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A Collection Of Poems In Six Volumes. By Several Hands

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The Danger of Writing Verse. An Epistle.

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The DANGER of Writing VERSE.

An EPISTLE.

First printed in the Year 1741.

By WILLIAM WHITEHEAD, Esq;

*Quæ poterant unquam satis expurgare cicuta,
Nî melius dormire putem, quam scribere versus?*

HOR. Ep. 2. Lib. 2.

YOU ask me, fir, why thus by phantoms aw'd,
No kind occasion tempts the Muse abroad?
Why, when retirement sooths this idle art,
To fame regardless sleeps the youthful heart?
'Twould wrong your judgment, shou'd I fairly say
Distrust or weakness caus'd the cold delay;
Hint the small diff'rence, till we touch the lyre,
'Twixt real genius and too strong desire;
The human slips, or seeming slips pretend,
That rouse the critick, but escape the friend;
Nay which, tho' dreadful when the foe pursues,
You pass, and smile, and still provoke the Muse.
Yet, spite of all you think, or kindly feign,
My hand will tremble while it grasps the pen.
For not in this, like other arts, we try
Our light excursions in a summer sky,

No

No casual flights the dang'rous trade admits,
 But wits once authors, are for ever wits.
 The fool in prose, like earth's unwieldy son,
 May oft rise vig'rous, tho' he's oft o'erthrown ;
 One dang'rous crisis marks our rise or fall,
 By all we're courted, or we're thunn'd by all.

Will it avail, that unmatu'r'd by years,
 My easy numbers pleas'd your partial ears,
 If now condemn'd, my riper lays must bear
 The wise man's censure, and the vain man's sneer ?
 Or, still more hard, ev'n where he's valu'd most,
 The man must suffer, if the poet's lost ;
 For wanting wit, be totally undone,
 And barr'd all arts, for having fail'd in one.
 When fears like these his serious thoughts engage,
 No bugbear phantom curbs the poet's rage ;
 'Tis pow'rful reason holds the streighten'd rein,
 While flutt'ring fancy to the distant plain
 Sends a long look, and spreads her wings in vain.

But grant, for once, th' officious Muse has shed
 Her gentlest influence on his infant head.
 Let fears lie vanquish'd, and resounding Fame
 Give to the bellowing blast the poet's name.
 And see ! distinguish'd from the crowd he moves,
 Each finger marks him, and each eye approves !
 Secure, as halcyons brooding o'er the deep,
 The waves roll gently, and the thunders sleep,



Obsequious nature binds the tempest's wings,
And pleas'd attention listens whilst he sings!

O blissful state! O more than human joy!

What shafts can reach him, or what cares annoy?

What cares, my friend? why all that man can know,

Oppress'd with real, or with fancy'd woe.

Rude to the world, like earth's first lord expell'd,

To climes unknown, from Eden's safer field;

No more eternal springs around him breathe,

Black air scowls o'er him, deadly damps beneath;

Now must he learn, misguided youth, to bear

Each varying season of the poet's year:

Flatt'ry's full beam, detraction's wintry store,

The frowns of fortune, or the pride of pow'r.

His acts, his words, his thoughts no more his own,

Each folly blazon'd, and each frailty known.

Is he reserv'd?—his sense is so refin'd

It ne'er descends to trifle with mankind.

Open and free?—they find the secret cause

Is vanity; He courts the world's applause.

Nay, tho' he speak not, something still is seen,

Each change of face betrays a fault within.

If grave, 'tis spleen; he smiles but to deride;

And downright awkwardness in him is pride.

Thus must he steer thro' fame's uncertain seas,

Now sunk by censure, and now puff'd by praise;

Contempt with envy strangely mix'd endure,

Fear'd where carefs'd, and jealous tho' secure.

One fatal rock on which good authors split
 Is thinking all mankind must like their wit ;
 And the grand business of the world stand still
 To listen to the dictates of their quill.
 Hurt if they fail, and yet how few succeed ;
 What's born in leisure men of leisure read ;
 And half of those have some peculiar whim
 Their test of sense, and read but to condemn.

Besides, on parties now our fame depends,
 And frowns or smiles, as these are foes or friends.
 Wit, judgment, nature join ; you strive in vain ;
 'Tis keen invective stamps the current strain,
 Fix'd to one side, like Homer's gods, we fight,
 These always wrong, and those for ever right.
 And would you chuse to see your friend, resign'd
 Each conscious tie which guides the virtuous mind,
 Embroil'd in factions, hurl with dreadful skill
 The random vengeance of his desp'rate quill ?
 'Gainst pride in man with equal pride declaim,
 And hide ill nature under virtue's name ?
 Or, deeply vers'd in flattery's wily ways,
 Flow in full reams of undistinguish'd praise ?
 To vice's grave, or folly's bust bequeath
 The blushing trophy, and indignant wreath ?
 Like Ægypt's priests, bid endless temples rise,
 And people with earth's pests th' offended skies ?

