Badische Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe

Digitale Sammlung der Badischen Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe

Poems

Poems on several occasions

Gay, John

Edinburgh, 1773

Epistle III. To the right honourable William Pulteney, Esq;

urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-263885

Visual Library

EPISTLE III.

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

WILLIAM PULTENEY, Esq;

PULTENEY, methinks you blame my breach of word;
What, cannot Paris one poor page afford?
Yes, I can sagely, when the times are past,
Laugh at those follies which I strove to taste;
And each amusement, which we shar'd, review,
Pleas'd with mere talking, since I talk to you.
But how shall I describe, in humble prose,
Their balls, assemblies, operas, and beaux?
In prose! you cry: Oh no, the Muse must aid,
And leave Parnassus for the Tuilleries' shade;
Shall he who late Britannia's city trod,
And led the draggled Muse, with pattens shod,
Through dirty lanes, and alleys doubtful ways,
Refuse to write, when Paris asks his lays!
Well then, I'll try. Descend, ye beauteous Nine,
In all the colours of the rainbow shine:
Let sparkling stars your neck and ear adorn,
Lay on the blushes of the crimson morn;

So may ye balls and gay aſſemblies grace,
And at the op'ra claim the foremoſt place.
Trav'lers ſhould ever fit expreſſions chuſe,
Nor with low phraſe the lofty theme abuſe.
When they deſcribe the ſtate of eaſtern lords,
Pomp and magnificence ſhould ſwell their words;
And when they paint the ſerpent's ſcaly pride,
Their lines ſhould hiſs, their numbers ſmoothly ſlide;
But they, unmindful of poetic rules,
Deſcribe alike Mockaws and great Moguls.
Dampier would thus, without ill-meaning ſatire,
Dreſs forth in ſimple ſtyle the petit-maitre.
'In Paris there's a race of animals,
'(I've ſeen them at their operas and balls),
'They ſtand erect, they dance whene'er they walk,
'Monkeys in action, parroquets in talk;
'They're crown'd with feathers, like the cockatoo,
'And, like camelions, daily change their hue;
'From patches juſtly plac'd they borrow graces,
'And with vermilion lacker o'er their faces;
'This cuſtom, as we viſibly diſcern,
'They, by frequenting ladies toilettes, learn.'
Thus might the trav'ler eaſy truth impart:
Into the ſubject let me nobly ſtart.
How happy lives the man, how ſure to charm,
Whoſe knot embroider'd flutters down his arm!
On him the ladies caſt the yielding glance,
Sigh in his ſongs, and languiſh in his dance;
While wretched is the wit, contemn'd, forlorn,
Whoſe gummy hat no ſcarlet plumes adorn;
No broider'd flow'rs his worſted ancle grace,
Nor cane emboſs'd with gold directs his pace;

No lady's favour on his ſword is hung:
What though Apollo dictate from his tongue?
His wit is ſpiritleſs, and void of grace,
Who wants th' aſſurance of brocade and lace.
While the gay fop genteelly talks of weather,
The fair in raptures doat upon his feather;
Like a court-lady though he write and ſpell,
His minuet-ſtep was faſhion'd by Marcell *;
He dreſſes, fences. What avails to know?
For women chuſe their men, like ſilks, for ſhow.
Is this the thing, you cry, that Paris boaſts?
Is this the thing renown'd among our toaſts?
For ſuch a flutt'ring ſight we need not roam;
Our own aſſemblies ſhine with theſe at home.

Let us into the field of beauty ſtart;
Beauty's a theme that ever warm'd my heart.
Think not, ye fair, that I the ſex accuſe:
How ſhall I ſpare you, prompted by the Muſe?
(The Muſes all are prudes) ſhe rails, ſhe frets,
Amidſt this ſprightly nation of coquettes.
Yet let not us their looſe coquett'ry blame;
Women of ev'ry nation are the ſame.

You aſk me, if Pariſian dames, like ours,
With ratt'ling dice profane the Sunday's hours;
If they the gameſter's pale-ey'd vigils keep,
And ſtake their honour while their huſbands ſleep?
Yes, Sir; like Engliſh toaſts, the dames of France
Will riſk their income on a ſingle chance.
Nannette laſt night a tricking Pharaon play'd,
The cards the taillier's ſliding hand obey'd;

* A famous dancing-maſter.

