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The Works of George Lord Lyttleton

Lyttelton, George <Lord>

London, 1774

XV. Octavia - Portia - Arria.

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DIALOGUE XIV.

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brightness of those, that are impious or immoral, shines only to betray, and lead men to destruction.

BOILEAU.

Has England been free from all seductions of this nature?

POPE.

No.—But the French have the art of rendering vice and impiety more agreeable than the English.

BOILEAU.

I am not very proud of this superiority in the talents of my countrymen. But, as I am told that the *good sense* of the English is now admired in France, I hope it will soon convince both nations, *that true wisdom is virtue, and true virtue is religion.*

POPE.

I think it also to be wished, that a taste for *the frivolous* may not continue too prevalent among the French. There is a great difference between gathering flowers at the foot of Parnassus, and ascending the arduous heights of the mountain. The palms and laurels grow there; and if any of your countrymen aspire to gain them, they must no longer enervate all the vigour of their minds by this habit of trifling. I would have them be perpetual competitors with the English in manly wit and substantial learning. But let the competition be friendly. There is nothing which so contracts and debases the mind as national envy. True wit, like true virtue, naturally loves its own image, in whatever place it is found.

DIALOGUE XV.

OCTAVIA—PORTIA—ARRIA.

PORTIA.

HOW has it happened, Octavia, that Arria and I, who have a higher rank than you in the temple of Fame, should have a lower here in Elysium? We are told, that the virtues, H h h you

you exerted, as a wife, were greater than our's. Be so good as to explain to us what were those virtues. It is the privilege of this place, that one can bear superiority without mortification. The jealousy of precedence died with the rest of our mortal failties. Tell us then your own story. We will sit down under the shade of this myrtle grove, and listen to it with pleasure.

OCTAVIA.

Noble ladies, the glory of our sex and of Rome, I will not refuse to comply with your desire, though it recalls to my mind some scenes, my heart would wish to forget. There can be only one reason why Minos should have given to my conjugal virtues a preference above your's; which is, that the trial assigned to them was harder.

ARRIA.

How! madam; harder than *to die* for your husband! We *died* for ours.

OCTAVIA.

You did, for husbands who loved you, and were the most virtuous men of the ages they lived in; who trusted you with their lives, their fame, their honour. To *outlive* such husbands is, in my judgement, a harder effort of virtue, than to *die for them or with them*. But Mark Antony, to whom my brother Octavius, for reasons of state, gave my hand, was indifferent to me, and loved another. Yet he has told me himself, I was handsomer than his mistress Cleopatra. Younger I certainly was; and to men *that* is generally a charm sufficient to turn the scale in one's favour. I had been loved by Marcellus. Antony said he loved me, when he pledged to me his faith. Perhaps he did for a time: a new handsome woman might, from his natural inconstancy, make him forget an old attachment. He was but too amiable.—His very vices had charms beyond other mens virtues. Such vivacity! such fire! such a towering pride! He seemed made by nature to command; to govern the world; to govern it with such ease, that the busines of it did not rob him

him of an hour of pleasure! Nevertheless, while his inclination for me continued, this haughty lord of mankind, who could hardly bring his high spirit to treat my brother, his partner in empire, with the necessary respect, was to me as submissive, as obedient to every wish of my heart, as the humblest lover that ever fighed in the vales of Arcadia. Thus he seduced my affection from the manes of Marcellus, and fixed it on himself. He fixed it, ladies, (I own it with some confusion) more fondly than it had ever been fixed on Marcellus. And when he had done so, he scorned me, he forsook me, he returned to Cleopatra. Think who I was:—the sister of Cæsar, sacrificed to a vile Egyptian queen, the harlot of Julius, the disgrace of her sex! Every outrage was added that could incense me still more. He gave her, at sundry times, as public marks of his love, many provinces of the empire of Rome in the East. He read her love-letters openly, in his tribunal itself; even while he was See Plutarch's Life of Antony. hearing and judging the causes of kings. Nay he left his tribunal, and one of the best Roman orators pleading before him, to follow her litter, in which she happened to be passing by at that time. But, what was more grievous to me than all these demonstrations of his extravagant passion for that infamous woman, he had the assurance, in a letter to my brother, to call her V. Suetonium in Augusto Cæsar. his wife. Which of you, ladies, could have patiently borne this treatment?

ARRIA.

Not I, madam, in truth. Had I been in your place, the dagger with which I pierced my own bosom, to shew my dear Pætus *how easy it was to die*, that dagger should I have plunged into Antony's heart, if piety to the gods, and a due respect to the purity of my own soul, had not stopped my hand. But, I verily believe, I should have killed myself; not, as I did, out of affection to my husband, but out of shame and indignation at the wrongs I endured.

