English Literature for Schools

SELECTIONS FROM *THE SPECTATOR*

ADDISON

SELECTIONS FROM *THE SPECTATOR*

Edited with Introduction and Notes

by

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Cambridge:
at the University Press
1952

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781316612569

First edition 1909
Reprinted 1914, 1920, 1925, 1928, 1929, 1933, 1936, 1946, 1950, 1952
First paperback edition 2016

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-316-61256-9 Paperback

PREFACE

THE following selection of Addison's essays from *The Spectator* is given in chronological order. Only in this way is it possible in a selection to convey something of the desultory charm of the complete work, and artificial grouping may well be left to the discretion and to the requirements of the teacher. As it is necessary for the understanding of the Coverley papers, Steele's account of the Club is given in an appendix.

In the brief notes to this edition I have acknowledged various obligations. I am specially indebted to the careful reprint of *The Spectator* edited and annotated by Professor Gregory Smith.

J. H. L.

LONDON
1st July, 1909.

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INTRODUCTION

THE opening sentence of *The Spectator* is interesting from more than one point of view. It is thoroughly Addisonian, and strikes the key-note of what is best in the essays that follow. One might search far without encountering a finer example in miniature of Addison's delicate irony or of what is now to us the pleasing archaism of his style. But to the writer upon Addison the concluding thrust of his first sentence comes home with special directness, and warns him to pass rapidly over those "Particulars...that conduce very much to the right understanding of an Author." The fear of seeming to fall into *Mr Spectator's* little trap by taking his advice seriously would alone set very brief limits to an outline of his life. The course of that life is itself another reason for brevity. During the last thirteen years of his life Addison held many important political offices. But the greatness that was thrust upon him interests us little now. To think of Addison as a Secretary of State and of Sir Richard Steele as a Commissioner of Stamps imposes a distinct strain on the reconstructive imagination. These facts still interest men of letters and make them think wistfully of the age of Queen Anne. It may be said, however, without any disrespect, that the

thought of Steele's and Addison's appearance in the political world fills us with the same misgiving as that to which *Mr Spectator* pleads guilty when he saw to his surprise that his old friend, Sir Roger, was getting up to speak at the assizes. "I was in some pain for him till I found he had acquitted himself of two or three sentences with a look of much business and great intrepidity." When we read of these things, we instinctively join the group of "the gentlemen of the county gathering about my old friend and striving who should compliment him most," and sympathizing with the awe-struck rustics who "gazed upon him at a distance, not a little admiring his courage that was not afraid to speak to the judge."

Addison was born on May 1, 1672, at Milston, Wiltshire, where his father, Lancelot Addison, was rector. He received his earlier education at Amesbury and Salisbury, and when he was eleven years old his father became Dean of Lichfield. After a short time at Lichfield Grammar School—the school of his chief successor in the list of English Essayists—Addison was sent to Charterhouse where he made his eventful friendship with Richard Steele. In 1687 he entered Queen's College, Oxford, and two years later—owing, it is said, to the excellence of some Latin verses—he obtained a demyship at Magdalen. He was elected to a Fellowship in 1698 and retained it, without taking orders, for thirteen years.

Addison's literary career began in 1693, the year in which he took his M.A. degree. His *Account of the Greatest English Poets* gave no promise of the reputation to come. The feeble couplets contain much that is of the nature of an awful example to critics. They convict Addison of a narrow range of reading and of a willingness to indulge in what

Lamb called damning at a venture. Thus Chaucer is described as a rude barbarian who

> jests in his unpolished strain,
> And tries to make his readers laugh in vain,

and the *Faerie Queene* is dismissed as a "mystic tale" that

> Can charm an understanding age no more.

A complimentary poem to Dryden had the result of gaining the dictator's favour, and soon Addison was being invited by Tonson, the publisher, to co-operate in various undertakings. His early writings it is safe to say would be forgotten now but for the interest reflected on them by his subsequent achievements. In their day, however, they seemed of sufficient merit to attract the attention of those in high places. With the Revolution came the chance for the miscellaneous writer, and leaders of party were eager to secure the services of promising recruits. How great was this eagerness is strikingly shown by the fortune of Addison. Somers and Halifax not only wished to obtain his literary help: they were willing to train him for the work. Accordingly in 1699 Addison set out on his tour on the continent with a government pension of £300 a year. He visited France, Italy, Germany, Austria, and Holland, with results far greater than the actual literary products of this period show. Addison was ostensibly qualifying for the service of King William, but the pension was really being put to more valuable use in training Mr Spectator to be a citizen of the world.