To-day her neck no brilliant circle wears,
Nor the ray-darting pendant loads her ears.
Why does old Chloris an aſſembly hold ?
Chloris each night divides the ſharper's gold.
Corinna's cheek with frequent loſſes burns,
And no bold *Trente le va* her fortune turns.
Ah! too raſh virgin! where's thy virtue flown ?
She pawns her perſon for the ſharper's loan!
Yet who with juſtice can the fair upbraid,
Whoſe debts of honour are ſo duly paid ?
But let me not forget the toilette's cares,
Where art each morn the languid cheek repairs:
This red's too pale, nor gives a diſtant grace;
Madame to-day puts on her opera-face;
From this we ſcarce extract the milkmaid's bloom,
Bring the deep dye that warms acroſs the room:
Now flames her cheek; ſo ſtrong her charms prevail,
That on her gown the ſilken roſe looks pale!
Not but that France ſome native beauty boaſts,
Clermont and Charolois might grace our toaſts.
When the ſweet-breathing ſpring unfolds the buds,
Love flies the duſky town for ſhady woods.
Then Tottenham-fields with roving beauty ſwarm,
And Hamſtead-balls the city-virgin warm;
Then Chelſea's meads o'erhear perfidious vows,
And the preſs'd graſs defrauds the grazing cows.
'Tis here the ſame; but in a higher ſphere,
For ev'n court-ladies ſin in open air.
What cit with a gallant would truſt his ſpouſe
Beneath the tempting ſhade of Greenwich boughs?
What peer of France would let his ducheſs rove
Where Boulogne's cloſeſt woods invite to love?

But here no wife can blaſt her huſband's fame,
Cuckold is grown an honourable name.
Stretch'd on the graſs what ſhepherd ſighs his pain,
And on the graſs what ſhepherd ſighs in vain?
On Chloe's lap here Damon laid along,
Melts with the anguiſh of her am'rous ſong;
There Iris flies Palaemon through the glade,
Nor trips by chance—till in the thickeſt ſhade;
Here Celimene defends her lips and breaſt,
For kiſſes are by ſtruggling cloſſer preſt:
Alexis there with eager flame grows bold,
Nor can the nymph his wanton fingers hold;
Be wiſe, Alexis; what, ſo near the road!
Hark, a coach rolls, and huſbands are abroad!
Such were our pleaſures in the days of yore,
When am'rous Charles Britannia's ſceptre bore;
The nightly ſcene of joy the Park was made,
And love in couples peopled ev'ry ſhade,
But ſince at court the rural taſte is loſt,
What mighty ſums have velvet couches coſt!

Sometimes the Tuilleries gawdy walk I love,
Where I through crouds of ruſtling mantuas rove;
As here from ſide to ſide my eyes I caſt,
And gaz'd on all the glitt'ring train that paſt:
Sudden a fop ſteps forth before the reſt;
I knew the bold embroid'ry of his veſt.
He thus accoſts me with familiar air,
"Parbleu! on a fait cet habit en Angleterre!
"Quelle manche! ce galon eſt groſſiérement rangé;
"Voila quelque choſe de fort beau et degagé!"
This ſaid: On his red heel he turns, and then
Hums a ſoft minuet, and proceeds again.

'Well; now you've Paris ſeen, you'll frankly own
'Your boaſted London ſeems a country-town;
'Has Chriſtianity yet reach'd your nation?
'Are churches built? Are maſquerades in faſhion?
'Do daily ſoups your dinners introduce?
'Are muſic, ſnuff, and coaches yet in uſe?'
Pardon me, Sir; we know the Paris mode,
And gather politeſſe from courts abroad.
Like you, our courtiers keep a num'rous train
To load their coach; and tradeſmen dun in vain.
Nor has religion left us in the lurch,
And, as in France, our vulgar croud the church;
Our ladies too ſupport the maſquerade,
The ſex by nature love th' intriguing trade.
Straight the vain fop in ign'rant rapture cries,
'Paris the barb'rous world would civilize!'
Pray, Sir, point out among the paſſing band
The preſent beauties who the town command.
'See, yonder dame; ſtrict virtue chills her breaſt,
'Mark in her eye demure the prude profeſt;
'That frozen boſom native fire muſt want,
'Which boaſts of conſtancy to one gallant!
'This next the ſpoils of fifty lovers wears,
'Rich Dandin's brilliant favours grace her ears!
'The necklace Florio's gen'rous flame beſtow'd,
'Clitander's ſparkling gems her finger load;
'But now her charms grow cheap by conſtant uſe,
'She ſins for ſcarfs, clock'd ſtockings, knots, and
'ſhoes.
'This next, with ſober gait, and ſerious leer,
'Wearies her knees with morn and ev'ning pray'r;

'She ſcorns th' ignoble love of feeble pages,
'But with three abbots in one night engages.
'This with the cardinal her nights employs,
'Where holy ſinews conſecrate her joys.
'Why have I promis'd things beyond my pow'r!
'Five aſſignations wait me at this hour,
'The ſprightly Counteſs firſt my viſit claims,
'To-morrow ſhall indulge inferior dames.
'Pardon me, Sir, that thus I take my leave,
'Gay Florimella ſlily twitch'd my ſleeve.'

