

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-82156-8 - The Collected Letters of Erasmus Darwin

Edited by Desmond King-Hele

Excerpt

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## THE LETTERS

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47-1 To SUSANNAH DARWIN, 11 April 1747

Chesterfield Ap: the 11<sup>th</sup> 1747

Dear Sister

Nothing can give more intimate delight  
 Than to peruse the verses you do write.  
 All is slow, sweet, harmonious, sublime,  
 And (may I say it!) more than half divine.  
 But hold! I own, if I your praise should sing,  
 My verse is far inferior to my Theme;  
 For tho' the Printers Type yours well require,  
 Yet my low Style, at best demands the Fire:  
 Your beaut'ous verse runs quick; yet oft, in mine,  
 E'en ten low words creep slow, in one dull Line. 10  
 And tho' your tuneful Lays slide smooth, don't blame  
 Mine, that move jarring, pitiful and lame;  
 Nor Criticize[?] them; since I ne'er confine  
 My barb'rous words and Thoughts to tinkling Rhyme,  
 Or English Meter: tho' I, e'ery Week,  
 Spell uncouth Latin and pretend to Greek.  
 But least you think I am a mere Gnathonick  
 In your deserved praise I'll be Laconick.  
 And now this long Preamble let us end,  
 And come to what at first I did intend: 20  
 Namely, to tell that tho' I should translate,  
 Or ne'er so well that Poem imitate,  
 My Latin verse would not produce enough  
 To send you home a Gown of sourest[?] Stuf;  
 For 'tis the most if I get empty Praise  
 For all my Pains. And then too, I always  
 Quite unacquainted was with Lady's dress,  
 Silk, Satin, Cambrick, Muslin and the rest;  
 But Pen, Ink, Paper, is my Element,  
 On which utensils I am chiefly bent; 30  
 Old Themes, Translations, Exercise and Greek,  
 The Schole-boys Chaos, I'll send e'ery Week;  
 Which if you will accept, for aught that I can tell,  
 A paper hat may build, if huswif'd well,  
 Which, now the warmer Season's coming on,  
 May keep you cooler than a silken one.  
 And, then again, do Beggars e'er implore  
 An Alms of him who, like themselves, is poor?

How then can one poor Poet e'er conceive  
 A Gift of other Poet to receive? 40  
 When all the Class are so exceeding poor,  
 They cannot add, or take from one another's Store.  
 But then, tho' Beggars thus do ne'er receive  
 From other Beggars, yet sometimes they give  
 Cheap Consolation, only Words and Wind.  
 So my advice to give you I'm inclined  
 (As the best Gift I'm able to bestow),  
 Since what you ask's out of my power to do,  
 For Silk and Satin I can ne'er produce;  
 But this advice perhaps may be of use, 50  
 'Read Dryden, Hudibras, Pope, Swift and Prior',  
 And you'll perceive in strain you'll soon mount higher,  
 And, with no middle flight, you then will soar  
 Above the Aonian Mount. And if more  
 Your bright Genius you exert and strive,  
 To Poet Laureat you may soon arrive.  
 But now the thread of my discourse is spun,  
 And with respects to all, I've almost done;  
 Wherefore, to end my Senseless Rhyme and jarring,  
 I now conclude, your Bro: Erasmus Darwin. 60

*Original* Not traced. There is a manuscript copy by Erasmus's father Robert Darwin at Cambridge University Library, DAR 267:2, notebook 13, p. 193 (see Plate 61b).

*Printed* Unpublished.

*Text* From the DAR 267 manuscript.