The accession of Queen Anne brought the downfall of Halifax and the stoppage of Addison's pension. He now began his way homewards, arriving in England in the Autumn of 1703, shortly after the death of his father. His prospects at this

time seemed black enough, but presently he was destined to find himself the hero of a fairy tale in literary history. The story has lent itself to picturesque embroidery, but the plainest statement of the facts is sufficiently romantic. The victory of Blenheim found no competent government eulogist. Godolphin in despair sought the advice of Halifax. Halifax spoke of Mr Addison, but hinted that he was not likely to serve a party that "had neither the justice nor the generosity to make it worth his while." Godolphin, acting on this hint, despatched his Chancellor of the Exchequer to interview Addison and to promise him a Commissionership if he would undertake the task. The result was *The Campaign* and the beginning of Addison's triumphant progress towards the Cabinet. Of the intrinsic merits of the poem it is unnecessary to speak. It is a piece of commission work skilfully executed, and had it any value now poetically it would have doubtless been correspondingly a failure in its own day as a piece of metrical journalism. Tradition tells us of Godolphin's delight at the famous "Angel simile" where Marlborough

> Rides in the whirlwind and directs the storm.

In 1706 Godolphin made good his promises by advancing Addison to be Under-Secretary of State, and when two years later he followed Lord Sunderland into retirement, he was almost immediately appointed Secretary to Wharton, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, a fellow-member of the Kit-Cat Club to which Addison had been elected on his return from the continent. While in Ireland Addison formed a strong friendship with Swift which survived the latter's defection to the Tory party. *The Whig Examiner* was undertaken in the Government's defence in 1710, but only ran for five

numbers, and Addison displayed little of the polemical vigour shown by Swift when he began to assail the Whigs in *The Examiner*. The fall of the Whig Ministry in 1710 cost Addison his place, and in the following year he had to resign his Fellowship. His fortunes, however, had prospered so greatly that he was able in 1711 to buy an estate near Rugby for £10,000. To this prosperity no doubt the success of *The Tatler* and of *The Spectator* contributed.

In 1707 Steele was made editor of the *London Gazette*, and two years later, while Addison was in Ireland, he founded *The Tatler*, "a paper which should observe upon the manners of the pleasurable as well as the busy part of mankind." On its first appearance on April 12, 1709, *The Tatler* was at once recognized as a new and brilliant departure. The paper was divided into five heads—gallantry, poetry, learning, politics, and "editorial." *The Tatler* itself had its pioneers and at first it was only a periodical in the making. It gained in uniformity as it proceeded, and it is likely enough that this was due to the influence of Addison who is said to have discovered the identity of Mr Bickerstaff in the fifth number. The project appears to have delighted Addison who saw in it the perfect medium for his satire. Nothing could be more definite than the way in which Addison at once found himself as an essayist. Steele hailed his co-operation with his old enthusiasm and when the paper had run its brilliant course of nearly two years paid a generous tribute to his friend's "genius, humour, wit, and learning" and described himself as "like a distressed prince who calls in a powerful neighbour to his aid; I was undone by my own auxiliary; when I had once called him in, I could not subsist without dependence on him." Steele is

never worse as a critic than when he writes of himself, and to accept his statement literally is to overlook all the facts of the case and to deny to friendship the pleasure of hyperbole. Generosity as well as irony is in need of intelligent interpretation. It is sufficient here to indicate that the happy thought was Steele's, that he wrote four *Tatlers* to Addison's one, and that his good-humoured "lucubrations" with their fine sympathy and insight probably did more to create a new circle of readers than the highly polished sarcasms of his auxiliary. Many years afterwards, when that auxiliary was dead, Steele again bore generous testimony to the value of his assistance. But he was goaded into adding the perfectly just observation, "whatever Steele owes to Mr Addison, the public owes Addison to Steele."

The short life of *The Tatler* was not due to any want of appreciation. It had undergone modifications of its original plan, and Steele and Addison thought it better to start anew. After an interval of two months *The Spectator* began its memorable career of five hundred and ten numbers. Of these all but forty-five papers were the work of Steele and Addison whose own shares were very nearly equal. The lead was taken by Addison who describes Mr Spectator and announces his intention of being a "looker-on." In the second number Steele drew the members of the Spectator Club and thus has the credit of furnishing the *dramatis personae* of our greatest periodical. These two opening essays are of special importance. They are the key to all the rest of the papers that bear on the Club and enable us to see that the essays were not rigorously edited. They were not carved and cut into consistency. Steele and Addison and others handled the characters in their own ways, and the marvel is that they succeeded in drawing portraits so vivid

and convincing. The inconsistencies, for example, in the delineation of Sir Roger de Coverley are such as would be easily pardoned even had they been the work of a single hand. While for various purposes the work of its contributors must be valued separately, it cannot be too strongly urged that *The Spectator* is the joint achievement of Steele and Addison. To read the essays of either in isolation is to forgo the charm of the whole. What that charm is may not easily be defined. A single essay can illustrate the irony of Addison or the humour and sentiment of Steele, but no number of essays by the hand of either can adequately represent *The Spectator*.

