

REFLECTIONS  
ON A  
**SLANDEROUS LIBEL**  
AGAINST  
**DOCTOR OWEN,**  
IN  
A LETTER TO SIR THOMAS OVERBURY.  
BY  
JOHN OWEN

REFLECTIONS  
ON  
A SLANDEROUS LIBEL, &c.

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SIR,

It is upon your desire, and not in any compliance with my own judgment or inclination, that I have taken a little consideration of a late slanderous libel published against me. I have learned, I bless God, to bear and pass by such reproaches, without much trouble to myself, or giving the least unto others. My mind and conscience are not at all concerned in them, and so far as my reputation seems to be so, I am very willing to let it go: for I cannot entertain a valuation of their good opinion, whose minds are capable of an impression from such virulent calumnies: besides, I know that there is nothing absolutely new in these things under the sun. Others also have met with the like entertainment in the world in all ages, whose names I shall not mention, to avoid the envy in comparing myself with them. I acknowledge that it is a dictate of the law of nature, that where others do us open wrong, we should do ourselves right, so far as we lawfully may. But I know also, that it is in the power of every one to forego the prosecution of his own right, and the vindication of himself, if thereby there arise no detriment unto others. That which alone in this case may be feared, is, lest offence should be taken against my person to the disadvantage of other endeavours, wherein I desire to be useful in the world.

But against this also I have the highest security from that indignation and contempt wherewith this libel is entertained by all persons of ingenuity and sobriety. Not out of any respect therefore to myself, or my own name (things of little or no consideration in or to the world), nor out of a desire that this paper should ever pass farther, than to your own hand, and thence to the fire; but to give you some account of this pamphlet, whose author it seems is known unto you, I have

both perused it, and made some short reflections upon it, which I have herewith sent unto you.

The whole design of this discourse is, 'per fas et nefas,' to endeavour the defamation of a person, who, to his knowledge, never saw the author of it, and is fully assured, never gave him the least provocation unto any such attempt. For when I am told who he is, I am as wise and knowing unto all his concernments as I was before. And yet it is not only my reputation, but considering my present state and condition, with the nature of his libellous aspersions, my farther outward trouble in the world, that he aimeth at; from which he seemeth to be much displeas'd that I am secur'd by the righteousness of the government and laws under which I live. Now however he pleas'd himself in this attempt, yet there is no man but may give as tolerable an account by the law of God, the customs of civilized nations, and in the estimation of wise and honest men, of robbing persons on the highway, and spoiling them of their goods, as he can do of this undertaking. It is true, some others have of late dealt not much otherwise with me, wherein how far they have satisfied themselves and others, time will discover. But yet, according to the present custom and manner of men, they may give some tolerable pretence to what they have done. For they sufficiently declare that they were provok'd by me, though no such thing were intended; and it is abundantly manifest, that they had no other way left them to give countenance unto some fond imaginations which they have unadvisedly published, but by petulant reviling of him, by whom they thought they were detected. And such things have not been unfrequent in the world. But as for this author, one wholly unknown to me, without the compass of any pretence of the least provocation from me, to accommodate the lusts and revenges of others, with that unruly evil, a mercenary tongue, full of deadly poison, without the management of any difference, real or pretended, merely to calumniate and load me with false aspersions, as in the issue they will prove, is an instance of such a deprav'd disposition of mind, such a worthless baseness of soul, such a neglect of all rules of morality and principles of human conversation, such a contempt of Scripture precepts innumerable, as, it may be, can scarcely be paralleled in an age,

amongst the vilest of men. Something I confess of this nature is directed unto in the casuistical divinity, or modern policy of the Jesuits: for they have declared it lawful to reproach and calumniate any one who hath done them an injury, or otherwise reflected on the honour of their society. And notable instances of their management of this principle are given us by the ingenious discoverer of their mysteries. But they always require a previous injury, or provocation to justify themselves in this filthy kind of revenge. And hereby is our author freed from the suspicion of having been influenced by their suggestions. For he hath gone in a way whereon they never attempted to set a foot before him; and scorning a villany that hath a precedent, he seems to design himself an example in the art of sycophantry. However, the same author hath directed men unto the best way of returning an answer unto false and calumnious accusations, whatever be their occasion; for he tells us, that Valerianus Magnus, an honest Capuchin friar, being so dealt withal by a Jesuit, made not any defence of his own innocency, any farther than by adjoining unto all the instances of his charge, 'Mentiris impudentissime.' And this you will immediately find to be the substance of that answer which this book deserves. For setting aside things relating to the former public troubles and disorders in these nations, from the venom of all reflections from whence I am secured by the government, law, and interest of the kingdom, all which in this revival of them are notoriously abused and trampled on, and there is no one thing charged on me in the whole libel, but that, either in the matter or manner of its relation, is notoriously false. The task I acknowledge of making this discovery would be grievous and irksome unto me, but that I must not account any thing so, which may fall out amongst men in the world; and do remember him, who after he had done some public services, whereof others had the advantage, was forced to defend his own house against thieves and robbers.

