



The Works Of Alexander Pope Esq.

In Nine Volumes Complete. With His Last Corrections, Additions, And Improvements; As they were delivered to the Editor a little before his Death

Containing The First of his Letters

Pope, Alexander

London, 1751

XII. From the Duke of Buckingham to Mr. Pope, on the dispute in France concerning Homer.

Nutzungsbedingungen

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-56122](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-56122)

the sense to endeavour to converse with the best of them, and shall therefore as soon as possible tell you in person how much I am, &c.

L E T T E R XII.

The D. of BUCKINGHAM to Mr. POPE.

YOU desire my opinion as to the late dispute in France concerning Homer: And I think it excusable (at an age alas! of not much pleasure) to amuse myself a little in taking notice of a controversy, than which nothing is at present more remarkable (even in a nation who value themselves so much upon the Belles Lettres) both on account of the illustrious subject of it, and of the two persons engaged in the quarrel.

The one is extraordinary in all the Lyric kind of Poetry, even in the opinion of his very adversary. The other a Lady (and of more value for being so) not only of great Learning, but with a Genius admirably turn'd to that sort of it which most becomes her Sex for softness, genteelness, and promoting of virtue; and such as (one would think) is not so liable as other parts of scholarship, to rough disputes, or violent animosity.

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Yet it has so happen'd, that no writers, even about Divinity itself, have been more outrageous or uncharitable than these two polite authors; by suffering their judgments to be a little warped (if I may use that expression) by the heat of their eager inclinations, to attack or defend so great an Author under debate. I wish for the sake of the public, which is now so well entertained by their quarrel, it may not end at last in their agreeing to blame a third man who is so presumptuous as to censure both, if they should chance to hear of it.

To begin with matter of fact. M. D'Acier has well judg'd, that the best of all Poets certainly deserved a better translation, at least into French prose, because to see it done in verse was despair'd of: I believe indeed, from a defect in that language, incapable of mounting to any degree of excellence suitable to so very great an undertaking.

She has not only perform'd this task as well as prose can do it, (which is indeed but as the wrong side of tapestry is able to represent the right ^a) she has added to it also many learned and useful annotations. With all which she most obligingly delighted not only her own sex, but most of ours, ignorant of the Greek, and

^a A thought of Cervantes.

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consequently her adversary himself, who frankly acknowledges that ignorance.

'Tis no wonder therefore, if, in doing this, she is grown so enamour'd of that unspeakably-charming Author, as to have a kind of horror at the least mention of a man bold enough to blame him.

Now as to M. de la Motte, he being already deservedly famous for all sorts of Lyric poetry, was so far introduced by her into those beauties of the Epic kind (tho' but in that way of translation) as not to resist the pleasure and hope of reputation, by attempting that in verse, which had been applauded so much for the difficulty of doing it even in prose; knowing how this, well executed, must extremely transcend the other.

But, as great Poets are a little apt to think they have an ancient right of being excus'd for vanity on all occasions, he was not content to out-do M. D'Acier, but endeavour'd to out-do Homer himself, and all that ever in any age or nation went before him in the same enterprize; by leaving out, altering, or adding whatever he thought best.

Against this presumptuous attempt, Homer has been in all times so well defended, as not to need my small assistance; yet, I must needs say, his excellencies are such, that for their sakes

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he deserves a much gentler touch for his seeming errors. These if M. de la Motte had translated as well as the rest, with an apology for having retain'd them only out of meer veneration; his judgment, in my opinion, would have appear'd much greater than by the best of his alterations, though I admit them to be written very finely. I join with M. de la Motte in wondering at some odd things in Homer, but 'tis chiefly because of his sublime ones, I was about to say his divine ones, which almost surprize me at finding him any where in the fallible condition of human nature.

And now we are wondering, I am in a difficulty to guess what can be the reason of these exceptions against Homer, from one who has himself translated him, contrary to the general custom of translators. Is there not a little of that in it? I mean to be singular, in getting above the title of a Translator, tho' sufficiently honourable in this case. For such an ambition no body has less occasion, than one who is so fine a Poet in other kinds; and who must have too much wit to believe, any alteration of another can intitle him to the denomination of an *Epic Poet* himself: tho' no man in this age seems more capable of being a good one, if the French tongue would bear it. Yet in his translation he has done too well, to leave any doubt
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(with all his faults) that her's can be ever parallel'd with it.

Besides he could not be ignorant, that finding faults is the most easy and vulgar part of a critic; whereas nothing shews so much skill and taste both, as the being thoroughly sensible of the sublimest excellencies.

What can we say in excuse of all this? *Humanum est errare*: Since as good a Poet as, I believe, the French language is capable of, and as sharp a Critic as any nation can produce, has by too much censuring Homer subjected a translation to censure, that would have otherwise stood the test of the severest adversary.

But since he would needs chuse that wrong way of criticism, I wonder he miss'd a stone so easy to be thrown against Homer, not for his filling the Iliad with so much slaughter (for that is to be excused, since a War is not capable of being described without it) but with so many various particulars of wounds and horror, as shew the writer (I am afraid) so delighted that way himself, as not the least to doubt his reader being so also. Like Spanioletta, whose dismal pictures are the more disagreeable for being always so very movingly painted. Even Hector's last parting from his son and Andromache hardly makes us amends for his body's being dragg'd thrice round the town. M. de la Motte in his

strongest objection about that dismal combat, has sufficient cause to blame his enraged adversary; who here gives an instance that it is impossible to be violent without committing some mistake; her passion for Homer blinding her too much to perceive the very grossest of his failings. By which warning I am become a little more capable of impartiality, though in a dispute about that very Poet for whom I have the greatest veneration.

M. D'Acier might have consider'd a little, that whatever were the motives of M. de la Motte to so bold a proceeding, it could not darken that fame which I am sure she thinks shines securely even after the vain attempts of Plato himself against it: caus'd only perhaps by a like reason with that of Madam D'Acier's anger against M. de la Motte, namely, the finding that in prose his genius (great as it was) could not be capable of the sublime heights of poetry, which therefore he banish'd out of his common-wealth.

Nor were these objections to Homer any more lessening of her merit in translating him as well as that way is capable of, viz. fully, plainly, and elegantly, than the most admirable verses can be any disparagement to as excellent prose.

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The best excuse for all this violence is, its being in a cause which gives a kind of reputation even to suffering, notwithstanding ever so ill a management of it.

The worst of defending even Homer in such a passionate manner, is its being more a proof of her weakness, than of his being liable to none. For what is it can excuse Homer any more than Hector, for flying at the first sight of Achilles? whose terrible aspect sure needed not such an inexcusable fright to set it off; and methinks all that account of Minerva's restoring his dart to Achilles, comes a little too late, for excusing Hector's so terrible apprehension at the very first.

L E T T E R XIII.

To the Duke of BUCKINGHAM.

Sept. 1, 1718.

I Am much honour'd by your Grace's compliance with my request, in giving me your opinion of the French dispute concerning Homer. And I shall keep my word, in fairly telling wherein I disagree from you. It is but in two or three very small points, not so much of the dispute, as of the parties concern'd in it. I

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