writers, and the decencies of writing, had been defined with such authority that much of Chaucer, of Shakespeare, and of Milton had been re-written by those in favour of the new rules. All earlier English writing, which, from its breadth and fervour, failed to conform to these standards, was disparaged as incorrect. The subject-matter, the material of authors, which, in the past, had been man's passion, or hope, however rude or wild, was then forced to an unwilling conformity with the amended manner. Character, in the drama of the period, was made to show itself polite, rather than human. The heroic person, in contemporary tragedy, showed



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himself, not as say Coriolanus showed himself, by noble action, but by the speaking of fine sentiments in a fine attitude. A man wrote of an event, not as it had happened, from the passions of humanity, but as he thought it ought to have happened, had Providence learned the unities before tampering with red clay.

But while the dramatist, in his tawdry trappings, kept ponderously aloof from all reality, the essayists, working in a medium proper to the time, not borrowed from a time wholly alien in temper, were able to approach life freshly, and to judge it, if not profoundly, at least with delicate art. They do not give us great literature, but they give us much that is charming, and wholesome, and whimsical, in very dainty and careful English. They have not the passion of the Elizabethans, nor the moral grandeur of the men of the Protectorate. Their strength had been sapped by the fiat that certain things which might offend certain readers had better be ignored. We find them bent on reforming, not the world, but their literary manners, and some of the drawing-rooms which they frequented.

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Their care for the manner, for the clothing of the thought, reduced poetry to exact mechanics, making a poem little more than regulated, antithetical prose. But while it fettered poetry (which demands freedom) it also fettered prose, and reduced wildness, and rhetoric, and poetical rhapsody, to order, and measure, and balance, and exact law. In the reign of Elizabeth, when prose had been artificial, as with Lyly, or braggart and wild as with Nash and Dekker, our writers produced sentences such as---

'Why should I go gadding and firsigging after firking flantado amfibologies? wit is wit, and good will is good will.'

Or

'For thy flaring frounzed Periwigs low dangled down with lovelocks, shalt thou have thy head side dangled down with more Snakes than ever it had hayres.'

Or

'Pan is a god, Apollo is no more. Comparisons cannot be odious, where the deities are equall. This pipe (my sweet pipe) was once a nymph, a faire nymph, once my lovely mistresse, now my heavenly musique, Tell mee, Apollo, is there any instrument so

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sweet to play on as one's mistress? Had thy lute been of lawrell, and the strings of Daphne's haire, thy tunes might have bene compared to thy notes; for then Daphne would have added to thy stroke sweetnesse, and to thy thoughts melodie.'

Two generations later, when prose was gorgeous and solemn, like great poetry, we find passages such as—

'Others, rather than be lost in the uncomfortable night of nothing, were content to recede into the common being, and make one particle of the public soul of all things, which was no more than to return into their unknown and divine original again. Egyptian ingenuity was more unsatisfied, contriving their bodies in sweet consistencies, to attend the return of their souls. But all was vanity, feeding the wind, and folly. The Egyptian mummies, which Cambyses or time hath spared, avarice now consumeth. Mummy is become merchandize, Mizraim cures wounds, and Pharaoh is sold for balsam.'

Or

'Behold now this vast city: a city of refuge, the mansion house of liberty, en-