

The Puppet Show

Jonathan Swift

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THE life of man to represent,
And turn it all to ridicule,
Wit did a puppet-show invent,
Where the chief actor is a fool.

The gods of old were logs of wood,
And worship was to puppets paid;
In antic dress the idol stood,
And priests and people bowed the head.

No wonder then, if art began
The simple votaries to frame,
To shape in timber foolish man,
And consecrate the block to fame.

From hence poetic fancy learned
That trees might rise from human forms
The body to a trunk be turned,
And branches issue from the arms.

Thus Daedalus and Ovid too,
That man's a blockhead have confessed,
Powel and Stretch the hint pursue;
Life is the farce, the world a jest.

The same great truth South Sea hath proved
On that famed theatre, the ally,
Where thousands by directors moved
Are now sad monuments of folly.

What Momus was of old to Jove
The same harlequin is now;
The former was buffoon above,
The latter is a Punch below.

This fleeting scene is but a stage,
Where various images appear,

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In different parts of youth and age
Alike the prince and peasant share.

Some draw our eyes by being great,
False pomp conceals mere wood within,
And legislators rang'd in state
Are oft but wisdom in machine.

A stock may chance to wear a crown,
And timber as a lord take place,
A statue may put on a frown,
And cheat us with a thinking face.

Others are blindly led away,
And made to act for ends unknown,
By the mere spring of wires they play,
And speak in language not their own.

Too oft, alas! a scolding wife
Usurps a jolly fellow's throne,
And many drink the cup of life
Mix'd and embittered by a Joan.

In short, whatever men pursue
Of pleasure, folly, war, or love,
This mimic-race brings all to view,
Alike they dress, they talk, they move.

Go on, great Stretch, with artful hand,
Mortals to please and to deride,
And when death breaks thy vital band
Thou shalt put on a puppet's pride.

Thou shalt in puny wood be shown,
Thy image shall preserve thy fame,
Ages to come thy worth shall own,
Point at thy limbs, and tell thy name.

Tell Tom he draws a farce in vain,
Before he looks in nature's glass;
Puns cannot form a witty scene,
Nor pedantry for humour pass.

To make men act as senseless wood,
And chatter in a mystic strain,
Is a mere force on flesh and blood,
And shows some error in the brain.

He that would thus refine on thee,
And turn thy stage into a school,
The jest of Punch will ever be,

And stand confessed the greater fool.