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Poems

Poems on several occasions

Gay, John

Edinburgh, 1773

Epistle IV. To the right honourable Paul Methuen, Esq;

urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-263885

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EPISTLE IV.

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

PAUL METHUEN, Esq;

THAT 'tis encouragement makes science spread,
Is rarely practis'd, though 'tis often said;
When learning droops and sickens in the land,
What patron's found to lend a saving hand?
True gen'rous spirits prosp'rous vice detest,
And love to cherish virtue when distress'd:
But ere our mighty lords this scheme pursue,
Our mighty lords must think and act like you.
Why must we climb the Alpine mountains sides
To find the seat where Harmony resides?
Why touch we not so soft the silver lute,
The chearful hautboy, and the mellow flute?
'Tis not th' Italian clime improves the sound,
But there the patrons of her sons are found.
Why flourish'd verse in great Augustus' reign?
He and Mecaenas lov'd the Muse's strain.

But now that wight in poverty muſt mourn
Who was (O cruel ſtars!) a poet born.
Yet there are ways for authors to be great;
Write ranc'rous libels to reform the ſtate:
Or if you chuſe more ſure and ready ways,
Spatter a miniſter with fulſome praiſe:
Launch out with freedom, flatter him enough;
Fear not, all men are dedication-proof.
Be bolder yet, you muſt go farther ſtill,
Dip deep in gall thy mercenary quill.
He who his pen in party-quarrels draws,
Liſts an hir'd bravo to ſupport the cauſe;
He muſt indulge his patron's hate and ſpleen,
And ſtab the fame of thoſe he ne'er hath ſeen.
Why then ſhould authors mourn their deſp'rate caſe?
Be brave, do this, and then demand a place,
Why art thou poor? exert thy gifts to riſe,
And baniſh tim'rous virtue from thy eyes.

All this ſeems modern preface, where we're told
That wit is prais'd, but hungry lives and cold:
Againſt th' ungrateful age theſe authors roar,
And fancy learning ſtarves, becauſe they're poor.
Yet why ſhould learning hope ſucceſs at court?
Why ſhould our patriots virtue's cauſe ſupport?
Why to true merit ſhould they have regard?
They know that virtue is its own reward.
Yet let not me of grievances complain,
Who (though the meaneſt of the Muſe's train)
Can boaſt ſubſcriptions to my humble lays,
And mingle profit with my little praiſe.

Aſk Painting, why ſhe loves Heſperian air?
Go view, ſhe cries, my glorious labours there;

There in rich palaces I reign in ſtate,
And on the temples lofty domes create.
The nobles view my works with knowing eyes:
They love the ſcience, and the painter prize.
Why didſt thou, Kent, forego thy native land,
To emulate in picture Raphael's hand?
Think'ſt thou for this to raiſe thy name at home?
Go back, adorn the palaces of Rome;
There on the walls let thy juſt labours ſhine,
And Raphael live again in thy deſign.
Yet ſtay a while; call all thy genius forth,
For Burlington, unbiaſs'd, knows thy worth;
His judgement in thy maſter-ſtrokes can trace
Titian's ſtrong fire, and Guido's ſofter grace:
But, oh conſider, ere thy works appear,
Canſt thou unhurt the tongue of Envy hear?
Cenſure will blame, her breath was ever ſpent
To blaſt the laurels of the eminent.
While Burlington's proportion'd columns riſe,
Does not he ſtand the gaze of envious eyes?
Doors, windows, are condemn'd by paſſing fools,
Who know not that they damn Palladio's rules.
If Chandois with a lib'ral hand beſtow,
Cenſure imputes it all to pomp and ſhow;
When, if the motive right were underſtood,
His daily pleaſure is in doing good.
Had Pope with grov'ling numbers fill'd his page,
Dennis had never kindled into rage.
'Tis the ſublime that hurts the critic's eaſe;
Write nonſenſe, and he reads and ſleeps in peace.
Were Prior, Congreve, Swift, and Pope unknown,
Poor ſlander-ſelling Curl would be undone.

He who would free from malice paſs his days,
Muſt live obſcure, and never merit praiſe.
But let this tale to valiant virtue tell
The daily perils of deſerving well.
A crow was ſtrutting o'er the ſtubbled plain,
Juſt as a lark deſcending clos'd his ſtrain.
The crow beſpoke him thus with ſolemn grace;
Thou moſt accompliſh'd of the feather'd race,
What force of lungs! how clear! how ſweet you ſing!
And no bird ſoars upon a ſtronger wing.
The lark, who ſcorn'd ſoft flatt'ry, thus replies:
True, I ſing ſweet, and on ſtrong pinions riſe;
Yet let me paſs my life from envy free,
For what advantage are theſe gifts to me?
My ſong confines me to the wiry cage,
My flight provokes the faulcon's fatal rage.
But, as you paſs, I hear the fowlers ſay,
To ſhoot at crows is powder flung away.