The whole discourse is a railing accusation, such as the angel durst not bring against the devil; but such as hath many characters and lineaments upon it, of him who was a false accuser and murderer from the beginning. Neither is it capable of a distribution into any other parts but those of

railing, and false accusations. And for the first, seeing he hath manifested his propensity unto it, and delight in it, he shall by me be left to the possession of that honour and reputation which he hath acquired thereby. Besides, his way of managery hath rendered it of no consideration. For, had it been conditid to the present gust of the age, by language, wit, or drollery, it might have found some entertainment in the world; but downright dirty railing is beneath the genius of the times, and by common consent condemned to the bear garden and Billingsgate. His charges and accusations, wherein doubtless he placed his principal hopes of success (though I much question whether he knew what he aimed at in particular or no), may in so many instances be called over, as to discover unto you with what little regard to Christianity, truth, or honesty, they have been forged and managed by him.

I shall begin with what he calls my practices, and then proceed to the principles he mentions, which is the best order his confused rhapsody of slanders can be reduced unto, though inverting that which he projected in his title.

1. One of the first charges I meet withal upon the first head, is pag. 9. That I 'was one of them who promised Cromwell his life upon his last sickness, and assured him that his days should be prolonged.' This I confess he manageth somewhat faintly and dubiously, the reason whereof I cannot guess at, it being as true as those other tales, in the report whereof he pretends to more confidence. And I have no answer to return but that of the friar before mentioned, 'Mentitur impudentissime;' for I saw him not in his sickness, nor in some long time before. Of the same nature is what he affirms, p. 28. of my being the instrument in the ruin of his son Richard, with whose setting up, and pulling down, I had no more to do than himself. And such are the reasons which he gives for that which never was. For the things he instanceth in, were my own choice, against all importunities to the contrary; so that the same answer must be returned again, 'Mentitur impudentissime.' P. 10. he charges me, that in writing against the Papists, I reflected upon the authority of the king, as to his power in matters of religion: which he repeats again, p. 34, and calls it 'a covert undermining of the just authority of the king.' Still the same an-

swer is all that can be given. His majesty's supremacy, as declared and established by law, is asserted and proved in the book he intends, p. 404—406. [Vol. xviii. pp. 470, 471.] Nor is there any word in the places quoted by him in his margin, that will give the least countenance to this false calumny. Besides, the book was approved by authority, and that by persons of another manner of judgment and learning, than this pitiful scribbler, who are all here defamed by him. P. 12. he chargeth me with countenancing an accusation against the reverend bishop of Chester, then warden of Wadham college; which is a known lie, and such I believe the bishop, if he be asked, will attest it to be. And so p. 14, he says, I received a commission from Oliver to carry 'gladium ferri:' but 'mentitur impudentissime;' for I never received commission from any man, or company of men in this world, nor to my remembrance did I ever wear a sword in my life. His whole 34th page, had there been any thing of wit, or ingenuity in fiction, in it, I should have suspected to have been borrowed from Lucian's 'Vera Historia,' concerning which he affirmed, that he wrote that which he had never seen, nor heard, nor did any one declare unto him. For it is only a confused heap of malicious lies, which all that read and know, laugh at with scorn. Such likewise is the ridiculous story he tells, p. 66. of my ordering things so, that members of parliament should have a book, which he calls mine, laid in their lodgings by unknown hands; whereof there is not any thing in substance or circumstance that can lay the least pretence to truth, but it is an entire part of his industrious attempt to carry the whetstone. The same must be said concerning what he reports of passages between me and the then lord chancellor; which as I have good witness to prove the mistake that fell out between us, not to have been occasioned by me, so I much question, whether this author was informed of the untruths he reports, by doctor Barlow, or whether ever he gave him his consent to use his name publicly for a countenance unto such a defamatory libel. It were endless and useless to call [cull] out the remaining instances of the same kind, whereof I think there is scarce a page free in his book, unless it be taken up with quotations. And I am sure that whosoever will give the least credit unto any of his stories and assertions, will do it at the utmost peril of being de-