H h h 2 PORTIA.

I must own, Octavia, that to bear such usage was harder to a woman than to swallow fire.

OCTAVIA.

See Plutarch's
Life of An-
tony.

Yet I did bear it, madam, without even a complaint, which could hurt or offend my husband. Nay, more; at his return from his Parthian expedition, which his impatience to bear a long absence from Cleopatra had made unfortunate and inglorious, I went to meet him in Syria, and carried with me rich presents of clothes and money for his troops, a great number of horses, and two thousand chosen soldiers, equipped and armed like my brother's prætorian bands. He sent to stop me at Athens, because his mistress was then with him. I obeyed his orders: but I wrote to him, by one of his most faithful friends, a letter full of resignation, and such a tenderness for him as I imagined might have power to touch his heart. My envoy served me so well, he set my fidelity in so fair a light, and gave such reasons to Antony, why he ought to see and receive me with kindness, that Cleopatra was alarmed. All her arts were employed to prevent him from seeing me, and to draw him again into Egypt.—Those arts prevailed. He sent me back into Italy, and gave himself up more absolutely than ever to the witchcraft of that *Circé*. He added Africa to the states he had bestowed on her before; and declared Cæsario, her spurious son by Julius Cæsar, heir to all her dominions, except Phoenicia, and Cilicia, which, with the Upper Syria, he gave to Ptolemy, his second son by her; and at the same time declared his eldest son by her, whom he had espoused to the princess of Media, heir to that kingdom, and king of Armenia, nay, and of the whole Parthian empire, which he meant to conquer for *him*. The children I had brought him he entirely neglected, as if they had been bastards.—I wept. I lamented the wretched captivity he was in;—but I never reproached him. My brother, exasperated at so many indignities, commanded me to quit the house

Ibid.

house of my husband at Rome, and come into his.—I refused to obey him.—I remained in Antony's house, I perfisted to take care of his children by Fulvia, the same tender care, as of my own. I gave my protection to all his friends at Rome. I implored my brother not to make my jealousy or my wrongs the cause of a civil war. But the injuries done to Rome by Antony's conduct could not possibly be forgiven. When he found he should draw the Roman arms on himself, he sent orders to me to leave his house. I did so, but carried with me all his children by Fulvia, except Antyllus, the eldest, who was then with him in Egypt. After his death and Cleopatra's, I took her children by him, and bred them up with my own.

A R R I A.

I Is it possible, madam? the children of Cleopatra?

O C T A V I A.

Yes, the children of my rival. I married her daughter to Juba, king of Mauritania, the most accomplished, and the handsomest prince in the world.

A R R I A.

Tell me, Octavia, did not your pride and resentment entirely cure you of your passion for Antony, as soon as you saw him go back to Cleopatra? and was not your whole conduct afterwards the effect of cool reason, undisturbed by the agitations of jealous and tortured love?

O C T A V I A.

You probe my heart very deeply. That I had some help from resentment and the natural pride of my sex, I will not deny. But I was not become *indifferent* to my husband. I loved the Antony who had been my lover, more than I was angry with the Antony who forsook me, and loved another woman. Had he left Cleopatra, and returned to me again with all his old *affection* of me, I would have been *more* angry with him than I was angry with him before.

former affection, I really believe I should have loved him as well as before.

ARRIA.

If the merit of a wife is to be measured by her sufferings, your heart was unquestionably the most perfect model of conjugal virtue. The wound I gave mine was but a scratch in comparison to many you felt. Yet I don't know, whether it would be any benefit to the world, that there should be in it many Octavias. *Too good subjects are apt to make bad kings.*

PORTIA.

True, Arria; the wives of Brutus and Cecinna Pætus may be allowed to have spirits a little rebellious. Octavia was educated in the court of her brother. Subjection and Patience were much better taught there than in our houses, where the Roman liberty made its last abode: and though I will not dispute the judgement of Minos, I can't help thinking that the affection of a wife to her husband is more or less respectable in proportion to the character of that husband. If I could have had for Antony the same friendship as I had for Brutus, I should have despised myself.

OCTAVIA.

My fondness for Antony was ill placed; but my perseverance in the performance of all the duties of a wife, notwithstanding his ill usage, a perseverance made more difficult by the very excess of my love, appeared to Minos the highest and most meritorious effort of female resolution, against the seductions of the most dangerous enemy to our virtue, *offended pride.*

DIA-