

Matthew Prior, "The Cameleon"

Description

MATTHEW PRIOR

•The Cameleon•

As the Cameleon, who is known
To have no Colours of his own;
But borrows from his Neighbour's Hue
His White, or Black; his Green, or Blue;
And struts as much in ready Light, Â 5
Which Credit gives him upon Sight,
As if the Rain-bow were in Tail
Settled on him, and his Heirs Male.
So the young Squire, when first he comes
From Country School to *Will's* or *Tom's*; Â 10
And equally (God knows) is fit
To be a Statesman, or a Wit:
Without one Notion of his own,
He saunters wildly up and down,
Till some Acquaintance, good or bad, Â 15
Takes notice of a staring Lad;
Admits him in amongst the Gang:
They jest, reply, dispute, harangue;
He acts and talks, as they befriend him:
Smear'd with the Colours, which they lend him. Â 20

Thus, meerly as his Fortune chances,
His Merit or his Vice advances.

If haply he the Sect pursues,
That read and comment upon News;
He takes up their mysterious Face; Â 25
He drinks his Coffee without Lace:
This Week his mimic Tongue runs o'er
What they have said the Week before;
His Wisdom sets all *Europe* right,
And teaches *Marlbrough* when to fight. Â 30

Or, if it be his Fate to meet
With Folks who have more Wealth than Wit:
He loves cheap *Port*, and double *Bub*,
And settles in the *Hum Drum* Club.

He learns how stocks with fall or rise; ^ 35
Holds Poverty the greatest Vice:
Thinks Wit the Bane of Conversation;
And says that Learning spoils a Nation.

But, if at first he minds his Hits,
And drinks *Champaine* among the Wits: ^ 40
Five deep he toasts the towâ€™ring Lasses;
Repeats you Verses writ on Glasses:
Is in the Chair; prescribes the Law;
And lyes with Those he never saw.

NOTES:

1 *Cameleon* ^œœAn inconstant or variable personâ€™(QED).

9 *Squire* ^œœA young man of good birth attendant upon a knightâ€™(QED).

10 *Will*â€™s or *Tom*â€™s Most likely common names of local pubs or coffeehouses.

18 *jest* ^œœTo tell a tale, to recite a romanceâ€™(QED); *harangue* ^œœTo make an address or speech to an assemblyâ€™(QED).

23 *Sect* A class ^œœor kind of personsâ€™(QED).

26 *Coffee without Lace* The epithet applied to tea or coffee that has not been mixed with some kind of spirit; ^œœMr. Nisby is of opinion that*laced* coffee is bad for the headâ€™ ^œœ*Spectator* No. 317 (Dinsdale, *A Glossary of Provincial Words Used in Teesdale*, 76).

30 *Marlb*â€™rough John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722). He is considered one of Englandâ€™s greatest generals after leading the British and allied armies to key victories over Louis XIV of France at Blenheim (1704), Ramillies (1706), and Oudenaarde (1708) (Konstam, *Marlborough*, 4).

33 *double Bub* ^œœA slang word for drink, esp. strong beerâ€™(QED).

34 *Hum Drum* ^œœLacking variety; of a routine characterâ€™(QED).

Source: *Poems on Several Occasions* (London 1718) pp. 177-179. [Google Books]

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