ceived. And where any thing he aims at, hath the least of truth in it, he doth but make it a foundation to build a falsehood upon. Such are his ingenious repetitions of some things I should say, fourteen or fifteen years ago, in private discourses ; which, yet supposing them true in the terms by him reported, as they are not, contain nothing of immorality, nothing of injury unto, or reflection on others. Surely this man must be thought to study the adorning and freedom of conversation, who thus openly traduceth a person for words occasionally, and it may be hastily, spoken, without the least injury to any, or evil in themselves, fourteen or fifteen years after. And these also are such as he hath taken upon mere reports, for I believe he will not say, that ever he spake one word with me himself in his life. How any one can safely converse with a man of this spirit and humour, I know not.

I shall wholly pass by his malicious wresting and false applications of the passages he hath quoted out of some things published by me : for as for the greatest part of those small perishing treatises, whence he and others have extracted their pretended advantages, it is many years since I saw them, some of them twenty, at the least ; nor do I know how they have dealt in repeating their ‘ excerpta,’ which with so much diligence they have collected ; that they are several times wrested and perverted by this malicious scribbler unto things never intended by me, that I do know. One discourse, about communion with God, I find there is much wrath stirred up against ; and yet upon the severe scrutiny which it hath on several hands undergone, nothing can be found to lay to its charge, but one passage concerning some differences about external worship ; which they needed not to have put themselves to so much trouble to have found out and declared. But as for this man, he makes such inferences from it, and applications of it, as are full of malice and poison, being not inferior in those good qualifications unto any of his other prodigious tales. For from what I speak concerning the purity of instituted worship, he concludes, that I judge, that all who in the worship of God make use of the common-prayer, are not loyal to Christ, nor have communion with God, nor can promote the interest of the gospel ; all which are notoriously false, never thought, never spoken, never

written by me. And I do believe, that many that have used that book in the public administrations, have been as loyal to Christ, had as much communion with God, and been as zealous to promote the interest of the gospel, as any who have lived in the world this thousand years. For men are accepted with God according to what they have, and not according to what they have not.

The next charge I can meet withal in this confused heap, which is like the grave, a place of darkness without any order, is no less than of perjury. And this principally he doth on such an account, as is not at all peculiar to me; but the reproach he manageth is equally cast on the greatest part of the kingdom by this public defamer. And I suppose others do, though I do not know the prudence of encouraging such a slanderous libeller, to cast fire-brands among peaceable subjects; and to revive the remembrance of things, which the wisdom, clemency, and righteousness of his majesty, with and by the law of the land, upon the best and most assured principles of piety and policy, hath put into oblivion. And it also seems strange to me, how bold he and some other scribblers make, by their interesting the sacred name of his majesty and his concerns in their impertinent squabblings, as they do on all occasions. But such things are of another cognizance, and there I leave them. What is peculiar to myself in this charge, is represented under a double instance :

1. Of the oath of canonical obedience, which I took and violated. And,

2. Of the university oath.

For the first, although I could easily return an answer unto the thing itself, yet as to what concerns me, I shall give no other but 'mentitur impudentissime;' I never took any such oath.