Adieu, Monſieur—The opera hour draws near.
Not ſee the opera! all the world is there;
Where on the ſtage th' embroider'd youth of France
In bright array attract the female glance:
This languiſhes, this ſtruts, to ſhow his mien,
And not a gold-clock'd ſtocking moves unſeen.

But hark! the full orcheſtra ſtrike the ſtrings:
The hero ſtruts, and the whole audience ſings.

My jarring ears harſh grating murmurs wound,
Hoarſe and confus'd, like Babel's mingled ſound.
Hard chance had plac'd me near a noiſy throat,
That in rough quavers bellow'd ev'ry note.
Pray, Sir, ſays I, ſuſpend a while your ſong,
The opera's drown'd; your lungs are wond'rous ſtrong;
I wiſh to hear your Roland's ranting ſtrain,
While he with rooted foreſts ſtrows the plain.
Sudden he ſhrugs ſurpriſe, and anſwers quick,
"Monſieur apparemment n'aime pas la muſique."
Then turning round, he join'd th' ungrateful noiſe;
And the loud chorus thunder'd with his voice.

O ſoothe me with ſome ſoft Italian air,
Let harmony compoſe my tortur'd ear!

When Anaſtatia's voice commands the ſtrain,
The melting warble thrills through ev'ry vein;
Thought ſtands ſuſpenſe, and ſilence pleas'd attends,
While in her notes the heav'nly choir deſcends.

But you'll imagine I'm a Frechman grown,
Pleas'd and content with nothing but my own,
So ſtrongly with this prejudice poſſeſs'd,
He thinks French muſic and French painting beſt.
Mention the force of learn'd Corelli's notes,
Some ſcraping fidler of their ball he quotes;
Talk of the ſpirit Raphael's pencil gives,
Yet warm with life whoſe ſpeaking picture lives;
Yes, Sir, ſays he, in colour and deſign,
Rigaut and Raphael are extremely fine!

'Tis true his country's love tranſports his breaſt,
With warmer zeal than your old Greeks profeſt.
Ulyſſes lov'd his Ithaca of yore,
Yet that ſage trav'ler left his native ſhore;
What ſtronger virtue in the Frenchman ſhines!
He to dear Paris all his life confines.
I'm not ſo fond. There are, I muſt confeſs,
Things which might make me love my country leſs.
I ſhould not think my Britain had ſuch charms,
If loſt to learning, if enſlav'd by arms;
France has her Richlieus and her Colberts known,
And then, I grant it, France in ſcience ſhone:
We too, I own, without ſuch aids may chance
In ignorance and pride to rival France.

But let me not forget Corneille, Racine,
Boileau's ſtrong ſenſe, and Moliere's hum'rous ſcene.
Let Cambray's name be ſung above the reſt,
Whoſe maxims, Pult'ney, warm thy patriot breaſt;

In Mentor's precepts Wiſdom ſtrong and clear
Dictates ſublime, and diſtant nations hear.
Hear all ye princes, who the world controul,
What cares, what terrors haunt the tyrant's ſoul;
His conſtant train are anger, fear, diſtruſt:
To be a king, is to be good and juſt;
His people he protects, their rights he ſaves,
And ſcorns to rule a wretched race of ſlaves.

Happy, thrice happy ſhall the monarch reign,
Where guardian laws deſpotic pow'r reſtrain!
There ſhall the ploughſhare break the ſtubborn land,
And bending harveſt tire the peaſant's hand:
There Liberty her ſettled manſion boaſts,
There Commerce plenty brings from foreign coaſts.
O Britain! guard thy laws, thy rights defend,
So ſhall theſe bleſſings to thy ſons deſcend!

You'll think 'tis time ſome other theme to chuſe,
And not with beaux and fops fatigue the Muſe:
Should I let ſatire looſe on Engliſh ground,
There fools of various character abound;
But here my verſe is to one race confin'd,
All Frenchmen are of *petit-maitre* kind.