*Notes*

- (1) Susannah Darwin (1729–1789) was Erasmus's favourite sister, and one of his earliest poems is in praise of her (see 1999 *Life*, p. 8). She acted as housekeeper for him at Lichfield in 1756–7, before his marriage, and as an indulgent aunt to his children in the 1760s. After the death of his wife Polly in 1770, she returned as housekeeper and foster-mother to his sons, until his second marriage in 1781.
- (2) Susannah had sent Erasmus a short poem, which she suggested he should translate into Latin. Teasing him over his growing family reputation as a poet, she implies that his translation into Latin would be saleable enough to buy her a 'gown of Satin' (notebook 13, p. 192).
- (3) At first reading, Erasmus's verse-letter may seem irritatingly careless and devoid of information. But the urbane and conversational tone is remarkable for a 15-year-old, and is sometimes reminiscent of Byron's *Don Juan* in its rollicking mock-modesty. The good-natured banter never falters. The poem's 'nothingness' is also significant, and may imply that a descriptive poem was already too easy for Erasmus. The nothingness is deliberate, and reflects a reticence: he refuses (lines 13–15) to expose his own (subversive?) thoughts in 'tinkling Rhyme'. This cautiousness persisted: Erasmus never published verse under his own name. Even *The Botanic Garden* (1789–92) was

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[48-1]

5

anonymous, and at times more teasing than serious. Only the posthumous *Temple of Nature* (1803) carried his name, and revealed his inmost thoughts.

- (4) Notes on the poem. (a) line 10: copied from Pope's 'And ten low words oft creep in one dull line', *Essay on Criticism* II 347; (b) line 17: 'Gnathonick' means 'flatterer', after the sycophantic character Gnatho in Terence's play *Eunuchus*; (c) line 24: Johnson's Dictionary gives 'austere' as one meaning of 'sour'; (d) line 51: to read Dryden, Butler's *Hudibras*, Pope, Swift and Prior, would be conventional advice for a literary student to offer his less-literary sister; (e) lines 53–4: 'with no middle flight . . . Aonian Mount' is a quotation from Milton's *Paradise Lost* i 15.
- (5) This and the other early letters, before 1754, are often difficult to transcribe. Most are manuscript copies in very small notebooks (6 × 4 inches), the copier being Erasmus's father Robert. His writing is tiny and rather illegible; the spelling and punctuation are deficient, full stops being rare; and there is no paragraphing, presumably to save space. I have corrected these oddities when I think it necessary, by creating paragraphs, inserting punctuation and correcting the spelling (unless it is one of Erasmus's own characteristic mis-spellings). However, I have generally preserved the initial capitals in the manuscript copies, because Erasmus himself used initial capitals rather freely. I have omitted the poems by Erasmus – one runs to 172 lines – associated with several of the letters. However, the letters-in-verse are printed in full.
- (6) It seems fitting that 'intimate delight' figures in the first line of Erasmus's first letter, and that in his last letter, 55 years later, he expresses delight with his new home.

48-1 TO ROBERT WARING DARWIN (*Plate 17*), 20 January 1747/8  
(Old Style)

20 January 1747

Your delightful, melodious, poetical, learned and ingenious Letter came to hand the 5<sup>th</sup> instant, and afforded me more agreeable innate satisfaction than any other sublunary composition could possibly have done; for which I'm eternally obliged to you, and in return have almost jaded my Poetical Muse for something to entertain you with, but find it unworthy your perusal when compared with yours, which are – but least you should esteem me a base flatterer, I will check (tho' with pain to myself) your deserv'd commendations; and content myself by letting you know by different hands in the above Verses that I'm not your only admirer, but so great is your esteem here and the just Opinion entertained of your super-excellent Poetry that every one can lend a simily to your praise or build a Panegyric upon your performances.

But to come to particulars, your Blank verse (not in my Opinion only) is inexpressibly Beautifull, and where you say you wrote unassisted by either Muse or Milton, to make the Alliteration stronger, you might have added Mason; but however pardon me if I pass in Silence your beautifull application of my first Riddle, not being able to do it justice in my mean Style; but I must acquaint you you mistook the Subject of the prize Enigma, but will find it

in the initial Letters of the three last lines. I am persuaded your Enigma was aim'd at my self and therefore, tho' it was very witty, extremely harmonious and polite Language, I will not commend it; but must own, if I could not have guessed it, the Capp would have fitted my Noddle. I make bold to present the two Enigmas to your perusal, the latter of which is wholly the Composition of Bro: Jackey.

