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The Works of George Lord Lyttleton

Lyttelton, George <Lord>

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XIII. Virgil - Horace - Mercury - Scaliger the Elder.

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told by some shades who are lately arrived here, that the ablest statesman of his time, a king, with whose fame the world is filled, has answered your book, and confuted all the principles of it, with a noble scorn and abhorrence. I am also assured, that in England there is a great and good king, *whose whole life has been a continued opposition to your evil system*; who has hated all cruelty, all fraud, all falsehood; whose word has been sacred, whose honour inviolate; who has made the laws of his kingdom the rules of his government, and good faith and a regard for the liberty of mankind the principles of his conduct with respect to foreign powers; who reigns more absolutely now in the hearts of his people, and does greater things by the confidence they place in him, and by the efforts they make from the generous zeal of affection, than any monarch ever did, or ever will do, by all the arts of iniquity which you recommended.

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DIALOGUE XIII.

VIRGIL.—HORACE.—MERCURY.—SCALIGER THE ELDER.

VIRGIL.

MY dear Horace, your company is my greatest delight, even in the Elysian fields. No wonder it was so when we lived together in Rome. Never had man so genteel, so agreeable, so easy a wit, or a temper so pliant to the inclinations of others in the intercourse of society. And then such integrity, such fidelity, such generosity in your nature! A soul so free from all envy, so benevolent, so sincere, so placable in its anger, so warm and constant in its affections! You were as necessary to Mæcenas, as he to Augustus. Your conversation sweetened to him all the cares of his ministry: your gaiety cheered his drooping spirits; and your counsels assisted him when he wanted advice. For you were capable, my dear Horace, of coun-

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seling statesmen. Your sagacity, your discretion, your secrecy, your clear judgement in all affairs, recommended you to the confidence, not of Mæcenas alone, but of Augustus himself; which you nobly made use of to serve your old friends of the republican party, and to confirm both the minister and the prince in their love of mild and moderate measures, yet with a severe restraint of licentiousness, the most dangerous enemy to the whole commonwealth under any form of government.

HORACE.

To be so praised by Virgil, would have put me in Elysium while I was alive.—But I know your modesty will not suffer me, in return for these encomiums, to speak of your character. Supposing it as perfect as your poems, you would think, as you did of them, that it wanted correction.

VIRGIL.

Don't talk of my modesty.—How much greater was your's, when you disclaimed the name of a poet, you whose odes are so noble, so harmonious, so sublime!

HORACE.

I felt myself too inferior to the dignity of that name.

VIRGIL.

I think you did like Augustus, when he refused to accept the title of king, but kept all the power with which it was ever attended. Even in your epistles and satires, where the poet was concealed, as much as he could be, you may properly be compared to a prince in disguise, or in his hours of familiarity with his intimate friends: the pomp and majesty were let drop, but the greatness remained.

HORACE.

Well:—I will not contradict you; and (to say the truth) I should do it with no very good grace, because in some of my odes I have not spoken so modestly of my own poetry, as in

my

my epistles. But to make you know your pre-eminence over me and all writers of Latin verse, I will carry you to Quintilian, the best of all Roman critics, who will tell you in what rank you ought to be placed.

VIRGIL.

I fear his judgement of me was biased by your commendation.—But who is this shade that Mercury is conducting? I never saw one that stalked with so much pride, or had such ridiculous arrogance expressed in his looks!

HORACE.

They come towards us:—Hail, Mercury! What is this stranger with you?

MERCURY.

His name is Julius Cæsar Scaliger, and he is by profession a *critic*.

HORACE.

Julius Cæsar Scaliger! He was, I presume, a *dictator* in criticism.

MERCURY.

Yes, and he has exercised his sovereign power over you.

HORACE.

I will not presume to oppose it. I had enough of following Brutus at Philippi.

MERCURY.

Talk to him a little:—He'll amuse you. I brought him to you on purpose.

HORACE.

Virgil, do you accost him:—I can't do it with proper gravity: I shall laugh in his face.

VIRGIL.

Sir, may I ask for what reason you cast your eyes so superciliously upon Horace and me? I don't remember that Augustus

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ever looked down upon us with such an air of superiority, when we were his subjects.

SCALIGER.

He was only a sovereign over your bodies, and owed his power to violence and usurpation. But I have from nature an absolute dominion over the wit of all authors, who are subjected to me as the greatest of critics or *hypercritics*.

VIRGIL.

Your jurisdiction, great sir, is very extensive:—and what judgements have you been pleased to pass upon us?

