

**ST. CHRYSOSTOM'S
PICTURE
OF HIS AGE**

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St. Chrysostom's Picture of His Age by John Chrysostom

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JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

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duct after the riots at Antioch.

AMONGST all great nations there are certain popular customs, which commonly escape the notice of grave historians, but which are seized with avidity by satirists, and chiefly give pungency to their literary compounds. How much of the high life and low life of Rome would for ever have remained hidden

when the curtain of time had dropped over them, if they had not been pointed out and jeered at by such unsparing critics as Horace, Juvenal, Martial and Petronius. In their pages, posterity has discovered the intrigues of Roman ladies, the horrible vices of the men, the banquets of peacocks, turbot, lobsters, British oysters, mullet stewed in Venafrian oil, lampreys and geese livers washed down by sextaries of old Falernian, creating a second hunger (*alia fames*), and demanding a midnight supper.¹ In fact, satirists are peculiarly the historians of vice and folly.

But we do not ordinarily expect to find the same character in the works of Christian divines. The treatises and commentaries of modern theology, and the sermons of modern pulpits, would be supposed to transgress the limits of good taste if they were to enter into the details of every-day life, and attempt any minute representation of men and manners. Rare, indeed, since the Reformation, have been the instances amongst English or Continental divines of such pictorial declamations; but in

¹ This practice, which Juvenal ridicules, was continued to St. Chrysostom's time. Gourmands τὰ βέλτιστα τοῖς ἀφίετοις σαρματόντες are denounced by him, "Quod Nemo leditur," &c. lib. 5 7.

England, old Hugh Latimer, and in France, Massillon were illustrious exceptions to the general rule. And it would be difficult to show why the pulpit should not point at the glaring extravagances of the day, or bring to light the hidden things of darkness. Surely it would thus have been employed by St. Paul. Its mild but weighty rebukes would be found more effectual guards and supports of virtue than the stinging chastisements of satire.³ When men cannot be "laughed into reform," they may be awe-struck by the thunders of a violated law. But the modesty of preachers shrinks now from an exposure of sin's worst deformities: vice is abundantly luxuriant, but we choose to suppose that it is concealed behind a veil, which it would be imprudent to raise.

Not so the great St. Chrysostom. No scruples of real or false delicacy—no dread of entering the lists with popular prejudices, or with the influence of wealth and power—no regard for any arbitrary rules of taste—ever deterred him from ferreting out vice, and then holding it, as it were, at arm's length, to the

³ The superiority of the pulpit over satire is well argued by Cowper in the Second Book of "*The Task*," but the passage is too long for quotation.