*Original* Not traced. There is a manuscript copy by Erasmus's father Robert at Cambridge University Library, DAR 267:2, notebook 13, p. 208.

*Printed* Unpublished.

*Text* From the DAR 267 manuscript.

*Notes*

- (1) This is one of two letters for which the designation (48-1) differs from the Old-Style year number (1747). This letter was written nine months after letter 47-1, and Erasmus is now 16. Here he offers ironically overblown praise in overlong sentences for the 180-line poem he had received from his brother (DAR 267:2, pp. 200–4). However, the first sentence could be sincere: receiving a long poem written just for you might well give 'more agreeable innate satisfaction' than the other items in the post that day.
- (2) Robert Waring Darwin (1724–1816), Erasmus's eldest brother, was now a lawyer at Lincoln's Inn: admitted on 18 June 1743, he was to be called to the Bar on 5 February 1751. He was keen on writing verse and led his younger brothers down the same road. Many years later, when Erasmus put together a volume of poems, he dedicated it 'To my brother Robert Waring Darwin Esquire, by whose example and encouragement my mind was directed to the study of Poetry in my very early years'. For more about Robert, see 1999 *Life*, pp. 6–7 and 218–19.
- (3) The obscurities in the second paragraph of the letter might be resolved by analysing the various Enigmas. These run to several hundred lines of rather illegible and decidedly enigmatic verse. The two enigmas mentioned at the end appear in DAR 267:2, pp. 206–7.
- (4) 'Mason', in the first sentence of the second paragraph, is William Mason (1725–1797), who in 1747 published a poem on the death of Alexander Pope. Mason was a friend of Erasmus's headmaster, William Burrow (see letter 50-1, note 2). For Mason, see Scott, pp. 530–2, and *DNB*.
- (5) 'Bro: Jackey' at the end is Erasmus's brother John Darwin (1730–1805). They were pupils together at Chesterfield School, and undergraduates together at St John's College, Cambridge. John became a clergyman and was Rector of Elston from 1766. See Scott, p. 601.
- (6) After the end of the letter, Erasmus's father adds 'the rest was home news', evidently not worth copying. With his selectivity in copying and great interest in his children's literary efforts, he seems like the president of a family literary society.
- (7) In notebook 13 of DAR 267, Erasmus's letter is followed by a long poem written by his brother Robert, entitled 'a supplement to the former Dream\*'. The asterisk refers us to a note by their father: '\* after having rec'd many Instances of ED's great genius for Poetry'. So Erasmus's fame as a poet in the 1790s would have been no surprise to his father.

48-2 To WILLIAM ALVEY DARWIN (*Plate 19*), 12 April 1748

[A letter from Eras: Darwin to his Bro: Wm Alvey Darwin at Mr Denton's Chamber in Gray's Inn, Chesterfield 12 Ap: 1748. He begins with the News of the Place and deaths of several of his acquaintance, and then goes on:]

Pray inform Bro: Robert we rec'd his letter. I dare not declare its qualities because it would be self-commendation; but I can assure him that the word innate was not designedly inserted in my last (I would rather confess my own ignorance than disoblige a Friend, a Friend!). I meant internal. His latter Enigma we guess to be (I somewhere remember a Pun upon it, oh!)

If you your Watch wou'd keep, this you must do,  
 Pocket your Watch, and watch your Pocket too.

Your latter Enigma, I say gave me a greater Pleasure than my own undeserved commendation, for in the words of Mr Pope but a fact[?] for the first,

All Praise [Pope has 'fame'] is foreign, but of true desert,  
 Plays round the Head, but comes not to the Heart.

But however if I may not commend him deservedly, who commends me undeservedly, I may at least thank him for his Commendation, nam si Laudes respiciunt Viri optimi gratias saltem sibi agi permittant gratias; caque[?] ex anima persolvimus (Trap.[?] Cre[?] prima), but I can't forbear esteeming him a second Timotheus, whose Lyre could so command[?] even Alexander that (as Mr Pope I think expresses it in his Criticism, if I may depend upon my Memory):

Now ardent fury in his Eye-Balls glow,  
 Now Sighs steal out, and Tears begin to flow.

