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The Works of George Lord Lyttleton

Lyttelton, George <Lord>

London, 1774

Preface To The Fourth Edition.

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P R E F A C E

TO THE

F O U R T H E D I T I O N .

LUCIAN among the ancients, and among the moderns Fenelon, archbishop of Cambray, and Monsieur Fontenelle, have written *Dialogues of the Dead* with a general applause. The plan they have traced out is so extensive, that the matter which lies within the compass of it can scarce be exhausted. It sets before us the history of all times and all nations, presents to the choice of a writer all characters of remarkable persons, which may best be opposed to, or compared with, each other; and is, perhaps, one of the most agreeable methods, that can be employed, of conveying to the mind any critical, moral, or political observations; because the *Dramatic* spirit, which may be thrown into them, gives them more life, than they could have in dissertations, however well written. And sometimes a *new dress* may render an *old truth* more pleasing to those whom the mere love of novelty betrays into error, as it very frequently does not only the *wits*, but the *sages* of these days. Indeed one of the best services, that could now be done to mankind by any good writer, would be the bringing them back to *common sense*, from which the desire of shining by extraordinary notions has seduced great numbers, to the no small detriment of morality, and of all real knowledge.

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PREFACE TO THE

It may be proper to observe, that in all works of this nature, the dead are often supposed, by a necessary fiction, to be thoroughly informed of many particulars, which happened in times posterior to their own; and in all parts of the world, as well as in the countries to which they belonged. Thus, in Fenelon's dialogue between Gelon and Dion, the former finds fault with the conduct of the latter; and in another between Solon and the emperor Justinian, the Athenian censures the government of the Roman Legislator, and talks of the History of Procopius, as if he had read it. I have also taken the liberty that others have used, to date the several dialogues, as best suited with the purposes to which they were written, supposing some of them to have past immediately after the decease of one or more of the speakers, and others at a very great distance of time from that in which they lived. But I have not in this edition made any alteration in the dates of the former. Elysium, Minos, Mercury, Charon, and Styx, being necessary allegories in this way of writing, are occasionally used here, as they have been by Fontenelle and the archbishop of Cambray: which (if it offended any critical or pious ears) I would justify by the declaration gravely annexed to the works of all Italian writers, wherein they use such expressions: "*Se haveffi nomi-
" nato Fato, Fortuna, Destino, Elysio, Stige, &c. sono schorzi
" di penna poetica, non sentimenti di animo Catolico* *."

Three of these dialogues were written by a different hand; as I am afraid would have appeared but too plainly to the reader, without my having told it. If the friend who favoured me with them should ever write any more, I shall think that the public owes me a great obligation, for having excited a genius so capable of uniting delight with instruction, and giving to virtue and knowledge those graces, which the wit of the age

* If I have named *Fate, Fortune, Destiny, Elysium, Styx, &c.* they are only the sports of a poetical pen, not the sentiments of a Catholic mind.

has

has too often, and too successfully, employed all its skill to bestow on vice and folly.

Besides many corrections which the reader will find in this edition, four new dialogues are added, in order to complete one chief design of the work, I mean the illustrating of certain *principles* and certain *characters* of importance, by bringing in persons who have acted upon different systems, to defend their own conduct, or to explain their own notions, by free discourse with each other, and in a manner conformable to the turn of their minds, as they have been represented to us by the best authors.

The seeing this done in the compass of a small volume, may possibly induce our young gentry (for whose service it is more particularly intended) to meditate on the subjects treated of in this work: and, if they make a proper use of the lights given to them, the public, I hope, will derive some benefit from the book, when the writer is no more.