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David Hume and Allan Ramsay: A New Letter

Among the voluminous Elizabeth Montagu Papers at the Huntington Library is an interesting letter from the artist Allan Ramsay to Mrs. Montagu which sheds valuable light upon David Hume's conversation during the relaxation of evening drinking. Further, the letter emphasizes again the leavening influence of the intellectual life of Edinburgh in the eighteenth century upon its participants: despite Ramsay's lightness of touch in describing encounters with Hume, serious reconstruction can be made about the tenor of conversations regarding the nature of man and the theory of history. I reproduce the letter in full, with the permission of the Librarian of the Huntington Library. I follow Ramsay's text *literatim*:

Madam

By a letter from my wife, last post, I learn that you have been so good as to renew your invitation to us to be your guests at Tunbridge: an offer so advantageous that my not availing myself of it sooner must put my understanding in a suspicious light, from whence I should be glad to have it extricated. And, not to write so long an Apology as Colley Cibber's for my life, thus it is: Two small daughters were inoculated; it was necessary for me and mine to perform quarantine at a distance from many of our most respectable friends, particularly from you; I had some business to settle in Scotland, and my friend Wedderburne was going thither alone. Having finished my business within my fortnight of Quarantine, I have been detained from day to day in hopes of seeing his Grace of Argyll, of whose setting out we got the first certain account yesterday, by a letter from Grantham. Whether this relation will give you a more favourable opinion of my sense than you would have had without it, I don't know: but, by much drinking with David Hume and his associates, I have learnt to be very historical; and am nightly confirmed in the belief, that it is much easier to tell the *How* than the *Why* of any thing; and that it is moreover better suited to the state of man; who, we are all satisfied, from self-examination, is any thing rather than a rational animal.

I am sorry to hear that you propose to leave Tunbridge so soon as the 15th. If you happen to have such heavenly weather there as we have in this place, you will be probably tempted to stay some days longer; in which case my Wife and I may still enjoy the pleasure, with which we flattered ourselves, of passing a day or two with you.

I see by the news papers that Admiral Boscawen is come safe home. When you write to the Lady, be so good as to transmit my hearty congratulations, who am, with the greatest respect.

Madam

Your most obliged
and most faithfull servant

Allan Ramsay

Edinburgh Sept. 11
1760

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