Badische Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe

Digitale Sammlung der Badischen Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe

Poems

Poems on several occasions

Gay, John

Edinburgh, 1773

The proeme to the courteous reader

urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-263885

Visual Library

THE PROEME TO THE COURTEOUS READER.

GREAT marvel hath it been, (and that not unworthily), to divers worthy wits, that, in this our island of Britain, in all rare sciences so greatly abounding, more especially in all kinds of poesie, highly flourishing, no poet, (though otherways of notable cunning in roundelays) hath hit on the right simple Eclogue, after the true ancient guise of Theocritus, before this mine attempt.

Other poet travelling in this plain high way of Pastoral know I none. Yet, certes, such it behoveth a Pastoral to be, as nature in the country affordeth; and the manners also meetly copied from the rustical folk therein. In this also my love to my natire country, Britain, much pricketh me forward, to describe aright the manners of our own honest and laborious ploughmen, in no wise sure more unworthy a British poet's imitation, than those of Sicily or Arcadie; albeit, not ignorant I am, what a rout and rabblement of critical gallimawfry hath been made of late days by

certain young men of insipid delicacy, concerning, I wist not what, Golden Age, and other outragious conceits, to which they would confine Pastoral. Whereof I avow, I account nought at all, knowing no age so justly to be instiled Golden, as this of our Sovereign Lady Queen ANNE.

This idle trumpery (only fit for schools and schoolboys) unto that ancient Dorick shepherd Theocritus, or his mates, was never known; he rightly, throughout his fifth Idyl, maketh his louts give foul language, and behold their goats at rut in all simplicity.

Ὠπόλος ὅκκ' ἐσορῇ τὰς μηκάδας ὁῖα βατεῦντι
Τακεται ὀφθαλμὼς ὅτι ȣ τράγος αὐτὸς ἔγεντο.

THEOC.

Verily, as little pleasance receiveth a true homebred taste, from all the fine finical new-fangled fooleries of this gay Gothic garniture, wherewith they so nicely bedeck their court clowns, or clown courtiers (for which to call them rightly I wot not) as would a prudent citizen journeying to his country-farms, should he find them occupied by people of this motely make, instead of plain downright hearty cleanly folks, such as be now tenants to the burgesses of this realme.

Furthermore, it is my purpose, gentle reader, to set before thee, as it were, a picture, or rather lively landscape of thy own country, just as thou mightest see it, didest thou take a walk into the fields at the proper

ſeaſon: Even as Maiſter Milton hath elegantly ſet forth the ſame.

" As one who long in populous city pent,
" Where houſes thick and ſewers annoy the air,
" Forth iſſuing on a ſummer's morn to breathe
" Among the pleaſant villages and farms
" Adjoin'd, from each thing met conceives delight;
" The ſmell of grain, or tedded graſs, or kine,
" Or dairy, each rural ſight, each rural ſound."

Thou wilt not find my ſhepherdeſſes idly piping on oaten reeds, but milking the kine, tying up the ſheaves, or, if the hogs are aſtray, driving them to their ſtyes. My ſhepherd gathereth none other nosegays but what are the growth of our own fields; he ſleepeth not under myrtle ſhades, but under a hedge; nor doth he vigilantly defend his flocks from wolves, becauſe there are none, as Maiſter Spencer well obſerveth.

" Well is known, that ſince the Saxon king
" Never was wolf ſeen, many or ſome
" Nor in all Kent, nor in Chriſtendom."

For as much as I have mentioned Maiſter Spencer, ſoothly I muſt acknowledge him a bard of ſweeteſt memorial. Yet hath his ſhepherd's boy at ſome times raiſed his ruſtick reed to rhimes more rumbling than rural. Diverſe grave points alſo hath he handled of churchly matter and doubts in religion daily ariſing, to great clerks only appertaining. What liketh me beſt

are his names, indeed right ſimple and meet for the country, ſuch as Lobbin, Cuddy, Hobbinol, Diggon, and others, ſome of which I have made bold to borrow. Moreover, as he called his Eclogues, The Shepherd's Calendar, and divided the ſame into twelve months, I have choſen (peradventure not over raſhly) to name mine by the days of the week, omitting Sunday or the Sabbath, ours being ſuppoſed to be Chriſtian ſhepherds, and to be then at church-worſhip. Yet further, of many of Maiſter Spencer's eclogues it may be obſerved, though months they be called, of the ſaid months therein nothing is ſpecified; wherein I have alſo eſteemed him worthy mine imitation.

That principally, courteous reader, whereof I would have thee to be advertiſed, (ſeeing I depart from the vulgar uſage), is touching the language of my ſhepherds; which is, ſoothly to ſay, ſuch as is neither ſpoken by the country maiden or the courtly dame; nay, not only ſuch as in the preſent times is not uttered, but was never uttered in times paſt: and, if I judge aright, will never be uttered in times future. It having too much of the country to be fit for the court, too much of the court to be fit for the country; too much of the language of old times to be fit for the preſent, too much of the preſent to have been fit for the old, and too much of both to be fit for any time to come. Granted alſo it is, that, in this my language, I ſeem unto myſelf as a London Maſon, who calculateth his work for a term of years, when he buildeth with old materials upon a ground-rent that is not his own, which ſoon turneth to rubbiſh and ruins. For

this point, no reaſon can I alledge, only deep learned enſamples having led me thereunto.

But here, again, much comfort ariſeth in me, from the hopes, in that I conceive, when theſe words, in the courſe of tranſitory things, ſhall decay, it may ſo hap, in meet time, that ſome lover of ſimplicity ſhall ariſe, who ſhall have the hardineſs to render theſe mine eclogues into ſuch more modern dialect as ſhall be then underſtood.

Gentle reader, turn over the leaf, and entertain thyſelf with the proſpect of thine own country, limned by the painful hand of

Thy loving countryman,

JOHN GAY.