And for the other I doubt not to speak with some confidence, that the intention and design of the oath was observed by me with as much conscience and diligence, as by any who have since acted in the same capacity, wherein I was at that time reflected on. And upon the provocation of this man, whoever he be, I do not fear to say, that considering the state and condition of affairs at that time in the nation and the university, I do not believe there is any



person of learning, ingenuity, or common modesty, who had relation in those days unto that place, but will grant at least, that notwithstanding some lesser differences from them, about things of very small importance, I was not altogether useless to the interest of learning, morality, peace, and the preservation of the place itself; and farther I am not concerned in the ingratitude and envy of a few illiterate and malicious persons, as knowing, that ‘*Obtrectatio est stultorum thesaurus, quem in linguis gerunt.*’

But if all these attempts prove successful, there is that yet behind, which shall justify the whole charge, or at least the author, in filling up his bill with so many prodigious falsities. And this is, my ‘blaspheming the Lord’s prayer,’ which is exaggerated with many tragical expressions and hideous exclamations: as indeed who can lay too heavy a load on so horrid a crime? But how if this should not prove so? How, if by all his outcries he should but adorn and set forth his own forgeries? This I know, that I do and ever did believe, that that prayer is part of the canonical Scripture, which I would not willingly blaspheme. I do believe that it was composed by the Lord Jesus Christ himself, and have vindicated it from being thought a collection and composition of such petitions as were then in use among the Jews, as some learned men had, I think unadvisedly, asserted it to be. I do and ever did believe it the most perfect form for prayer that ever was composed; and the words of it so disposed by the divine wisdom of our blessed Saviour, that it comprehends the substance of all the matter of prayer to God. I do and did always believe, that it ought to be continually meditated on, that we may learn from thence, both what we ought to pray for, and in what manner; neither did I ever think a thought, or speak a word, unsuitable to these assertions. Wherein then, doth this great blasphemy lie? Unto two heads it must be reduced.

1. That I judge not, that our Lord Jesus Christ in the giving of this prayer unto his disciples, did prescribe unto them the precise use or repetition of those words, but only taught them what to pray for, or how.

Now although it may be this man doth not, yet all men of any tolerable learning or reading, know, that this assertion relating only to the different interpretations of one expression,

indeed of one word, in one of the evangelists, hath been owned and allowed by learned men of all parties and persuasions. He may, if he please, consult Grotius, Musculus, and Cornelius a Lapide, to name one of a side for his information. But,

2. I have delivered other things concerning the use of it, in my book against the Socinians.

Whereunto I shall only say, that he who differs from others in the manner of the use of any thing, may have as reverend an esteem of the thing itself as they; and herein I shall not give place unto any man that lives on the earth, with respect unto the Lord's prayer. It is true, I have said, that there were manifold abuses in the rehearsal of it amongst people ignorant and superstitious; and did deliver my thoughts, it may be too freely and severely, against some kind of repetition of it. But as for the ridiculous and impudent charge of blasphemy hence raised by this pitiful calumniator, I am no way concerned in it. No more am I with that lie, which hath been now reported to the satiety of its first broachers and promoters: namely, that I should 'put on my hat, upon the repetition of it;' it was, as I remember, about fifteen years ago, that such a rumour was raised, by I know not whom, nor on what occasion. It was somewhat long before I heard any whisper of it, as is the manner in such cases. But so soon as I did attain a knowledge that such a slander had been reported and scattered abroad, I did cause to be published, in English and French, a declaration of its notorious falsity, in the year 1655. But so prone are many to give entertainment to false reproaches of them, whom on any account they are displeased with; so unwilling to part with a supposed advantage against them, though they know it to have been put into their hand by the mistakes, folly, or malice of others; that the same untruth hath been several times since repeated and republished, without the least taking notice that it was publicly denied, condemned, and the authors of it challenged to give any tolerable account of their report. Only of late, one learned person, meeting it afresh, where its admittance would have been to his advantage (namely Mr. Durel, in his answer unto the apology of some nonconformists) had the ingenuity to acknowledge the public disclaimure of any such practice so

long since made and published, and thereon at least to suspend his assent to the report itself.

I am, Sir, quite weary of repeating the instances of this man's notorious falsehood and unjust accusations; I shall therefore overlook the remainder of them on this head, that I may give you one of his intolerable weakness and ignorance. And this lies in his attempt to find out contradictions between what I have written in several places about toleration, and liberty of conscience, p. 67. For because I say, that 'Pernicious errors are to be opposed and extirpated by means appointed, proper, and suitable thereunto;' as also, that it is the 'duty of the magistrate to defend, protect, countenance, and promote the truth;' the man thinks that these things are inconsistent with liberty of conscience, and such a toleration, or forbearance, as at any time I have pleaded for. But if any man should persuade him to let those things alone, which either he hath nothing to do withal, or doth not understand, it may be he would accommodate him with a sufficient leisure, and more time than he knows well how to dispose of.

