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978-1-108-07404-9 - The Life and Errors of John Dunton, Citizen of London: With the Lives and Characters of More than a Thousand Contemporary Divines and Other Persons of Literary Eminence: Volume 1

Edited by John Nichols

Excerpt

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# JOHN DUNTON'S *Life and Errors.*

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## CHAPTER I.

### FROM HIS BIRTH TO HIS FIFTEENTH YEAR.

**A**T the threshold of this Account, I must own it as a very criminal *Error* of my *Life*, into which both Disappointment and Passion have frequently misled me; that I have too often arraigned the Divine Providence that Nature ever travailed with such an unhappy birth. It was almost a relief to me to cry out with Job, iii. 3. 'Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man-child conceived.' Would but this acknowledgment be a caution to others, how they split upon the same rock, and quarrel with Providence, I should reckon myself sufficiently recompensed.

However, to begin. I was born at Graffham in Huntingdonshire the 14th of May 1659. My father, Mr. *John Dunton*, was Fellow of Trinity College in Cambridge, and rector of Graffham. My mother, *Lydia Dunton*, was daughter to Mr. Daniel Carter, of Chesham; and, were it not foreign to the purpose, I could here acquaint the Reader with the *Visions she had of another World* in her trances, in one of which she lay three days, and was mercifully restored as they were disposing her in the coffin; and a year after she died *in earnest*, and was interred in Graffham Chancel March 3, 1660; upon which occasion the following couplets were composed:

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[More information](#)

“ She did, I saw her mount the sky,  
 And with new whiteness paint the Galaxy ;  
 Heaven her, methought, with all its eyes did view,  
 And yet acknowledg'd all its eyes too few.  
 Methought I saw in crowds bless'd Spirits meet,  
 And with kind welcomes her arrival greet,  
 Which, could they grieve, had gone with grief away,  
 To see a Saint more white, more pure than they.  
 Earth was unworthy such a prize as this,  
 Only a while Heaven let us share the bliss.”

To return. My first entrance upon the stage was attended with all the symptoms of death, as if I had been sensible of my future miseries, and willing to steal into the grave from the very womb of Nature ; but some of the attendants\* were so compassionate and cruel, as to sprinkle water on my forehead, and raise me to life, though, alas ! it proved but an unkind office, to chain me down to this world, when I was making my retreat, and taking wing for another ; upon which emergency the following lines were written :

“ So the infant day does rise,  
 Gilding hills, and painting skies,  
 Till some envious pregnant cloud  
 Does its blooming glories shroud.

So a short-lived Winter's sun  
 Sets almost as soon 's begun ;  
 Weeping Heaven laments its fall,  
 Mourning Earth, its funeral.

So a Rose-bud does prepare  
 To salute the calmer air,  
 Till some piercing Northern gust  
 Rends and spreads it in the dust.

Such, poor Infant, was thy birth,  
 Such thy parents' joy and mirth ;  
 Roses, suns, and days can be  
 But a *Meiosis* of thee.”

The first appearance which I made was very mean and contemptible ; and, as if Nature had designed me to take up only some insignificant and obscure corner of the universe, I was so diminutive a creature, that a quart pot could contain the whole of me with ease enough ; whereupon was written :

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\* Mrs. Palmer, of Graffham.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## LIFE AND ERRORS.

23

“ There lies a pretty little Knave,  
In 's cradle, dressing-room, and grave.”

In this condition, and long before I had any articulate use of my tongue, I gave the world sufficient evidence of a child of Adam; and the certain tokens of corrupt nature and intemperate passion were more and more apparent, as I made advances both in strength and age: all the signs of disobedience and revenge, of impatience and immoderate desire, were seen in me, when I wanted the power to execute what my inclinations led me to. These were only the more innocent and infant essays of depraved nature; to those *black*er crimes that are yet to come. It is a matter of certainty with me, that, by a narrow observation of the temper and constitution of children, we may discover most of those vices and virtues in the very embryo, which afterwards make them remarkable in the world. This notion has often thrown me into melancholy, when I have reflected how ripe and pregnant the seeds of all vice and sin were in me when so young:

“ These the sure preludes, these the ruder plan,  
Of early childhood ripen'd into man!”

