

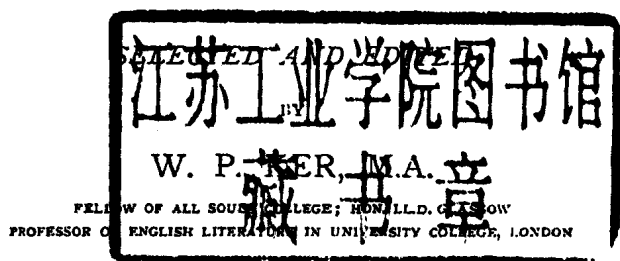
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MY LORD,

THESE Miscellany Poems are by many titles yours. The first they claim, from your acceptance of my promise to present them to you, before some of them were yet in being. The rest are derived from your own merit, the exactness of your judgment in Poetry, and the candour of your nature, easy to forgive some trivial faults, when they come accompanied with countervailing beauties. But, after all, though these are your equitable claims to a dedication from other poets, yet I must acknowledge a bribe in the case, which is your particular liking of my verses. 'Tis a vanity common to all writers, to overvalue their own productions; and 'tis better for me to own this failing in myself, than the world to do it for me. For what other reason have I spent my life in so unprofitable a study? why am I grown old, in seeking so barren a reward as fame?

The same parts and application which have made me a poet might have raised me to any honours of the gown, which are often given to men of as little learning and less honesty than myself. No Government has
5 ever been, or ever can be, wherein timeservers and blockheads will not be uppermost. The persons are only changed, but the same jugglings in State, the same hypocrisy in religion, the same self-interest and mismanagement, will remain for ever. Blood and money
10 will be lavished in all ages, only for the preferment of new faces, with old consciences. There is too often a jaundice in the eyes of great men; they see not those whom they raise in the same colours with other men. All whom they affect look golden to them, when the
15 gilding is only in their own distempered sight. These considerations have given me a kind of contempt for those who have risen by unworthy ways. I am not ashamed to be little, when I see them so infamously great; neither do I know why the name of poet should
20 be dishonourable to me, if I am truly one, as I hope I am; for I will never do any thing that shall dishonour it. The notions of morality are known to all men; none can pretend ignorance of those ideas which are inborn in mankind; and if I see one thing, and practise
25 the contrary, I must be disingenuous not to acknowledge a clear truth, and base to act against the light of my own conscience. For the reputation of my honesty, no man can question it, who has any of his own; for that of my poetry, it shall either stand by its own
30 merit, or fall for want of it. Ill writers are usually the sharpest censors; for they, as the best poet and the best patron said,

When in the full perfection of decay,
Turn vinegar, and come again in play.

35 Thus the corruption of a poet is the generation of

a critic; I mean of a critic in the general acceptation of this age; for formerly they were quite another species of men. They were defenders of poets, and commentators on their works; to illustrate obscure beauties; to place some passages in a better light; to redeem 5 others from malicious interpretations; to help out an author's modesty, who is not ostentatious of his wit; and, in short, to shield him from the ill-nature of those fellows, who were then called *Zoili* and *Momi*, and now take upon themselves the venerable name of censors. 10 But neither Zoilus, nor he who endeavoured to defame Virgil, were ever adopted into the name of critics by the Ancients; what their reputation was then, we know; and their successors in this age deserve no better. Are our auxiliary forces turned our enemies? are they, 15 who at best are but wits of the second order, and whose only credit amongst readers is what they obtained by being subservient to the fame of writers, are these become rebels, of slaves, and usurpers, of subjects? or, to speak in the most honourable terms 20 of them, are they from our seconds become principals against us? Does the ivy undermine the oak which supports its weakness? What labour would it cost them to put in a better line, than the worst of those which they expunge in a true poet? Petronius, the 25 greatest wit perhaps of all the Romans, yet when his envy prevailed upon his judgment to fall on Lucan, he fell himself in his attempt; he performed worse in his *Essay of the Civil War* than the author of the *Pharsalia*; and, avoiding his errors, has made greater of his own. 30 Julius Scaliger would needs turn down Homer, and abdicate him after the possession of three thousand years: has he succeeded in his attempt? He has indeed shown us some of those imperfections in him, which are incident to humankind; but who had not rather be that 35