SCALIGER.

Is it possible you should be ignorant of my decrees? I have placed you, Virgil, above Homer; whom I have shewn to be—

VIRGIL.

Hold, sir,—no blasphemy against my master.

HORACE.

But what have you said of me?

SCALIGER.

I have said, that I had rather have written the little Dialogue between you and Lydia, than have been made king of Arragon.

HORACE.

If we were in the other world, you should give me the kingdom, and take both the ode and the lady in return. But did you always pronounce so favourably for us?

SCALIGER.

Send for my works and read them.—Mercury will bring them to you with the first learned ghost that arrives here from Europe. There is instruction for you in them: I tell you of your faults.—But it was my whim to commend that little ode; and I never do things by halves. When I give praise, I give it liberally,

liberally, to shew my royal bounty. But I generally blame, to exert all the vigour of my censorian power, and keep my subjects in awe.

HORACE.

You did not confine your sovereignty to poets; you exercised it, no doubt, over all other writers.

SCALIGER.

I was a poet, a philosopher, a statesman, an orator, an historian, a divine, without doing the drudgery of any of these, but only censuring those who did, and shewing thereby the superiority of my genius over them all.

HORACE.

A short way indeed to universal fame! And I suppose you were very peremptory in your decisions.

SCALIGER.

Peremptory! ay.—If any man dared to contradict my opinions, I called him a dunce, a rascal, a villain, and frightened him out of his wits.

VIRGIL.

But what said others to this method of disputation?

SCALIGER.

They generally believed me because of the confidence of my assertions; and thought I could not be so insolent, or so angry, if I was not absolutely sure of being in the right. Besides, in my controversies, I had a great help from the language in which I wrote: for one can scold and call names with a much better grace in Latin than in French, or any tame, modern tongue.

HORACE.

Have not I heard, that you pretended to derive your descent from the princes of Verona?

SCALIGER.

SCALIGER.

Pretended! do you presume to deny it?

HORACE.

Not I indeed:—Genealogy is not my science. If you should claim to descend in a direct line from king Midas, I would not dispute it.

VIRGIL.

I wonder, Scaliger, that you stooped to so low an ambition. Was it not greater to reign over all Mount Parnassus than over a petty state in Italy?

SCALIGER.

You say well.—I was too condescending to the prejudices of vulgar opinion. The ignorant multitude imagine that a prince is a greater man than a critic. Their folly made me desire to claim kindred with the *Scalas* of Verona.

HORACE.

Pray, Mercury, how do you intend to dispose of this august person? You can't think it proper to let him remain with us.—He must be placed with the demigods; he must go to Olympus.

MERCURY.

Be not afraid.—He shall not trouble you long. I brought him hither to divert you with the sight of an animal you never had seen, and myself with your surprize. He is the chief of all the modern critics, the most renowned captain of that numerous and dreadful band. Whatever you may think of him, I can seriously assure you, that, before he went mad, he had good parts, and great learning. But I will now explain to you the original cause of the absurdities he has uttered. His mind was formed in such a manner, that, like some perspective glasses, it either diminished or magnified all objects too much; but above all others it magnified the good man to himself. This made him so proud that it turned his brain. Now I have had

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my sport with him, I think it will be charity to restore him to his senses ; or rather to bestow what nature denied him, a sound judgement. Come hither, Scaliger.—By this touch of my ca-  
duceus I give thee power to see things as they are, and among others thyself.—Look, gentlemen, how his countenance is fal-  
len in a moment ! Hear what he says :—He is talking to him-  
self.

SCALIGER.

Bless me ! with what persons have I been discoursing ! with Virgil and Horace ! How could I venture to open my lips in their presence ? Good Mercury, I beseech you, let me retire from a company for which I am very unfit. Let me go and hide my head in the deepest shade of that grove which I see in the valley. After I have performed a penance there, I will crawl on my knees to the feet of those illustrious shades, and beg them to see me burn my impertinent books of criticism, in the fiery billows of Phlegethon, with my own hands.

MERCURY.

They will both receive thee into favour. This mortification of truly knowing thyself is a sufficient atonement for thy former presumption.



## DIALOGUE XIV.

BOILEAU.—POPE.

BOILEAU.

MR. Pope, you have done me great honour. I am told, that you made me your model in poetry, and walked on Parnassus in the same paths which I had trod.

POPE.

We both followed Horace : but in our manner of imitation, and in the turn of our natural genius, there was, I believe, much