When my mother was deceased, and my father thereupon left in sorrow, he made a voyage into Ireland \*, that his griefs might be abated; where, at the request of Sir Henry Ingoldsby, he settled for several years. This made some alteration in my affairs. I was sent immediately away to Mr. *William Reading's*, at Dungrove, a place almost in the neighbourhood of Chesham, and there put to school so soon as I was capable: this was the first of all those inconsiderate Rambles that I have made. The world may expect that I should here make up the accounts of my improvement and proficiency at school; but, alas! those years which I spent there were as well cancelled out of the number I have lived.

All the advance I made under Sarah Wire, John Ducket, Richard Bowly, and a whole catalogue of Teachers, was only to know the rudiments of my mother tongue. I could improve fast enough in any thing but

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\* Attended by his old and faithful servant, Mr. Thomas Tallwood.

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[More information](#)

*the art of learning*, to which I had a strange kind of aversion, both as it kept me confined, and, as I thought, was too difficult and unpleasant.

At this time, when I could only tell backward a few years, which I then reckoned a sort of misery, my mind was furnished with a number of very odd fancies, which have since been my great unhappiness. I remember one day, as I returned through the fields from Chesham-school, my thoughts were so entirely taken up with projecting to myself the plan of life, and what I would *be*, and *do*, when I came to be a man—that my feet misled me, and I wandered, without knowing it, till I had out-measured the *Terra Firma*, and so plunged headlong in the River; but, as Providence would have it, my cousin, Mr. John Reading, was lying on the bank, and saved me from a death, which, in all probability, was both present and unavoidable.

Another providential deliverance I received at Chesham was this. While I was playing with a *leaden bullet* in my mouth, it slipped down my throat; but, the size of it being too large for the passage, it stopped in my breast; and I remained in that condition till I had lost all hope of life, when on the sudden the bullet bolted up, and so prevented both my own and the fears of others:

Thus oft we take our leave of life and pain,  
And both, yet linger, and we live again;  
Thus oft we stretch, the fatal gulph to pass,  
And Death flies off, and turns the vital glass:  
Thus oft we 're willing when we cannot die,  
And wish in vain for immortality.  
Death hags the mind, then vanishes away,  
And oft adjourns the last decisive day.

And here, that I may not prove ungrateful to the God of Providence, and preventing mercy, I shall add a *Third Danger*, that my childish curiosity exposed me to. One day I was wandering alone in the fields of Dungrove, and, taking up a *bearded ear* of corn to play with, I made the experiment how far I could venture it down my throat, and pluck it back again; but, both to my surprize and pain, it stuck there, and whilst I struggled with it, I only sent it farther out of my own reach. In this extremity, some of my Relations that were walking

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[More information](#)

in the fields\* found me lying speechless, and gasping for breath, and with some difficulty they set me at rights again, though the memory of it will remain with me--

“When nothing else can stop our little breath,  
The staff of Life turns into darts of Death.”

This was the third time that Death had threatened me, and by so many signal deliverances was I rescued; but, alas! there was nothing of them that gave me the least impression, save the bare remembrance, which helped me to tell them over to my School-fellows † with abundance of pride; for I could then boast of my *heroism*, having out-faced such a number of deaths and dangers; and I am sure the matter lost nothing by the relation of it. At this age, a lie with me was a matter of very little scruple, though I never practised the sin unless it would either prevent a discovery, or procure some advantage that at least would gratify and please me; but, alas! this providence in sin can never atone for it.

The advances I made at *School* went on very slowly, for I had a thousand little things to say, that would excuse my absence, or at least abate the rigour of the punishment: *sickness* and *business*, I remember, were threadbare topicks, I had made use of them so frequently; though I am fully convinced to my sorrow, that these methods to conceal my negligence were the greatest *cheat* I ever put upon myself.

In my own defence (and I think I neither have, nor shall baulk the least *Error* that occurs) I can say, that as for the little thieveries, too common with children, I was never much addicted to them: once, indeed, I was persuaded by a company of play-fellows to join with them in *robbing an Orchard*, and, being placed as a centinel, we were all of us discovered; and perhaps it was well for me, seeing, had we got safe off with the booty, I might have had the courage to make a second adventure of that nature. However, I cannot call it any merit in

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\* Mr. Walmesley of Chesham, Aunt Reading, her daughter Anne, Mrs. Mary Gossam, Sarah Randal, Robert Reading, Mrs. Prat of Bellingdon, &c.

† Elias Cock, Matthew Biscow, John Aires, Thomas Reading, &c.

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[More information](#)

me that I was no more addicted to steal, because it proceeded purely from my own cowardice, when my inclinations were strong enough.

