

WORKS

OF THE LATE

Doctor BENJAMIN FRANKLIN,

CONSISTING OF

HIS LIFE WRITTEN BY HIMSELF;

TOGETHER WITH

ESSAYS,

HUMOROUS, MORAL, AND LITERARY,

CHIEFLY IN THE MANNER OF

THE SPECTATOR.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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ON MODERN INNOVATIONS IN THE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND IN
PRINTING.

To NOAH WEBSTER, *jun. Esq.* at HARTFORD.

Philadelphia, Dec. 26, 1789.

DEAR SIR,

I RECEIVED, some time since, your *Dissertations on the English Language*. It is an excellent work, and will be greatly useful in turning the thoughts of our countrymen to correct writing. Please to accept my thanks for it, as well as for the great honour you have done me in its dedication. I ought to have made this acknowledgement sooner, but much indisposition prevented me.

I cannot but applaud your zeal for preserving the purity of our language both in its expression and pronunciation, and in correcting the popular errors several of our states are continually falling into with respect to both. Give me leave to mention some of them, though possibly they
may

may already have occurred to you. I wish; however, that in some future publication of yours, you would set a discountenancing mark upon them. The first I remember, is the word *improved*. When I left New-England in the year 1723, this word had never been used among us, as far as I know, but in the sense of *ameliorated*, or *made better*, except once in a very old book of Dr. Mather's, entitled *Remarkable Providences*. As that man wrote a very obscure hand, I remember that when I read that word in his book, used instead of the word *employed*, I conjectured that it was an error of the printer, who had mistaken a short *l* in the writing for an *r*, and a *y* with too short a tail for a *v*, whereby *employed* was converted into *improved*: but when I returned to Boston in 1733, I found this change had obtained favour, and was then become common; for I met with it often in perusing the newspapers, where it frequently made an appearance rather ridiculous. Such, for instance, as the advertisement of a country house to be sold, which had been many years *improved* as a tavern; and in the character of a deceased country gentleman, that he had been, for more than thirty years, *improved* as a justice of the peace.

This

This use of the word *improve* is peculiar to New-England, and not to be met with among any other speakers of English, either on this or the other side of the water.

During my late absence in France, I find that several other new words have been introduced into our parliamentary language. For example, I find a verb formed from the substantive *notice*. *I should not have noticed this, were it not that the gentleman, &c.* Also another verb, from the substantive *advocate*; *The gentleman who advocates, or who has advocated that motion, &c.* Another from the substantive *progress*, the most awkward and abominable of the three: *The committee having progressed, resolved to adjourn.* The word *opposed*, though not a new word, I find used in a new manner, as, *The gentlemen who are opposed to this measure, to which I have also myself always been opposed.* If you should happen to be of my opinion with respect to these innovations, you will use your authority in reprobating them.

The Latin language, long the vehicle used in distributing knowledge among the different nations of Europe, is daily more and more neglected; and one of the modern tongues, viz. French, seems, in point
of

of universality, to have supplied its place. It is spoken in all the courts of Europe; and most of the literati, those even who do not speak it, have acquired knowledge of it, to enable them easily to read the books that are written in it. This gives a considerable advantage to that nation. It enables its authors to inculcate and spread through other nations, such sentiments and opinions, on important points, as are most conducive to its interests, or which may contribute to its reputation, by promoting the common interests of mankind. It is, perhaps, owing to its being written in French, that Voltaire's *Treatise on Toleration* has had so sudden and so great an effect on the bigotry of Europe, as almost entirely to disarm it. The general use of the French language has likewise a very advantageous effect on the profits of the bookselling branch of commerce, it being well known, that the more copies can be sold that are struck off from one composition of types, the profits increase in a much greater proportion than they do in making a greater number of pieces in any other kind of manufacture. And at present there is no capital town in Europe without a French bookseller's shop corresponding with Paris. Our English bids fair to obtain

obtain the second place. The great body of excellent printed sermons in our language, and the freedom of our writings on political subjects, have induced a great number of divines of different sects and nations, as well as gentlemen concerned in public affairs, to study it, so far at least as to read it. And if we were to endeavour the facilitating its progress, the study of our tongue might become much more general. Those who have employed some part of their time in learning a new language, must have frequently observed, that while their acquaintance with it was imperfect, difficulties, small in themselves, operated as great ones in obstructing their progress. A book, for example, ill printed, or a pronunciation in speaking not well articulated, would render a sentence unintelligible, which from a clear print, or a distinct speaker, would have been immediately comprehended. If, therefore, we would have the benefit of seeing our language more generally known among mankind, we should endeavour to remove all the difficulties, however small, that discourage the learning of it. But I am sorry to observe that, of late years, those difficulties, instead of being diminished, have been augmented.

