

The Trifler – Abridged

No. 1

CAST your eyes upon paper, madam; there you may look innocently, said a polite old gentleman of my acquaintance to me, one day, in the words of a wit to a fine lady. A compliment is no unpleasing way of conveying advice to a young woman, and when that advice may be so construed,^[1] as to become perfectly agreeable to her own inclinations, it is certain to be well received, and quickly complied with. It is indeed very clear to me, that my friend in this borrowed admonition^[2] recommended reading to eyes which he probably thought were too intent upon pleasing; but I, with a small deviation from the sense, applied it, to what is I freely own my predominant passion; and therefore resolved to write, still pursuing the same darling end, though by different means.

So frankly to acknowledge the desire of pleasing to be my predominant passion, is in other words, to confess myself, one of that ridiculous species of beings, called a coquet.^[3]—This will be said by some, and thought by others, for all do not say what they think on such occasions.

Yet to that laudable^[4] principle, in women mistaken for coquetry, we owe the thunder of eloquence in the senate, as well as the glitter of dress in the drawing-room. An animated speech, and a well-chosen silk, are equally the effects of a desire to please, both in the patriot and the beauty: and if the one is ever observed to be silent, and the other without ornaments, it is because he is persuaded, that silence is most expressive; and she, that negligence is most becoming.

But for this active principle, the statesman would be no politician, and the general no warrior. The desire of fame, or the desire of pleasing, which, in my opinion, are synonymous terms, produces application in one and courage in the other. It is the poet's inspiration, the patriot's zeal, the courtier's^[5] loyalty, and the orator's eloquence. All are coquets, if that be coquetry, and those grave personages and the fine lady are alike liable to be charged with it.

But it will be objected, that the distinguishing characteristic of a coquet is to use her powers of pleasing to the ungenerous purpose of giving pain; the same may be said of each of the others. All human excellence, as well as human happiness, is comparative. We are admired but in proportion as we excel others, and whoever excels is sure to give pain, to his inferiors in merit, either from envy or emulation;^[6] passions which produce sensations nearly alike, although their consequences are very different.

I hope I have now fully proved, that I, tho' a woman, young, single, gay, and ambitious of pleasing, deserve not the odious appellation of coquet; I say, I hope, I have proved it, for I am

but eighteen, and not used to be contradicted in an argument.

“If seldom your opinions err;

“Your eyes are always in the right,”

says the gallant Prior. Hence it follows that we always triumph in a dispute, though I cannot help allowing, that we often triumph without victory.

Universally as I could wish to please in this paper, yet I shall be contented, if it finds only a favourable acceptance with my own sex, to whose amusement it is chiefly designed to contribute.

To introduce it to them under the denomination of a trifle^[7] may be thought an affront to their understandings. But in the choice of my title, I remembered the fable of the mountain that brought forth a mouse. That I have promised little is my security from censure; if I give more it will be my best claim to praise. I should indeed have thought some apology necessary for an undertaking of this kind, had I not been persuaded, it was a mighty easy one, from its being so frequently attempted, and by persons too of my own sex.

The subjects I propose to treat of will be such as reading and observation shall furnish me with; for, with a strong passion for intellectual pleasures, I have likewise a taste for many of the fashionable amusements, and in the disposition of my time, I have contrived^[8] to gratify both these inclinations; one I thought too laudable to be restrained, the other I found too pleasing to be wholly subdued.

I am already aware that I have talked too much of myself: it is indeed a subject one cannot easily quit, and perhaps I am not sorry, that in introductory papers of this sort, the writers have generally given some account of themselves. Every one knows that long custom has the force of a law; and, in obedience to this, I shall fill up my first paper with a short history of myself.

I am the daughter of a gentleman remarkable only in this, that during the course of a pretty long life, he never lost a friend, or made an enemy. From which singular circumstance I leave the reader to collect his character. My mother was generally allowed to be a well bred-woman, and an excellent economist. In her youth she was extremely indulged by her parents, who, on account of a slight disorder in her eyes, would not suffer her to use her needle, or look into a book, except on Sundays or holidays, when she was permitted to read two or three verses of a chapter in the Bible.

My mother therefore grew up, not only without any taste, but with a high contempt for reading; and those of her female acquaintance who had made any proficiency that way were sure to be distinguished by her, with the opprobrious^[9] term of being *book-learned*, which my mother always pronounced with a look and accent of ineffable scorn.