Thus Timotheus brought Music to its greatest perfection, by adding a tenth string to his Lyre and inventing Chromatics; nothing seems better to answer this tenth string than an excess of Commendation added to the most exquisite strokes of Poetry, and what did Timotheus gain by his Addition!

But no more of this. Bro: Robert will receive a translation of one of Lucian's Dialogues from Jackey in his next. And my Shivering Muse, having nothing else to blot the rest of my Paper, will present to your perusal some Verses upon Winter. I conclude.

Your loving Bro:  
 Erasmus Darwin

Bro: joins in love to you both.

P.S. We received a letter from home, that my father was very ill at Lincoln, about a fortnight since, and long to hear of his health.

[There follows a poem of 162 lines entitled 'Winter', as mentioned above.]

*Original* Not traced. There is a manuscript copy by Erasmus's father Robert at Cambridge University Library, DAR 267:2, notebook 13, p. 234.

*Printed* Unpublished.

*Text* From the DAR 267 manuscript.

*Notes*

- (1) The sentences in square brackets at the start are written by Erasmus's father in the manuscript copy. 'Mr Denton' is Christopher Denton, a gentleman of Holborn, who was admitted to Gray's Inn on 11 May 1744 (*Gray's Inn Admission Register*).
- (2) This letter is an editor's nightmare. It is the most illegible of all the letters in this book and, when deciphered, the words do not make good sense.
- (3) William Alvey Darwin (1726–1783), Erasmus's elder brother, was a pupil at Gray's Inn, though not formally admitted until 1751. Unlike John and Erasmus, he did not go to St John's College, Cambridge. He worked as a lawyer in London until 1777, when he retired to Sleaford. His son inherited Elston Hall in 1816 and the family has maintained the connection with Elston. There is an excellent portrait of William Alvey Darwin by Joseph Wright (Nicolson, *Wright*, Plate 176; reproduced here as Plate 19).
- (4) I have not resolved all the obscurities, but the following notes on the letter may help a little: (a) brother Robert apparently objected to the word *innate* in letter 48-1, perhaps for semantic reasons; (b) the first couplet by Pope is from the *Essay on Man*, Epistle 4, lines 253–4, with 'fame' changed to 'Praise'; (c) I have not found the source of the Latin quotation, which may be roughly translated as, 'for if the best men look askance at praise, at least they allow thanks to be given; plan[?] from the mind we explain'; (d) Timotheus (446–357 BC) was a boldly innovative musician praised by Pope in the *Essay on Criticism*, and the lines quoted by Erasmus from memory are an altered version of a couplet from the *Essay* (II 378–9), in which the first line reads, 'Now his fierce eyes with sparkling fury glow'.

48-3 TO ROBERT WARING DARWIN (brother), 20 July 1748

Chesterfield July 20<sup>th</sup> 1748

Dear Bro:

A mournfull and unexpected Message of bad news met us at our arrival here that did not a little startle the whole Schole. However, to keep you no longer in suspense, Geo: Bourn is dead, threw himself into a Fever, by bathing hot after a journey, and died in less than a week –

Mista senium ac juvenum deusantur funera  
 Quem sors dierum tunque dabit luera oppone  
 Felix quem faciunt aliena pericula scutum [*two words illegible*] Pilorum,

who ran away from Schole in debt having corrupt mantes[?].

But now I come to the poem to Aunt Wigley. I must first remind you of Swift's rule of criticism, viz first never to blame if you cannot correct; 2nd that if you can alter a word or sentence to the better, to suppose the author had really used that, and all the fault in the transcriber's or printer's carelessness. Upon these terms, wherever you find fault, we shall be obliged to you to erase the Original

and insert the Correction, or interlineate and return it to be retranscribed. But to particulars: the motto seems to be designed by the author as a Compliment to the person dedicated, it being a line from Homer p. 92 etc[?] est non potest lego, but having examined the left hand page of that author, the sense of it appears to run thus: She is inferior to none, neither in Beauty, in Wit, in Understanding nor in household Business or Needlework. In the progress of the piece there are two Peccadillos against Grammar, yet as they do not darken the Sense nor are [*illegible*] feel, are not much more than rules in Rhetoric, we desire it may go to Grantham so soon as possible, with our respects. I am your

Loving Bro:

Eras. Darwin

*Original* Not traced. There is a manuscript copy by Erasmus's father Robert at Cambridge University Library, DAR 267:2, notebook 13, p. 232.