At these years *Religion* was as little understood as practised by me, though I was possessed with strange notions of Heaven and Hell; and as I had some love for Heaven, in regard I was told it was a place of happiness and pleasure, and furnished with variety of agreeable entertainments; so I had some servile fear of Hell, because it was represented as a place full of the blackest and the most frightful terrors; as a fiery dungeon, where impenitent sinners should be punished with endless and extreme pain. These considerations were matter of astonishment to me, when I either reflected upon them as it were by accident, or was talked to about them; though these impressions wore off, like letters inscribed upon the surface of water; for so soon as I got among my school-fellows, I was diverted, and grew as unaffected as before.

This is an unfit place to tell the Reader those young thoughts I entertained of *Death*. In general I formed an idea of him like a walking skeleton, with a dart in his right, and an hour-glass in his left hand. This image took its rise from some effigies I had seen, or some discourse I had heard of Death; and the imagination, though it was lively enough, was yet of little service to me, because I reckoned upon a vast number of years, and a world of pleasure, betwixt me and Death. However, at the worst, I thought I could certainly persuade him to spare me; and though I had been informed that Death was inexorable as well as impartial, yet self-love was so strong in me, that I could not but think that I might make terms of peace with him, or, at least, that prayers and tears would prevail with him, and work upon his pity.

With reference to the Day of Judgment, my sentiments were so childish and various, both as to the place and manner of proceeding at that solemn appearance, that they would swell the Work quite beyond compass. But, if ever I had a glimpse of Heaven, it was in these *early days*, as I was once reading the fifteenth Psalm; and for that reason I read that Psalm with a peculiar pleasure to this day.

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[More information](#)

## LIFE AND ERRORS.

27

To return. Nine years of my *Life* were already up, when my Father returned for England, and was advanced to the Rectorship of Aston-Clinton \*, where he married a *second* time †; and so soon as he had settled his affairs, and formed a family, I was sent for home; but I bid a farewell to Dungle with almost as much reluctance as the soul leaveth the body; and indeed the comparison is something apposite, for at those years I knew as little of any other part of the Globe, as the soul does of the Upper Worlds. At the arrival of this melancholy news, I swooned away, as if my Life and Dungle had been incorporate; and the pleasure I found in that *deliquium* has ever since reconciled my thoughts to Death, and familiarized the appearance of the King of Terrors. But this foolish passion wore off, and was less and less troublesome the longer I had been so agreeably entertained at my Father's house, though that liberty at first was followed with a perfect bondage to my apprehensions; for my Father began now to look after me a little strictly, and in regard he designed me for the Ministry, I was kept at home under his own care and tuition; for I had convinced him sufficiently of my roving inclinations; and beside, having made such awkward improvements at school, he thought I was not in a condition to be trusted with my time abroad; and for my own part, I concluded that to be bred a Minister was something out of the road, and beyond the reach of the common sort of mankind: this worked upon my ambition, and went down with me well enough, till I was given to understand *what* there was betwixt me and being a Minister. An attempt was made upon me; but indeed the Latin tongue gave me satisfaction enough, though I had attained to some perfection in it, and could speak it pretty well extempore: but the difficulties of the Greek quite broke all my resolutions; and, which was a greater disadvantage to me, I was wounded with a silent passion for a Virgin ‡ in my Father's house, that unhinged me all

\* By Sir Francis Gerrard.

† With Mrs. Mary Lake, daughter to the Rev. Mr. Mariat, and sister to that eminent citizen, Mr. Thomas Rolfe.

‡ Mrs. Mary Sanders.

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[More information](#)

at once, though I never made a discovery of the flame, and for that reason it gave me the greater torment. This happened in my thirteenth year, when, by some impulse or other, I am sure I loved, though the nature of the passion was a secret to me; yet the symptoms of it were so innocent and sincere, that I may call it, with propriety enough, the very tendency of Nature to closer union. I can attribute my freedom, and the cure of this amorous indisposition, to nothing else but profound silence, which was certainly occasioned by the contrary strugglings of fear and shame; for I always haunted her retirements; and when I was with her, my tongue faltered, and refused to be the instrument to convey the least of those tender things I had to tell her.

“Thus pensive Ghosts by their loved reliques stay,  
And sigh and sob the midnight hours away:  
Thus infant passions combat in the womb,  
And, silent, lay each other in the tomb.”