My sister, who is a year younger than myself, so entirely engrossed her affection, that I was wholly neglected by her. My fondness for reading, which I discovered very early, encreased her dislike of me. As she seldom chose to have me in her sight, I had opportunities sufficient to indulge myself in this favourite amusement, for I had taken possession of all the books my brother left behind him, when he went to the university; but having great sensibility of soul, I was so affected with my mother’s partial fondness for my sister, and neglect of me, that young as I then was, I often past whole nights in tears, lamenting my misfortune.

But this sensibility entirely ruined me with my mother; for, being one day excessively shocked at some new instance of her partiality, I went up sobbing to the nursery, and had recourse^[10] to a book for my relief. It happened to be Aesop's Fables: I opened it at the following one, which striking my imagination, then full of the preference given by my mother to my sister, I followed a sudden impulse, and sent it to my mother, desiring she would be pleased to read it; for I did not doubt but she would make a proper application of it.

An ape had twins: she doated^[11] upon one of them, and did not much care for the other. She took a sudden fright one day, and in a hurry whips up her darling under her arm, and took no heed of the other, which therefore leaped astride upon her shoulders. In this haste down she comes, and beats out her favourite's brains upon a stone, while that which she had on her back came off safe and sound.

My mother, surprised at the novelty of the request, read the fable, and immediately afterwards came up to the nursery in great wrath, and corrected me severely, for calling her an *ape*, prophetically declaring that a girl who at nine years old could be so wicked, as to compare her mother to an *ape*, would never come to good.

Every one who came to the house was told the horrid crime I had been guilty of, the servants held me in the utmost detestation for comparing my mother to an *ape*, never mentioning it, without lifted up hands and eyes, in abhorrence of such early undutifulness.^[12]

My father, who had loved me with great tenderness, was dead when this incident happened; and the most effectual^[13] way of paying court^[14] to my mamma being to caress my sister, and take no notice of me, I met with very few friends, either at home or abroad.

In this state of humiliation and disgrace my brother found me, at his return from the university. When my sister and I were presented to him, my mother did not fail to relate the crime for which I had suffered so much, shewing^[15] him the book, which she had kept carefully ever after, with the leaf^[16] doubled down, at the fatal fable, declaring she thought herself very unhappy in having given birth to a child who was likely to prove so great an affliction to her; 'for may not every thing that is bad, said she, be expected from a girl who at her years could compare her mother to an *ape*?'

My brother read the fable, and my mother leaving the room to give some necessary orders, he ran eagerly to me, snatched me up in his arms, and gave me a hundred kisses. My little heart was so sensibly affected with a tenderness to which I had not been accustomed, that I burst into tears.

My mother at her return found me sobbing, with the violence of my emotions, and did not doubt but my brother had been chiding me. He told her gravely, that since I was so fond of reading, he would regulate my studies himself, and take care I should read no books which might teach me to be undutiful.

To this dear brother I owe the advantage of a right^[17] education, which I had like to have missed. After my mother's death he took me entirely under his own care. My sister chose to reside with an aunt, whose heir she expects to be; and while she is a slave to the caprices^[18] of an old woman, I have the pleasure of being the mistress of a well-ordered family, for I keep my brother's house; and

by endeavouring to make him as useful as well as agreeable^[19] companion, enjoy the sweet satisfaction of shewing^[20] every day my gratitude for obligations it can never be in my power to return.

No. 2

FROM the account I have already given of my temper and inclinations, it will be readily supposed that the love of power, which our great satirist^[21] asserts to be the ruling passion of my sex, is not the least prevailing^[22] one of mine; and therefore I will candidly acknowledge that the too perceptible decline of our influence has often been the subject of much painful reflection to me.

We live no longer in those happy times, when to recover one stolen fair one, whole nations took up arms; when the smile of beauty was more powerful than the voice of ambition; when heroes conquered to deserve our favour, and poets preferred the myrtle to the laurel crown.

In this degenerate age instances of dying for love are very rare, and instances of marrying for love are still rarer. Formerly, if a lady had commanded her lover to bring her the head of a lion, he would have gone to Africa in search of the savage conquest, though death were to have been the consequence of his obedience: but now, what lady would presume so much upon her authority, as to exact from her lover the sacrifice of a party at whist, or a match at Newmarket!