In

In examining the English books that were printed between the restoration and the accession of George the Second, we may observe, that all substantives were begun with a capital, in which we imitated our mother tongue, the German. This was more particularly useful to those who were not well acquainted with the English, there being such a prodigious number of our words that are both verbs and substantives, and spelt in the same manner, though often accented differently in pronunciation. This method has, by the fancy of printers, of late years been entirely laid aside; from an idea, that suppressing the capitals shews the character to greater advantage; those letters, prominent above the line, disturbing its even, regular appearance. The effect of this change is so considerable, that a learned man of France, who used to read our books, though not perfectly acquainted with our language, in conversation with me on the subject of our authors, attributed the greater obscurity he found in our modern books, compared with those of the period above mentioned, to a change of style for the worse in our writers; of which mistake I convinced him, by marking for him each substantive with a capital, in a paragraph, which

which he then easily understood, though before he could not comprehend it. This shews the inconvenienc of that pretended improvement.

From the same fondness for an uniform and even appearance of characters in the line, the printers have of late banished also the *Italic* types, in which words of importance to be attended to in the sense of the sentence, and words on which an emphasis should be put in reading, used to be printed. And lately another fancy has induced other printers to use the round *s* instead of the long one, which formerly served well to distinguish a word readily by its varied appearance. Certainly the omitting this prominent letter makes a line appear more even, but renders it less immediately legible; as the paring of all men's noses might smooth and level their faces, but would render their physiognomies less distinguishable. Add to all these improvements backwards, another modern fancy, that *grey* printing is more beautiful than black. Hence the English new books are printed in so dim a character as to be read with difficulty by old eyes, unless in a very strong light and with good glasses. Whoever compares a volume of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, printed be-

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tween the years 1731 and 1740, with one of those printed in the last ten years, will be convinced of the much greater degree of perspecuity given by black than by the grey. Lord Chesterfield pleasantly remarked this difference to Faulkener, the printer of the Dublin Journal, who was vainly making encomiums on his own paper, as the most complete of any in the world. "But Mr. Faulkener," says my lord, "don't you think it might be still farther improved, by using paper and ink not quite so near of a colour?"—For all these reasons I cannot but wish that our American printers would, in their editions, avoid these fancied improvements, and thereby render their works more agreeable to foreigners in Europe, to the great advantage of our bookselling commerce.

Farther, to be more sensible of the advantage of clear and distinct printing, let us consider the assistance it affords in reading well aloud to an auditory. In so doing the eye generally slides forward three or four words before the voice. If the sight clearly distinguishes what the coming words are, it gives time to order the modulation of the voice to express them properly. But if they are obscurely printed,
or

or disguised by omitting the capitals and long *f*'s, or otherwise, the reader is apt to modulate wrong; and finding he has done so, he is obliged to go back and begin the sentence again; which lessens the pleasure of the hearers. This leads me to mention an old error in our mode of printing. We are sensible that when a question is met with in the reading, there is a proper variation to be used in the management of the voice. We have, therefore, a point, called an interrogation, affixed to the question, in order to distinguish it. But this is absurdly placed at its end, so that the reader does not discover it till he finds that he has wrongly modulated his voice, and is therefore obliged to begin again the sentence. To prevent this, the Spanish printers, more sensibly, place an interrogation at the beginning as well as at the end of the question. We have another error of the same kind in printing plays, where something often occurs that is marked as spoken *aside*. But the word *aside* is placed at the end of the speech, when it ought to precede it, as a direction to the reader, that he may govern his voice accordingly. The practice of our ladies in meeting five or six together, to form little busy parties, where

each is employed in some useful work, while one reads to them, is so commendable in itself, that it deserves the attention of authors and printers to make it as pleasing as possible, both to the reader and hearers.

My best wishes attend you, being, with sincere esteem,

Sir,

Your most obedient and
very humble servant,

B. FRANKLIN.



AN ACCOUNT OF THE HIGHEST COURT
OF JUDICATURE IN PENNSYLVANIA,
VIZ.

THE COURT OF THE PRESS.

Power of this court.

IT may receive and promulgate accusations of all kinds, against all persons and characters among the citizens of the state, and even against all inferior courts; and
may