*Printed* Unpublished.

*Text* From the DAR 267 manuscript.

*Notes*

- (1) This is another unsatisfactory letter, with obscurities and illegibilities.
- (2) There is a 30-line elegy on George Bourn by Erasmus in DAR 267:2, p. 228. I have not identified the Latin quotation.
- (3) The 162-line poem about Mrs Wigley, by John and Erasmus, appears in DAR 267:2, pp. 229–32 (manuscript copy by their father Robert). There are several poems in the DAR 267 notebooks about 'Aunt Wigley'. Born Jane Harriman in 1707, she was married in 1725 to William Hill, the brother of Erasmus's mother Elizabeth. Hill died in 1732, aged 33, and Jane was married again in 1742, to Dr Edward Wigley (1698–1751). She died in December 1752. See DAR 267:9.

48-4 To ROBERT WARING DARWIN (brother), 10 October 1748

Chesterfield 10 Oct 1748

Dear Bro:

The Chief Purport of this is to desire you would let me know, as soon as possible, if you have a Dionysius περι υψος to dispose of; which I am persuaded you have, from a brilliant Reflection of too small a Part of that Author's Beautys in a succinct translation of yours, which I have by me.

This messenger of mine, I am apt to think, will find you harassing poor Hares, or frightening Partridges, or some other diversion which attends the Autumn; but (to fill up my paper I must tell you) we don't in the least envy you, that being a Passion diametrically opposite to Love; and beside we too have our Amusements; you may boast your Bars of Gold and [Plumbs?] of Amber, you may boast your purple Clusters swell'd with floods of Wine: nor envy we. We feed upon the delicious Ambrosia of Virgil, and sip the Nectar of pamelian Horace; we drink the honey of the attic Bee and wanton in the flowers of Eloquent Tully, and without dissimulation we really prefer the Nectar of Hellicon to the Nectrous of



Elston; and would rather choose construing[?] of Poets than of Pearles. Whilst you pop at Partridges or unfold the swelling Net,

We too together beat the ample field,  
 Try what the open, what the covert yield,  
 Eye Nature's Walks, shoot Folly as it flies,  
 And catch the manners living as they rise.

But however you may perhaps defend yourself with Homer's Line 80[?], (Επι τι θυμοι εδευετο δαιτος εαισης, and confirm it with omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci: you may tell us that we homunculi are fed only with the Milk of knowledge and wander in the Skirts of Science's Labarinth; whilst you digest the stronger[?] meals[?] of Philosophy's abstract studies, that you take[?] the penetrabilia, are received[?] as it were into the cabinet Counsels of Nature and her Laws: if this be the case, you must pardon one more Latin line,

Cum tot sustineas et tanti negotia solus  
 . . . . . in publica commoda pettem[?]  
 Si longo Sermone morer Sua tempora, Plato.  
 Bro: joyns in respects and compliments.  
 I am Your loving Bro:  
 Eras: Darwin

*Original* Not traced. There is a manuscript copy by Erasmus's father Robert at Cambridge University Library, DAR 267:2, notebook 13, pp. 237–8.

*Printed* Unpublished.

*Text* From the DAR 267 manuscript.