However desirous I am to find the cause of this decline of our empire in the depraved manners of the men, yet justice obliges me to own that we ourselves are not wholly free from blame. Beauty, like the majesty of kings, weakens its influence when familiarised to common view. The face that may be seen every morning at auctions, at public breakfastings^[23], and in crowded^[24] walks; every evening at assemblies, at the play, the opera, or some other fashionable scene of pleasure, soon loses the charm of novelty, and effaces^[25] the impression it first made. We may gaze upon a fine picture till the grace of the attitude, the loveliness of the features, and the strength of the colouring cease to surprise and delight us; and unhappily many of our present race of beauties are too solicitous^[26] about their personal charms to attend to the improvement of their minds: so that a fine woman is indeed often no more than a fine picture.

It has been observed, that there is no country in the world where women enjoy so much liberty as in England, and none where their sway^[27] is so little acknowledged. In Spain, where the severe father, and jealous brother, guard the secluded maid from all converse with men, she will conquer more hearts by being seen once without a veil, than one of our beauties, who appears with her neck and shoulders uncovered at every place of publick resort^[28] during the whole season.^[29]

The Spanish lover passes whole nights at his mistress's door, and employs sighs, tears, serenades, and tender complaints to move her companion; bribes the vigilant duenna^[30] with half his estate to procure him a short interview at a grated window: and for this inestimable favour he exposes himself to the rage of her relations, who probably stand ready to punish his presumption with death; while he, regardless of the insidious^[31] stab, contemplates her by the faint light of the moon, with enthusiastic rapture^[32].

For her sake he enters the dreadful lists,^[33] and encounters the fiercest bull of Andalusia; the spectators tremble at his danger; he looks up to the balcony where she is stated^[34], and catches fortitude from her eyes. Should he be wounded in the unequal combat, a sign from her gives him new force and courage: again he assails his furious antagonist, and drives him bellowing about the field. The lady waves her handkerchief to him as a token of her joy for his victory; the lover, half dead with fatigue and loss of blood, but triumphing more in that instance of her regard for him than in the loud acclamations^[35] he hears on every side, turns to the place where she stands, kisses his sword, and is carried out of the lists.

Thus ardent are the flames which love inspires in a country where the promiscuous^[36] assembly, the wrangling^[37] card-table, the licentious comedy, and late protracted ball, are not permitted to rob beauty of its most engaging charms, the blush of unsullied modesty, and the soft dignity of female reserve.

With us the lover dresses at^[38] his mistress, sings, dances, and coquets^[39] with her, expects to dazzle her with superior charms, and loves her for the superficial qualities he admires in himself. He hopes not to gain her heart in reward of his services and constancy,^[40] but claims it as a price due to the resistless graces of his person.

Such is the low state of our power at present, and such it will continue till our own prudence^[41] and reserve supply the place of imposed retiredness,^[42] and throw as many difficulties in the lover's way as the tyranny of custom does in other countries. Beauty, like the Parthian archer,^[43] wounds surest when she flies, and we then most certain of victory when we have not courage enough to invite the attack.

No. 3

MADAM,

WHEN 'squire Bickerstaff, in the time of our mothers, such a time as, if their accounts may be trusted, is never likely to return, took upon him to entertain the town, he endeavoured to secure a kind reception by deducing his genealogy^[44], and proving his relation to the whole family of the *Staffs*.

If you can either by proximity of blood, or similitude^[45] of mind, shew^[46] your alliance to the numerous and powerful generation of *Triflers*^[47], you may set any other race of mortals at defiance; for very little is to be feared from any power against which the Triflers shall form a combination.

I have always had the honour of being numbered among the Triflers; my mother, my grand-mother, and my grand-mother's mother, were all Triflers before me. You know, if you know any thing of Trifles, that it is the peculiar practice of our family to count their pedigree^[48] on the female side. By the advantage of a strong memory, diligently stored with repeated narratives, I have an exact knowledge of the whole succession of Trifles, which have engaged the elegant and gay^[49] for two centuries and a half.