The essays in *The Spectator* fall into a few easily defined groups of which three are of outstanding interest and importance—the Coverley papers, the critical essays, and the "comedy of manners." In view of the professed object of *The Spectator*—to bring "philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses"—the last group is the most important of all. In the truest sense of the words, the term, "comedy of manners," is ludicrously inapplicable to the post-Restoration drama, but it would be difficult to find a better title for this section of the work of Steele and Addison. Using entirely different weapons they have the same object in view—to combat ignorance and affectation and folly and impurity. Steele has many claims to be regarded as a great journalist, but none more notable than his resolve to write for and about women. This side of *The Spectator's* satire puzzled some of his contemporaries. Swift tells Stella, "I will not meddle with the *Spectator*, let him *fair sex* it to the world's end." The essays on the fair sex need no initials to betray their

authorship. Those marked by the letters C.L.I.O. are as obviously the work of the bachelor don as those signed R. and T. are from the hand of the writer of Prue's love-letters and of the immortal compliment, "to love her is a liberal education." Of the effect of this side of *The Spectator's* mission we have many incontestable proofs: none more famous than the words of the poet, John Gay. "It is impossible to conceive the effect his writings have had on the town; how many thousand follies they have either quite banished or given a very great check to; how entirely they have convinced our fops and young fellows of the value and advantage of learning." These papers were esteemed in their own day as both entertaining and educative. Their power of entertainment is perennial and they have now acquired an historical value as the best of all sidelights on the London of Queen Anne.

His irony and his urbanity are the two most prominent traits in the essays of Addison. The former is of a kind almost *sui generis*. To define its specific difference, it is needful to remember that irony literally means dissembling. In dramatic or tragic or Sophoclean irony, Fate is the dissembler. The actors in the tragedy are hoodwinked by a deceptive prosperity and it is in the very moment of apparent safety that they are overtaken by ruin. Socratic irony, on the other hand, is the feigning of ignorance. The master leads the novice step by step into a pitfall of contradiction. In a similar manner Addison uses the device of feigning sympathy. There is nothing of the censor or moralist in the way he approaches his victim. The more ridiculous the folly he attacks, the greater is his air of pretended concernment and sympathy. The irony is all the more deadly that it is delivered

under the guise of friendship, and his "gay malevolence" was capable of leaving a wound more lasting than the angry blows of Swift. But here it is necessary to recall the other great quality of Addison's writing—its fine taste and urbanity. It was the type and not the individual that he assailed. His object he tells us was to reprehend "those vices which are too trivial for the chastisement of the law, and too fantastical for the cognizance of the pulpit...All agreed that I should be at liberty to carry the war into what quarters I pleased; provided I continued to combat with criminals in a body, and to assault the vice without hurting the person... I must entreat every particular person who does me the honour to be a reader of this paper, never to think himself, or any one of his friends or enemies, aimed at in what is said; for I promise him never to draw a faulty character which does not fit at least a thousand people; or to publish a single paper that is not written in the spirit of benevolence and with a love of mankind." This claim Addison vindicated. Far-fetched attempts have been made to identify some of his characters, but these are really as little individual as the "characters" of the Jacobean writers which Addison's so far excel in point of vitality and verisimilitude. There is sometimes the suggestion of party bias in the portraiture but never the personal rancour of Pope.

With the close of *The Spectator* Addison's best literary work was done. The fierceness of party strife invested his tragedy *Cato* with an interest that has not survived, and the play is now remembered chiefly as an awful example of classical frigidity and correctness and by reason of Voltaire's eulogy of its author as "the first English writer who composed a regular tragedy."

