

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43268-0 - George Crabbe: Poems: Volume II
Edited by Adolphus William Ward
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TALES.

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TO
HER GRACE ISABELLA
DUCHESS DOWAGER OF
RUTLAND.

MADAM,

THE dedication of works of literature to persons of superior worth and eminence appears to have been a measure early adopted, and continued to the present time; so that, whatever objections have been made to the language of dedicators, such addresses must be considered as perfectly consistent with reason and propriety; in fact, superior rank and elevated situation in life naturally and justly claim such respect, and it is the prerogative of greatness to give countenance and favour to all who appear to merit and to need them; it is likewise the prerogative of every kind of superiority and celebrity, of personal merit when peculiar or extraordinary, of dignity, elegance, wealth, and beauty, certainly of superior intellect and intellectual acquirements; every such kind of eminence has its privilege, and, being itself an object of distinguished approbation, it gains attention for whomsoever its possessor distinguishes and approves.

Yet the causes and motives for an address of this kind rest not entirely with the merit of the patron, the feelings of the author himself having their weight and consideration in the choice he makes: he may have gratitude for benefits received, or pride not illaudable in aspiring to the favour of those whose

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notice confers honour ; or he may entertain a secret but strong desire of seeing a name in the entrance of his work which he is accustomed to utter with peculiar satisfaction, and to hear mentioned with veneration and delight.

Such, madam, are the various kinds of eminence for which an author on these occasions would probably seek, and they meet in your grace ; such too are the feelings by which he would be actuated, and they centre in me : let me therefore entreat your grace to take this book into your favour and protection, and to receive it as an offering of the utmost respect and duty, from,

May it please Your Grace,

Your Grace's

Most obedient, humble,

And devoted servant,

GEORGE CRABBE.

Muston, July 31, 1812.

PREFACE.

THAT the appearance of the present work before the public is occasioned by a favourable reception of the former two, I hesitate not to acknowledge; because, while the confession may be regarded as some proof of gratitude, or at least of attention from an author to his readers, it ought not to be considered as an indication of vanity. It is unquestionably very pleasant to be assured that our labours are well received; but, nevertheless, this must not be taken for a just and full criterion of their merit: publications of great intrinsic value have been met with so much coolness, that a writer who succeeds in obtaining some degree of notice should look upon himself rather as one favoured than meritorious, as gaining a prize from Fortune, and not a recompense for desert; and, on the contrary, as it is well known that books of very inferior kind have been at once pushed into the strong current of popularity, and are there kept buoyant by the force of the stream, the writer who acquires not this adventitious help may be reckoned rather as unfortunate than undeserving; and from these opposite considerations it follows, that a man may speak of his success without incurring justly the odium of conceit, and may likewise acknowledge a disappointment without an adequate cause for humiliation or self-reproach.

But were it true that something of the complacency of self-approbation would insinuate itself into an author's mind with the idea of success, the sensation would not be that of unalloyed pleasure; it would perhaps assist him to bear, but it would not enable him to escape, the mortification he must encounter from censures, which, though he may be unwilling to admit, yet he finds himself unable to confute; as well as from advice, which, at the same time that he cannot but approve, he is compelled to reject.

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Reproof and advice, it is probable, every author will receive, if we except those who merit so much of the former, that the latter is contemptuously denied them; now of these, reproof, though it may cause more temporary uneasiness, will in many cases create less difficulty, since errors may be corrected when opportunity occurs; but advice, I repeat, may be of such nature, that it will be painful to reject, and yet impossible to follow it; and in this predicament I conceive myself to be placed. There has been recommended to me, and from authority which neither inclination nor prudence leads me to resist, in any new work I might undertake, an unity of subject, and that arrangement of my materials which connects the whole and gives additional interest to every part; in fact, if not an Epic Poem, strictly so denominated, yet such composition as would possess a regular succession of events, and a catastrophe to which every incident should be subservient, and which every character, in a greater or less degree, should conspire to accomplish.

In a Poem of this nature, the principal and inferior characters in some degree resemble a general and his army, where no one pursues his peculiar objects and adventures, [but] pursues them in unison with the movements and grand purposes of the whole body; where there is a community of interests and a subordination of actors; and it was upon this view of the subject, and of the necessity for such distribution of persons and events, that I found myself obliged to relinquish an undertaking, for which the characters I could command, and the adventures I could describe, were altogether unfitted.

But if these characters which seemed to be at my disposal were not such as would coalesce into one body, nor were of a nature to be commanded by one mind, so neither on examination did they appear as an unconnected multitude, accidentally collected, to be suddenly dispersed; but rather beings of whom might be formed groups and smaller societies, the relations of whose adventures and pursuits might bear that kind of similitude to an Heroic Poem, which these minor associations of men (as pilgrims on the way to their saint, or parties in search of amusement, travellers excited by curiosity, or adventurers in pursuit of gain) have in points of connexion and importance with a regular and disciplined army.

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Allowing this comparison, it is manifest that while much is lost for want of unity of subject and grandeur of design, something is gained by greater variety of incident and more minute display of character, by accuracy of description and diversity of scene: in these narratives we pass from gay to grave, from lively to severe, not only without impropriety, but with manifest advantage. In one continued and connected Poem, the reader is, in general, highly gratified or severely disappointed; by many independent narratives, he has the renovation of hope, although he has been dissatisfied, and a prospect of reiterated pleasure, should he find himself entertained.