It is said in one of Steel's comedies, that nobody despises the honours of ancestry but those that want them; and therefore I will not lose any advantage of hereditary excellency. My mother was the best knotter^[50] of queen Mary's court; my aunt *Pen* was the third lady that in the reign of Charles the Second tied ribands to her nipples; my grand-mother was a country gentlewoman, and has left little behind her except a scented paste, with which the beauties of her time used to clear their skins without the help of water. My grand-mother appeared at the court of James the First in Mrs. Turner's yellow starch, and her mother was always solicited to cut out ruffs by queen's Elizabeth's maids of honour.

I suppose, madam, you will now allow me to be a genuine and legitimate Trifler; and I should be glad that you could by equal authority clear your pretensions to a place among the sisterhood. Triflers are always jealous; and I will not conceal my suspicions, that you are claiming a character without right; and that your life has not been passed regularly among us; that you have either wanted the initiation of the boarding-school, or the completion of the ball-room.

I know, that it is common enough among periodical authors to forget their titles: they fill their heads with the theory of a plan which experience soon shews them to be too narrow to last long. The *Tatler* often talks with the most solemn austerity of wisdom, and the *Guardian* deviates into many topics with which as a *Guardian* he has no concern; but none ever started from her own purpose so soon as the *Trifler*; and therefore I am afraid, that she has taken a province which she cannot fill.

To the first paper I made no objection: it is natural to a *Trifler* to think her own adventures important, and to tell them to those who do not wish to hear them: but the second paper has betrayed you. Can you think love and courtship subjects for a *Trifler*? If love be a Trifle, what can we call serious? The truth is that almost all other female employments are the sports of idleness; and that they seldom cease to trifle till they begin to love.

It is impossible in reading a book not to form some image of the writer. You have told us little of yourself; and therefore your readers are left to their own conjectures. To tell you the truth, I conceive you to be a rural virgin, that after having passed about thirty years between reading and needle-work among groves and brooks, has at the invitation of some great lady left her grotto and bower, and come to take a view of the scenes of life, with no other ideas of love or pleasure than she has gathered from the amours and amusements of her own village.

I do not wonder that to a votaress of studious tranquility, the whole bustle of the town appears a Trifle. Much of the splendor, and much of the cares of life, I shall willingly give up to your sport or censure. You may say what you will of pleasures where no heart is light, of connections without kindness, of struggles for precedency, of competitions for the newest fashion; but believe me, dear *Dryad*, to love and to be loved is a serious business; and whatever customs of courtship, caprice, levity, or vanity, have dictated, however the modes of approach between the sexes may be varied by the accidents of time or place, it is not for the *Trifler* to treat as Trifles those operations which unite us for ever to tyrants or to friends, to savages or to sages, and which terminate the flighty wit, or airy flutterer in a wife, an economist, a mother, and a grand-mother.

I am, Madam, Your very Humble Servant. PENELOPE SPINDLE.

No. 5

THE Arabian proverb, *Shut the windows that the house may be light*, is supposed to contain some great mystery; and indeed it must be confessed that it has very much the air of a paradox: but whatever explication the wise and the learned may give to this sentence, it seems not unaptly applied to that gay part of my own sex so improperly called fine ladies, the business of whose lives it is to dress, to play at cards, to simper in the drawing-room, to languish at an opera, and coquet at a play, whose eyes being perpetually dazzled by the glare of folly and impertinence, are too weak to bear the steady ray of reason: their minds therefore are always dark; and ignorance, like a thick cloud, wraps them up in impenetrable gloom. To such as these then I will suppose the Arabian sage cries, *Shut the windows that the house may be light*.

The fine lady has no other use for her eyes but to sparkle and languish; reading would spoil their luster, and encroach upon that precious time which is all devoted to pleasure. What advantage can she derive from books? Will they teach her how to improve her complexion, and repair the ravages made by time in her face? Can morality, learning, and wit, instruct one who exercises her memory only upon cards, and has sufficient employment for her judgment, in choosing a suit of ribbons, or a brocade?^[51] Who never knew, what it was to think seriously for a single moment; and whose mind can entertain no other ideas but what dress and quadrille^[52] inspire.

Yet of such poor materials as these a coquet is made, one who lays claim to boundless dominion, who expects to subject all hearts to her sway, and dispense happiness and misery, life and death, with a smile or frown.