*a Qui nescit qualia demens
 Ægyptus portenta colat ? crocodilon adorat.*

Juv. Sat. 15.

Q 2

The



The Muse of old her native freedom knew,
 And wild in air the sportive wand'rer flew;
 On worth alone her bays eternal strow'd,
 And found the heroe, ere she hymn'd the god.
 Nor less the chief his kind support return'd,
 No drooping Muse her slighted labours mourn'd;
 But stretch'd at ease she prun'd her growing wings,
 By sages honour'd, and advanc'd by kings.
 Ev'n knowing Greece confess'd her early claim,
 And warlike Latium caught the gen'rous flame.
 Not so our age regards the tuneful tongue,
 'Tis senseless rapture all, and empty song:
 No Pollio sheds his genial influence round,
 No Varus listens whilst the groves resound.
 Ev'n those, the knowing and the virtuous few,
 Who noblest ends by noblest means pursue,
 Forget the poet's use; the powerful spell
 Of magic verse, which SIDNEY paints so well.
 Forget that Homer wak'd the Grecian flame,
 That Pindar rous'd inglorious Thebes to fame,
 That every age has great examples given
 Of virtue taught in verse, and verse inspir'd by heaven.

But I forbear—these dreams no longer last,
 The times of fable and of flights are past.
 To glory now no laurel'd suppliants bend,
 No coins are struck, no sacred domes ascend.
 Yet ye, who still the Muse's charms admire,
 And best deserve the verse your deeds inspire,

Ev'n

Ev'n in these gainful unambitious days,
 Feel for yourselves at least, ye fond of praise,
 And learn one lesson taught in mystic rhyme
 " 'Tis verse alone arrests the wings of Time."
^b Fast to the thread of life, annex'd by Fame,
 A sculptur'd medal bears each human name,
 O'er Lethe's streams the fatal threads depend,
 The glitt'ring medal trembles as they bend ;
 Close but the shears, when chance or nature calls,
 The birds of rumour catch it as it falls ;
 Awhile from bill to bill the trifle's tost,
 The waves receive it, and 'tis ever lost !

But should the meanest swan that cuts the stream
 Consign'd to Phœbus, catch the favour'd name,
 Safe in her mouth she bears the sacred prize
 To where bright Fame's eternal altars rise.
 'Tis there the Muse's friends true laurels wear,
 There ^c Ægypt's monarch reigns, and great Augustus there.

Patrons of arts must live 'till arts decay,
 Sacred to verse in every poet's lay.

Thus grateful France does Richlieu's worth proclaim,
 Thus grateful Britain doats on Somers' name.
 And, spite of party rage, and human flaws,
 And British liberty and British laws,

^b *Bacon de augmentis scientiarum.*

^c *Ptolemy Philadelphus.*



Times yet to come shall sing of ANNA'S reign,
And bards, who blame the measures, love the men.

But why round patrons climb th' ambitious bays?
Is interest then the fordid spur to praise?

^d Shall the same cause, which prompts the chatt'ring jay

To aim at words, inspire the poet's lay?

And is there nothing in the boasted claim

Of living labours and a deathless name?

The pictur'd front, with sacred fillets bound?

The sculptur'd bust with laurels wreath'd around?

The annual roses scatter'd o'er his urn,

And tears to flow from poets yet unborn?

Illustrious all! but sure to merit these,

Demands at least the poet's learned ease.

Say, can the bard attempt what's truly great,

Who pants in secret for his future fate?

Him serious toils, and humbler arts engage,

To make youth easy, and provide for age;

While lost in silence hangs his useless lyre,

And tho' from heav'n it came, fast dies the sacred fire.

Or grant true genius with superior force

Bursts ev'ry bond, resistless in its course,

Yet lives the man, how wild foe'er his aim,

Would madly barter fortune's smiles for fame!

Or distant hopes of future ease forego,

For all the wreaths that all the Nine bestow?

^d *Perfusus.*

Well

Well pleas'd to shine, thro' each recording page,
The hapless Dryden of a shameless age?

Ill-fated bard! where-e'er thy name appears,
The weeping verse a sad memento bears.