II. His last attempt is upon some sayings, which he calls my principles, in the representation whereof, whether he hath dealt with any greater regard to truth and honesty, than are the things we have already passed through, shall be briefly considered.

The first, as laid down in the contents prefixed to this sorry chapter, is in these words: 'That success in business doth authoricate its cause; and that if God's providence permits a mischief, his will approves it.'

There are two parts, you see, of this principle; whereof the first is, that success will justify a cause in business; that is, as I take it, any one: and secondly, that which God permits, he doth approve. Now as both parts of this principle are diabolically false, so in their charge on me also; so that I must betake myself again to the example of the friar, and say, 'Mentitur impudentissime.' A cause is good or bad, before it hath success one way or other. And that which hath not its warrant in itself, can never obtain any from its success. The rule of the goodness of any public cause, is the eternal law of reason, with the just legal rights and interests of men. If these make not a cause good, success

will never mend it. But when a cause on these grounds is so indeed, or is really judged such by them that are engaged in it, not to take notice of the providence of God in prospering men in the pursuit of it, is to exclude all thoughts of him and his providence from having any concern in the government of the world. And if I, or any other, have at any time applied this unto any cause, not warranted by the only rule of its justification, it no way reflects on the truth of the principle which I assert; nor gives countenance to the false one, which he ascribes unto me. For the latter clause of this pretended principle, that if God's providence permit a mischief, his will approves it, I suspect there is some other ingredient in it, besides lying and malice, namely, stupid ignorance. For it is mischief in a moral sense that he intends, nothing being the object of God's approbation or disapprobation, on any other account. It would therefore seem very strange, how any one, who hath but so much understanding as to know that this principle would take away all differences between good and evil, should provide himself of so much impudence, as to charge it on me.

Another principle, in pursuit of the same design, he lays down as mine, p. 46, namely, 'That saints may retain their holiness in the act of sinning, and that whatever law they violate, God will not impute it to them as a sin.'

There seems to be two parts of this principle also. The first is, that saints may retain their holiness in the act of sinning. I know not well what he means by this part of his principle, and yet do, for some reasons, suppose him to be more remote from the understanding of it than I am, although the words are his own. If he mean, that the act of sinning is not against, or an impeachment of holiness, it is a ridiculous contradiction. If he mean, that every actual sin doth not deprive the sinner of all holiness; he is ridiculous himself, if he assert that it doth, seeing 'there is no man that doeth good, and sinneth not.' The framing of the last clause of this principle smells of the same cask; and as it is charged on me, is false. Whatever law of God any man breaks, it is a sin, is so judged of God, and by him imputed so far unto the sinner, as to judge him guilty thereof, whoever he be. But God doth not impute every sin unto believers unto judgment and condemnation. And if he can

understand any thing in the books quoted by him, he will find that there is no more in them towards what he reflects upon, but that God will by his grace preserve true believers from falling into such sins, as whereby they should totally and finally lose their faith, fall from grace, and be cast out of God's covenant. This principle I own, and despise his impotent, ignorant, and ridiculous defamation of it.

His third principle is about praying by the Spirit, which he chargeth at the highest rate, as that which will destroy all government in the world.

I know well enough, whence he hath learned this kind of arguing. But I have no reason to concern myself particularly in this matter. The charge, for aught I know, as here proposed, falls equally on all Christians in the world; for whether men pray by a book, or without a book, if they pray not by the Spirit, that is, the assistance of the Spirit of God, they pray not at all. Let therefore the Scripture and Christianity answer for themselves; at present in this charge I am not particularly concerned.

Thus, sir, I have complied with your desire, unto a perusal of this confused heap of malicious calumnies, which otherwise I had absolutely in silence put off to the judgment of the great day. It may be this author hath scarce yet cast up his account, nor considered what it is to lend his fingers to others to thrust into the fire, which they would not touch themselves. For whilst they do, or may, if they please, enjoy their satisfaction in his villany and folly, the guilt and shame of them will return in a cruciating sense upon his own understanding and conscience. When this shall befall him, as it will do assuredly, if he be not utterly profligate, he will find no great relief in wishing that he had been better advised; nor in considering, that those, who rejoice in the calumny, do yet despise the sycophant. I am, Sir,

Your, &c.

J. O.