That a creature so despicable as this is capable of doing a great deal of mischief, the following letter will shew; and I do not doubt but by publishing it I shall oblige my readers as much as the unhappy writer who makes it her request.

[1] Interpreted (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, "Construe, v.a.").

[2] "The hint of a fault or duty; counsel; gentle reproof" (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, "Admonition, n.s.").

[3] "To act the lover" (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, "Word, n.s.").

[4] "Praise-worthy; commendable" (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, "Laudable, adj.").

[5] "One that courts or solicits the favour of another" (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, "Courtier, n.s.").

[6] "Rivalry; desire of superiority" (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, "Emulation, n.s.").

[7] "A thing of no moment" (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, "Trifle, n.s.").

[8] "To plan out" (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, "Contrive, n.s.").

- [9] “Reproachful; disgraceful; causing infamy” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Opprobrious, adj.”).
- [10] “Access” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Recourse, n.s.”).
- [11] “To be in love to extremity” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Doat, n.s.”).
- [12] “Want of respect; irreverence; disobedience” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Undutifulness, n.s.”).
- [13] “Productive of effects; powerful to a degree adequate to the occasion; operative; efficacious” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Effectual, adj.”).
- [14] Pleasing (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Court, n.s.”).
- [15] Showing
- [16] page
- [17] “Fit; proper; becoming; suitable; true; not erroneous; not wrong” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Right, adj.”).
- [18] “Fancy; whim” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Caprice, Caprichio, n.s.”).
- [19] “Suitable to; consistent with” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Agreeable, adj.”).
- [20] showing
- [21] “One who writes satires” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Satirist, n.s.”).
- [22] “Predominant; having most influence” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “prevailing, adj.”).
- [23] “The taking of breakfast” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, “breakfasting, n.”).
- [24] Crowded
- [25] To destroy any form painted, or carved (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “efface, v.a.”).
- [26] “Anxious; careful; concerned” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “solicitous, adj.”).
- [27] “Influence; direction” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “sway, n.s.” 4).
- [28] A place “that is much frequented or visited” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, “resort, n.” P2.a.).
- [29] The period of the year during which a particular place is most frequented for business, fashion, or amusement; esp. the time (now May to July) when the fashionable world is assembled in London.

dead season, the period when ‘society’ has departed from a place of resort (*Oxford English Dictionary*, “season, n.” 10).

[30] “An old woman kept to guard a younger” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “duenna, n.s.”).

[31] “Sly; circumventive; diligent to entrap; treacherous” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “insidious, n.s.”).

[32] “Ecstasy’ transport; violence of any pleasing passion; enthusiasm; uncommon heat of imagination (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “rapture, n.s.” 1).

[33] “Inclosed ground in which tilts are run, and combats fought (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “list, n.s.” 2).

[34] “To give a particular rank or position to; to rank” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, “state, v.” 2a).

[35] “Shouts of applause; such as those with which a victorious army salutes the general” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “acclamation, n.s.”).

[36] “Mingled; confused; undistinguished” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “promiscuous, adj.”).

[37] Squabbling

[38] “To clothe pompously or elegantly” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “dress, v.a.” 2).

[39] “To entertain with compliments and amorous tattle; to treat with an appearance of amorous tenderness” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “coquet, v.a.”).

[40] “Lasting affection; continuance of love, or friendship (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “constancy, n.s.” 4).

[41] “Wisdom applied to practice” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “prudence, n.s.”).

[42] “Solitude; privacy; secrecy” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “retiredness, n.s.”).

[43] Parthian horsemen hailed from Parthia, a region of the Achaemenian empire and later a kingdom in what is now Iran. They were famous for baffling their enemies with rapid maneuvers and by shooting backwards while fleeing or pretending to flee (*Oxford English Dictionary*, “parthian, n. and adj.” 1).

[44] “History of the succession of families; enumeration of descent in order of succession; a pedigree” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “genealogy, n.s.”).

[45] “Likeness; resemblance” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “similitude, n.s.”).

[46] Show

[47] “One who acts with levity; one that talks with folly” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “trifler, n.s.”).

[48] “Genealogy; lineage; account of descent” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “pedigree, n.s.”).

[49] Merry

[50] A person hired to untie knots

[51] A gold or silver piece of silk (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “brocade, n.s.”).

[52] A card game