

Matthew Prior, "The Cameleon"

by admin - Monday, August 07, 2017

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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, 5
Which Credit gives him upon Sight,
As if the Rain-bow were in Tail
Sett'd on him, and his Heirs Male.
So the young Squire, when first he comes
From Country School to *Will's* or *Tom's*; 10
And equally (G-d 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, 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. 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; 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 *Marlb'rough* when to fight. 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 tow'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* "An inconstant or variable person" (*OED*).

9 *Squire* "A young man of good birth attendant upon a knight" (*OED*).

10 *Will's or Tom's* Most likely common names of local pubs or coffeehouses.

18 *jest* "To tell a tale, to recite a romance" (*OED*); *harangue* "To make an address or speech to an assembly" (*OED*).

23 *Sect* A class "or kind of persons" (*OED*).

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

30 *Marlb'rough* John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722). He is considered one of England'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* "A slang word for drink, esp. strong beer" (*OED*).

34 *Hum Drum* "Lacking variety; of a routine character" (*OED*).

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

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