Matthew Prior, “The Cameleon”

Description

MATTHEW PRIOR

â€œThe Cameleonâ€•

As the Cameleon, who is known
To have no Colours of his own;
But borrows from his Neighbourâ€™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
Settlâ€™d on him, and his Heirs Male.
So the young Squire, when first he comes
From Country School to *Willâ€™s* or *Tomâ€™s;Â Â* 10
And equally (Gâ€“d knows) is fit
To be a Statesman, or a Wit:
Without one Notion of his own,
He saunters wildly up and down,
â€˜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:
Smearâ€™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 oâ€™er
What they have said the Week before;
His Wisdom sets all *Europe* right,
And teaches *Marlbâ€™rough* 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; Â 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: Â 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* **â€œ**An inconstant or variable personâ€• (*OED*).

9 *Squire* â€œA young man of good birth attendant upon a knightâ€• (*OED*).

10 *Willâ€™s or Tomâ€™s* Most likely common names of local pubs or coffeehouses.

18 *jest* â€œTo tell a tale, to recite a romanceâ€• (*OED*); *harangue* â€œTo make an address or speech to an assemblyâ€• (*OED*).

23 *Sect* A class â€œor kind of personsâ€• (*OED*).

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

30 *Marlbâ€™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* â€œA slang word for drink, esp. strong beerâ€• (*OED*).

34 *Hum Drum* â€œLacking variety; of a routine characterâ€• (*OED*).

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

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