Johnson's criticism of *Cato* reveals an amusing conflict between common sense and respect for classical tradition. It is "unquestionably the noblest production of Addison's genius...Every critical reader must remark that Addison has, with a scrupulosity almost unexampled on the English stage, confined himself in time to a single day, and in place to rigorous unity." So much for "the rules." But when we come to the characterisation Johnson tells us that *Cato* is "rather a poem in dialogue than a drama, rather a succession of just sentiments in elegant language, than a representation of natural affections or of any state probable or possible in human life...Of the agents we have no care; we consider not what they are doing or what they are suffering; we wish only to know what they have to say. Cato is a being above our solicitude; a man of whom the gods take care, and whom we leave to their care with heedless confidence." In this deliverance we seem to detect an amusing (because a perfectly unintentional) instance of Addison's being attacked with his own weapon.

After the death of Queen Anne Addison resumed his political career, returning to his former post as Irish Secretary and in 1717 becoming a Secretary of State. The latter office he held for less than a year when he was obliged to resign on account of failing health. In 1716 he married the Countess of Warwick, "marrying discord with a noble wife." The tradition of his unhappiness is of doubtful value and a large discount has to be allowed for the persistent enmity of Pope. In 1719 he suffered from repeated attacks of asthma and died in the summer of that year in Holland House, one of his last literary labours being a controversy with his old schoolfellow and confederate, Steele. Two years later, Steele, in his preface to *The*

Drummer, paid a noble tribute to his friend. "I am indeed much more proud of his continued friendship than I should be of the fame of being thought the author of any writings which he himself is capable of producing. I remember when I finished *The Tender Husband*, I told him there was nothing I so ardently wished as that we might sometime or other publish a work written by us both, which should bear the name of the Monument, in memory of our friendship." Steele's loyal heart could have wished no more lasting memorial than *The Spectator*.

Fortune, as we have seen, was very kind to Addison. It brought him laurels, scarcely deserved, as a poet and as a dramatist and as a politician. It brought him his chance, through the agency of Steele, of revealing his real gifts as a great master of English prose, as one of the foremost of our English humorists. On one occasion, however, fortune deserted him, and brought upon him the malignity of Pope who remains unique in our literature for his satanic skill in giving immortality to his malice. The story is a tangled one and does not concern us here. As in every similar episode of his life Pope seems deliberately to have obscured the issue with a view to justifying himself. The famous description of Atticus in the *Epistle to Arbuthnot* shows Pope's skill and malice at their best and worst.

> Were there one whose fires
> True genius kindles, and fair fame inspires;
> Blest with each talent and each art to please,
> And born to write, converse, and live with ease:
> Should such a man, too fond to live alone,
> Bear, like the Turk, no brother near the throne,
> View him with scornful, yet with jealous eyes,
> And hate for arts that caused himself to rise;
> Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,
> And without sneering, teach the rest to sneer;

> Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike,
> Just hint a fault, and hesitate dislike;
> Alike reserved to blame or to commend,
> A timorous foe, and a suspicious friend;
> Dreading e'en fools, by flatterers besieged,
> And so obliging that he ne'er obliged;
> Like Cato gave his little senate laws,
> And sit attentive to his own applause,
> While Wits and Templars ev'ry sentence raise
> And wonder with a foolish face of praise:
> Who but must laugh, if such a man there be?
> Who would not weep if Atticus were he?

The lines have become so familiar, and have in part been found so capable of general application, that one is apt to overlook their particular significance and skill as a portrait of Addison. Their sting is the more deadly because every line contains a half truth. Misanthropy and introspection gave Pope a truly diabolical insight into human weakness. Addison doubtless enjoyed his sovereignty at Button's, and his reserved manner might well be construed as patronising condescension. The irony of his writings is likely to have had its counterpart in his speech, and if we assume this hypothesis we can see the precise amount of truth and exaggeration in Pope's description.—To

> Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,
> And without sneering, teach the rest to sneer—

that is a brilliant definition of Addisonian irony as viewed by hostile eyes, but how inadequate as a full description of the methods of Mr Spectator! There is just sufficient truth in the couplet to make us beware of using such adjectives as "gentle" in describing Addison's style. The word is as inapplicable here as it is in the case of Charles Lamb. Addison's irony is gentle only because it is general and is veiled by humour. Had he chosen to be

bitter and particular, neither Swift nor Pope would have been so formidable an assailant.

"We have not the least doubt that if Addison had written a novel, on an extensive plan, it would have been superior to any that we possess." This is one of Macaulay's most typical flights into the thin air of generalisation. There is no reason for thinking that Steele and Addison could have constructed and carried forward a complete plot. The Coverley papers are evidence to the contrary at the same time that they firmly establish the right of Steele and Addison to rank among the most important pioneers of the English novel. The fame of Addison does not require support from probabilities. He helped to perfect a new kind in English literature and revealed to his successors, of whom none has excelled him, the full possibilities of humorous satire.

J. H. L.