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Essays of Joseph Addison

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An excerpt from the Editor's Introduction:

WE commonly regard the Age of the Revolution as an age of military exploits and political changes, an age whose warlike glories loom dimly through the smoke of Blenheim or of Ramillies, and the greatness of whose political issues still impresses us, though we track them with difficulty through a chaos of treasons and cabals. But to the men who lived in it the age was far more than this. To them the Revolution was more than a merely political revolution; it was the recognition not only of a change in the relations of the nation to its rulers, but of changes almost as great in English society and in English intelligence. If it was the age of the Bill of Rights, it was the age also of the Spectator. If Marlborough and Somers had their share in shaping the new England that came of 1688, so also had Addison and Steele. And to the bulk of people it may be doubted whether the change that passed over literature was not more startling and more interesting than the change that passed over politics. Few changes, indeed, have ever been so radical and complete. Literature suddenly doffed its stately garb of folio or octavo, and stepped abroad in the light and easy dress of pamphlet and essay. Its long arguments and cumbrous sentences condensed themselves into the quick reasoning and terse easy phrases of ordinary conversation. Its tone lost the pedantry of the scholar, the brutality of the controversialist, and aimed at being unpretentious, polite, urbane. The writer aimed at teaching, but at teaching in pleasant and familiar ways; he strove to make evil unreasonable and ridiculous; to shame men by wit and irony out of grossness and bad manners; to draw the world to piety and virtue by teaching piety and virtue themselves to smile. And the change of subject was as remarkable as the change of form.

Letters found a new interest in the scenes and characters of the common life around them, in the chat of the coffee-house, the loungers of the Mall, the humors of the street, the pathos of the fireside. Everyone has felt the change that passed in this way over our literature; but we commonly talk as if the change had been a change in the writers of the time, as if the intelligence which produces books had suddenly taken of itself a new form, as if men like Addison had conceived the Essay and their readers had adapted themselves to this new mode of writing. The truth lies precisely the other way. In no department of human life does the law of supply and demand operate so powerfully as in literature. Writers and readers are not two different classes of men: both are products of the same social and mental conditions: and the thoughts of the one will be commonly of the same order and kind as the thoughts of the other. Even in the form which a writer gives to his thought, there will be the same compelling pressure from the world about him; he will unconsciously comply with what he feels to be the needs of his readers; he will write so as best to be read. And thus it is that if we seek a key to this great literary change of the Age of the Revolution, we must look for it not in the writers of the Revolution so much as in the public for whom they wrote.

I restrict myself here, however, to a single feature of this change."As a bashful and not forward boy," says the novelist Richardson, "I was an early favorite with all the young women of taste and reading in the neighborhood. Half-a-dozen of them, when met to work with their needles, used, when they got a book they liked and thought I should, to borrow me to read to them, the mothers sometimes with them, and both mothers and daughters used to be pleased with the observations they put me on making." ....

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