My Father tried all the methods with me that could be thought of, in order to reconcile my mind to the love of Learning; but all of them proved useless and ineffectual. My thoughts were all unbent and dissolved in the affairs of Love; and you may well conceive that an amour, which was entirely transacted within my own breast, and the severities of study and strict discipline, would make betwixt them but a very indifferent sort of harmony. However, had I been as much a master of the Greek as I was of the Latin tongue, I must without dispute have packed up for Oxford. When my Father was convinced that an unsettled mercurial humour had given me such a disgust to the Languages, which I then thought very barren and unprofitable; the next experiment that he made was to know how the rational part of Learning would relish with me; upon this, I began to dabble in Philosophy, and made some little progress in Logick, Metaphysicks, and Morality; the last of which was only in notion, not in practice, for neither Aristotle, Herbord, Wendelin, nor all the Ethicks in the world, could work a reformation in my manners. Their fine-spun threads, and the reason of their notions, pleased me, I remember; but that was all. My Father's hopes began now to dwindle very sensibly; yet he was very unwilling



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[More information](#)

## LIFE AND ERRORS.

29

to resign, in regard he would gladly have transmitted the priesthood to his own posterity, seeing he himself was the third *John Dunton*, in a lineal descent, that had been a Minister. However, there was no striving against the stream of Nature—

*Ex quo vis tigno non fit Mercurius.*

Fourteen years of my *Life* were run, and my Father had not the least encouragement to proceed with me, so that he began to take up a resolution to dispose me some other way: an account of which must be the business of the next Period.

## CHAPTER II.

AN IDEA OF A NEW LIFE; OR, THE MANNER HOW I WOULD THINK, AND SPEAK, AND ACT, MIGHT I LIVE OVER AGAIN THESE FOURTEEN YEARS.

**I**N vain, alas, in vain! the period's run!  
 I wish, but can't recall, th' unwilling Sun.  
 His radiant rounds are finish'd in the sky,  
 And a few more lead to Eternity.  
 Time's one successive *now*, it cannot stay,  
 But streams in silence on, and smooths away.  
 We live but *once*, and vainly wish for more;  
 That *once* improv'd, we make the blissful shore.  
 But, ah! those years, and those more happy times  
 Of youth mis-spent, and stain'd with deepest crimes!  
 Yet, while remain these latest-running sands,  
 I'll sue for pardon with up-lifted hands.  
 At Mercy's feet for grace I'll prostrate lie,  
 And there unanswer'd, there I'll pine and die.

There is commonly a long time spent before Children can take in the different natures of good and evil. Yet it is a matter beyond dispute with me, that there is no child can commit any actual transgression till its understanding be impressed with some obscure notices, at

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[More information](#)

least, of the *evil* of sin. And though those images that an infant forms of duty and obedience may have but very faint influence on the will that is unrenewed, yet they are sufficient to leave the person inexcusable. Upon this notion I shall raise the first *rudiments* of a *New Life*, and begin to reform from that very instant in which the first actual sin was committed; for there is no one can doubt but where there is a capacity to sin, there is at the same time a capacity to reform; in regard that, by the rule of contraries, whatsoever is capable of the one, is also capable of the other.

The very first effort of this *Ideal Life* should be to guard and secure those avenues that lead into the errors and the sins of Infancy; which, for the sake of method, I will range under the heads of Passion and Disobedience; and the reason why I place Disobedience the second is plain, seeing it is the natural offspring of intemperate Passion.

To begin: Passion, in the general acceptance, may be branched into Pride and impatient Desire, which are frequently, if not always, the first fruits of corrupt nature in Children. These are the seeds of all those licentious and wild excesses which have been the ruin of thousands, and have made so many desolations among mankind; for, when men have all along soothed themselves with the vanities of ambition, and the fooleries of inclination, they will find these affections will be constantly pursuing them at the heel, and spurring them on to all the kinds of unlawful liberties. Now these men must either abridge their inclinations and sinful appetites; which, when they are ripened and habitually confirmed, will give them a world of uneasiness and trouble in their own breasts; or, on the other hand, they must gratify themselves at the expence of their virtue, if they have any, and the favour of Heaven. Now the first of these extremities, I am sure, is very unacceptable to human nature; for it is the emblem of the pains of Hell to have those inclinations about one that cannot be gratified without a wound to conscience, and a breach upon Christianity; and as for the last extreme, it is as evident that a man, unless he were abandoned to that chimera of speculative Atheism, cannot indulge himself