*Notes*

- (1) Though again rather illegible, this letter is more significant than the earlier ones, because the 16-year-old Erasmus is beginning to challenge his eldest brother's country way of life – shooting and fishing. 'Whilst you pop at Partridges', he says, my brother John and I are hard at work on our classical studies. Erasmus implies, under cover of banter, that Robert is not only idly wasting his time but also killing innocent creatures. When Erasmus condemns 'the Nectrous of Elston', his invented word half-echoes the 'Nectar' earlier, but may be a polite name for necrophages (who eat their kills) or necrophiles (who enjoy killing).
- (2) Detailed notes. (a) 'Dionysius περι υψος' is presumably part of the *Scripta Rhetorica* of Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1st century BC). (b) The 'attic Bee' is Xenophon (c.435–c.354 BC), whose *Anabasis* was studied by many generations of schoolboys; 'Eloquent Tully' is Cicero (106–43 BC), studied by even more. (c) The four lines of English verse are from Pope's *Essay on Man*, Epistle 1, lines 9–10 and 13–14, and are quoted correctly, apart from a stylistic change in the first line, to suit the syntax of the letter. (d) The correct version of the line from Homer (with accents and breathings omitted) is 'ουδε τι θυμοις εδευετο δαιτος εισης' (*Odyssey* π 479 and τ 425): 'Nor were their hearts at all disappointed by the equally shared feast' is the translation in the Loeb edition. (e) The Latin line 'omne tulit . . .' is from Horace, and may be translated: 'He has carried every point who has blended the useful with the agreeable.' (f) I have not identified the Latin quote at the end.

49-1 To SUSANNAH DARWIN, 18 March 1748/9 (Old Style)

Chesterfield. March 18<sup>th</sup> 1748/9

Dear Sister

Yours I'm persuaded lay Windbound somewhere, not reaching Chesterfield till better than a fortnight after the date, that I must begg to be excused for not answering it sooner. Besides I had other Reasons for my delay, as having a mind to see Lent almost expired before I could vouch for a continued series of my own Abstinense throughout the whole; and not having before had a convenient oppertunity to consult a Synod of my learned friend[s] about your ingenious Conscience, where, I must inform you, the whole Society unanimously agree in the Opinion of the learned Divine you mention, that Swine may in reality be Fish but then they are a devilish Sort of Fish; and the same Authority affirms that all Fish is Flesh, whence we prove by a logical Sillogism that Porck is not only Flesh but a devilish Sort of flesh; and consequently very improper food for a Lent Stomach, wherefore I would advise you for Conscience sake altogether to abstain from tasting it; as I can assure you I have done all this Lent, and for my own part have lived only upon Puding, milk, bread and vegetables; postscript, but don't mistake me, I don't mean I have not touch'd roast beef, Mutton, Veal, Goose, fowl, etc., for what are all these? All flesh is Grass!

Was I to give you a Journal of a Week it would be stuf so full of Greek and Latin as translation, Verses, themes, annotation, Exercise and the like, it would not only be very tedious and insipid but perfectly unintelligible to any but Scholeboys.

I fancy you forgot in Yours to inform me that your strict abstinence had quite settled the swelling of your Cheek, but that I can easily suppose, when I reflect upon the happy effects of temperance. For the temperate enjoy an ever-blooming Health free from all the Infections and Disorders luxurious Mortals are subject to; the whimsical Tribe of Phisitians cheated of their fees may sit down in penury and Want, they may curse Mankind and imprecate the Gods and call down that parent of all Deseases luxury to infect Mankind, luxury more destructive than the sharpest Famine; tho' all the Distempers that ever Satan inflicted (by God's Permission) upon Job were to be pour'd upon Mankind, they would no doubt play harmless round the Heads of the temperate, nor dare to touch a single Hair; we should not meet those pale, thin and haggard contenances which every Day present themselves to us. No doubt Men would still live their Hunderd, and Methusalemn would lose his Character; fever banished from our Streets, limping Gout would fly the land and sedentary Stone would vanish into Oblivion, and Death himself be slain.

I could for ever rail against Luxury and for ever panegyryze upon abstinence had I not already encroach'd too far upon your Patience; but it being Lent the exercise of that christian Virtue may not be amiss, so I shall proceed a little furder, to tell you that if you have a scarcity of fish I can't sufficiently applaud your ingenious Contrivance, but I can't help thinking that was you to douse