Ah! what avail'd th' enormous blaze between
Thy dawn of glory, and thy closing scene!

When sinking nature asks our kind repairs,
Unstrung the nerves, and silver'd o'er the hairs;

When stay'd reflection comes uncall'd at last,
And grey experience counts each folly past,

Untun'd and harsh the sweetest strains appear,
And loudest Pæans but fatigue the ear.

'Tis true the man of verse, tho' born to ills,
Too oft deserves the very fate he feels.

When, vainly frequent at the great man's board,
He shares in ev'ry vice with ev'ry lord:

Makes to their taste his sober sense submit,
And 'gainst his reason madly arms his wit;

Heav'n but in justice turns their serious heart
To scorn the wretch, whose life belies his art.

He, only he, shou'd haunt the Muse's grove,
Whom youth might reverence and grey hairs approve;

Whose heav'n-taught numbers, now, in thunder roll'd,
Might rouse the virtuous and appal the bold.

Now, to truth's dictates lend the grace of ease,
And teach instruction happier arts to please.

For him would PLATO change their gen'ral fate,
And own one poet might improve his state.



Curs'd be their verse, and blasted all their bays,
 Whose sensual lure th' unconscious ear betrays;
 Wounds the young breast, ere virtue spreads her shield,
 And takes, not wins, the scarce disputed field,
 Tho' specious rhet'ric each loose thought refine,
 Tho' music charm in ev'ry labour'd line,
 The dang'rous verse, to full perfection grown,
 BAVIUS might blush, and QUARLES disdain to own.

Shou'd some MACHAON, whose sagacious soul
 Trac'd blushing nature to her inmost goal,
 Skill'd in each drug the varying world provides,
 All earth embosoms, and all ocean hides,
 Nor cooling herb, nor healing balm supply,
 Ease the swoln breast, or close the languid eye;
 But, exquisitely ill, awake disease,
 And arm with poisons ev'ry baleful breeze:
 What racks, what tortures must his crimes demand,
 The more than BORCIA of a bleeding land!
 And is less guilty he, whose shameless page
 Not to the present bounds its subtil rage,
 But spreads contagion wide, and stains a future age?

Forgive me, Sir, that thus the moral strain,
 With indignation warm'd, rejects the rein;
 Nor think I rove regardless of my theme,
 'Tis hence new dangers clog the paths to fame.
 Not to themselves alone such bards confine
 Fame's just reproach for virtue's injur'd shrine;

Profan'd

Profan'd by them, the Muse's laurels fade,
 Her voice neglected, and her flame decay'd.
 And the son's son must feel the father's crime,
 A curse entail'd on all the race that rhyme.

New cares appear, new terrors swell the train,
 And must we paint them ere we close the scene?
 Say, must the Muse th' unwilling task pursue,
 And to compleat her dangers mention you?
 Yes you, my friend, and those whose kind regard
 With partial fondness views this humble bard:
 Ev'n you he dreads. — Ah! kindly cease to raise
 Unwilling censure, by exacting praise.

Just to itself the jealous world will claim
 A right to judge; or give, or cancel fame.
 And, if th' officious zeal unbounded flows,
 The friend too partial is the worst of foes.

e Behold th' ATHENIAN sage, whose piercing mind
 Had trac'd the wily lab'rins of mankind,
 When now condemn'd, he leaves his infant care
 To all those evils man is born to bear.
 Not to his friends alone the charge he yields,
 But nobler hopes on juster motives builds;
 Bids e'en his foes their future steps attend,
 And dare to censure, if they dar'd offend.
 Wou'd thus the poet trust his offspring forth,
 Or bloom'd our BRITAIN with ATHENIAN worth;

e *Platonis Apologia.*

Wou'd



Wou'd the brave foe th' imperfect work engage
 With honest freedom, not with partial rage,
 What just productions might the world surprize !
 What other POPES, what other MAROS rise !

But since by foes, or friends, alike deceiv'd,
 Too little those, and these too much believ'd ;
 Since the same fate pursues by diff'rent ways,
 Undone by censure, or undone by praise ;
 Since bards themselves submit to vice's rule,
 And party-feuds grow high, and patrons cool :
 Since, still unnam'd, unnumber'd ills behind
 Rise black in air, and only wait the wind :
 Let me, O let me, ere the tempest roar,
 Catch the first gale, and make the nearest shore ;
 In sacred silence join th' inglorious train,
 Where humble peace, and sweet contentment reign ;
 If not thy precepts, thy example own,
 And steal thro' life, not useles, tho' unknown.