Homer than this Scaliger? You see the same hyper-critic, when he endeavours to mend the beginning of Claudian, (a faulty poet, and living in a barbarous age,) yet how short he comes of him, and substitutes such
 5 verses of his own as deserve the ferula. What a censure has he made of Lucan, that "he rather seems to bark than sing"! Would any but a dog have made so snarling a comparison? one would have thought he had learned Latin as late as they tell us he did Greek.
 10 Yet he came off, with a *pace tuâ*, "by your good leave, Lucan"; he called him not by those outrageous names, of *fool*, *booby*, and *blockhead*: he had somewhat more of good manners than his successors, as he had much more knowledge. We have two sorts of those gentle-
 15 men in our nation; some of them, proceeding with a seeming moderation and pretence of respect to the dramatic writers of the last age, only scorn and vilify the present poets, to set up their predecessors. But this is only in appearance; for their real design is
 20 nothing less than to do honour to any man, besides themselves. Horace took notice of such men in his age—

*Non ingeniis favet ille sepultis,
 Nostra sed impugnat; nos nostraque lividus odit.*

25 'Tis not with an ultimate intention to pay reverence to the *Manes* of Shakespeare, Fletcher, and Ben Johnson, that they commend their writings, but to throw dirt on the writers of this age: their declaration is one thing, and their practice is another. By
 30 a seeming veneration to our fathers, they would thrust out us, their lawful issue, and govern us themselves, under a specious pretence of reformation. If they could compass their intent, what would wit and learning get by such a change? If we are bad poets, they
 35 are worse; and when any of their woful pieces come

abroad, the difference is so great betwixt them and good writers, that there need no criticisms on our part to decide it. When they describe the writers of this age, they draw such monstrous figures of them, as resemble none of us ; our pretended pictures are so unlike, that 5 'tis evident we never sat to them : they are all grotesque ; the products of their wild imaginations, things out of nature ; so far from being copied from us, that they resemble nothing that ever was, or ever can be. But there is another sort of insects, more venomous than 10 the former ; those who manifestly aim at the destruction of our poetical church and state ; who allow nothing to their countrymen, either of this or of the former age. These attack the living by raking up the ashes of the dead ; well knowing that if they can subvert their 15 original title to the stage, we who claim under them must fall of course. Peace be to the venerable shades of Shakespeare and Ben Johnson ! none of the living will presume to have any competition with them ; as they were our predecessors, so they were our masters. 20 We trail our plays under them ; but as at the funerals of a Turkish emperor, our ensigns are furled or dragged upon the ground, in honour to the dead, so we may lawfully advance our own afterwards, to show that we succeed ; if less in dignity, yet on the same foot and 25 title, which we think too we can maintain against the insolence of our own Janizaries. If I am the man, as I have reason to believe, who am seemingly courted, and secretly undermined ; I think I shall be able to defend myself, when I am openly attacked ; and to 30 show, besides, that the Greek writers only gave us the rudiments of a stage which they never finished ; that many of the tragedies in the former age amongst us were without comparison beyond those of Sophocles and Euripides. But at present I have neither the 35

leisure, nor the means, for such an undertaking. 'Tis ill going to law for an estate, with him who is in possession of it, and enjoys the present profits, to feed his cause. But the *quantum mutatus* may be remembered
5 in due time. In the meanwhile, I leave the world to judge, who gave the provocation.

This, my Lord, is, I confess, a long digression, from *Miscellany Poems* to *Modern Tragedies*; but I have the ordinary excuse of an injured man, who will be telling
10 his tale unseasonably to his betters; though, at the same time, I am certain you are so good a friend, as to take a concern in all things which belong to one who so truly honours you. And besides, being yourself a critic of the genuine sort, who have read the best
15 authors in their own languages, who perfectly distinguish of their several merits, and in general prefer them to the Moderns, yet, I know, you judge for the English tragedies, against Greek and Latin, as well as against the French, Italian, and Spanish, of these latter ages.
20 Indeed, there is a vast difference betwixt arguing like Perrault, in behalf of the French poets, against Homer and Virgil, and betwixt giving the English poets their undoubted due, of excelling Æschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles. For if we, or our greater fathers, have not
25 yet brought the drama to an absolute perfection, yet at least we have carried it much further than those ancient Greeks; who, beginning from a Chorus, could never totally exclude it, as we have done; who find it an unprofitable encumbrance, without any necessity of enter-
30 taining it amongst us, and without the possibility of establishing it here, unless it were supported by a public charge. Neither can we accept of those Lay-Bishops, as some call them, who, under pretence of reforming the stage, would intrude themselves upon us, as our
35 superiors; being indeed incompetent judges of what