I mean not, however, to compare these different modes of writing as if I were balancing their advantages and defects before I could give preference to either; with me the way I take is not a matter of choice, but of necessity; I present not my Tales to the reader as if I had chosen the best method of ensuring his approbation, but as using the only means I possessed of engaging his attention.

It may probably be remarked that Tales, however dissimilar, might have been connected by some associating circumstance to which the whole number might bear equal affinity, and that examples of such union are to be found in Chaucer, in Boccace, and other collectors and inventors of Tales, which, considered in themselves, are altogether independent; and to this idea I gave so much consideration as convinced me that I could not avail myself of the benefit of such artificial mode of affinity. To imitate the English poet, characters must be found adapted to their several relations, and this is a point of great difficulty and hazard; much allowance seems to be required even for Chaucer himself, since it is difficult to conceive that on any occasion the devout and delicate Prioress, the courtly and valiant Knight, and “the poure good Man the persone of a Towne,” would be the voluntary companions of the drunken Miller, the licentious Sompnour, and “the Wanton Wife of Bath,” and enter into that colloquial and travelling intimacy which, if a common pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas may be said to excuse, I know nothing beside (and certainly nothing in these times) that would produce such effect. Boccace, it is true, avoids all difficulty of this kind, by not assigning to

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the ten relators of his hundred Tales any marked or peculiar characters ; nor, though there are male and female in company, can the sex of the narrator be distinguished in the narration. To have followed the method of Chaucer might have been of use, but could scarcely be adopted, from its difficulty ; and to have taken that of the Italian writer would have been perfectly easy, but could be of no service : the attempt at union therefore has been relinquished, and these relations are submitted to the public, connected by no other circumstance than their being the productions of the same author, and devoted to the same purpose, the entertainment of his readers.

It has been already acknowledged, that these compositions have no pretensions to be estimated with the more lofty and heroic kind of poems, but I feel great reluctance in admitting that they have not a fair and legitimate claim to the poetic character. In vulgar estimation, indeed, all that is not prose passes for poetry ; but I have not ambition of so humble a kind as to be satisfied with a concession which requires nothing in the poet, except his ability for counting syllables ; and I trust something more of the poetic character will be allowed to the succeeding pages than what the heroes of the *Dunciad* might share with the author ; nor was I aware that by describing, as faithfully as I could, men, manners, and things, I was forfeiting a just title to a name which has been freely granted to many whom to equal, and even to excel, is but very stinted commendation.

In this case it appears that the usual comparison between poetry and painting entirely fails : the artist who takes an accurate likeness of individuals, or a faithful representation of scenery, may not rank so high in the public estimation as one who paints an historical event, or an heroic action ; but he is nevertheless a painter, and his accuracy is so far from diminishing his reputation, that it procures for him in general both fame and emolument ; nor is it perhaps with strict justice determined that the credit and reputation of those verses which strongly and faithfully delineate character and manners, should be lessened in the opinion of the public by the very accuracy which gives value and distinction to the productions of the pencil.

Nevertheless, it must be granted that the pretensions of any

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composition to be regarded as poetry will depend upon that definition of the poetic character which he who undertakes to determine the question has considered as decisive ; and it is confessed also that one of great authority may be adopted, by which the verses now before the reader, and many others which have probably amused and delighted him, must be excluded : a definition like this will be found in the words which the greatest of poets, not divinely inspired, has given to the most noble and valiant Duke of Athens—

“The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
 “Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven ;
 “And as Imagination bodies forth
 “The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
 “Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
 “A local habitation, and a name¹.”

Hence we observe the poet is one who, in the excursions of his fancy between heaven and earth, lights upon a kind of fairy-land, in which he places a creation of his own, where he embodies shapes, and gives action and adventure to his ideal offspring ; taking captive the imagination of his readers, he elevates them above the grossness of actual being, into the soothing and pleasant atmosphere of supra-mundane existence : there he obtains for his visionary inhabitants the interest that engages a reader’s attention without ruffling his feelings, and excites that moderate kind of sympathy which the realities of nature oftentimes fail to produce, either because they are so familiar and insignificant that they excite no determinate emotion, or are so harsh and powerful that the feelings excited are grating and distasteful.

Be it then granted that (as Duke Theseus observes) “such tricks hath strong Imagination,” and that such poets “are of imagination all compact ;” let it be further conceded, that theirs is a higher and more dignified kind of composition, nay, the only kind that has pretensions to inspiration : still, that these poets should so entirely engross the title as to exclude those who address their productions to the plain sense and sober judgment of their readers, rather than to their fancy and imagination, I must repeat that I am unwilling to admit—because I conceive

¹ *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act V. Scene 1.

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that, by granting such right of exclusion, a vast deal of what has been hitherto received as genuine poetry would no longer be entitled to that appellation.

All that kind of satire wherein character is skilfully delineated must (this criterion being allowed) no longer be esteemed as genuine poetry; and for the same reason many affecting narratives which are founded on real events, and borrow no aid whatever from the imagination of the writer, must likewise be rejected: a considerable part of the poems, as they have hitherto been denominated, of Chaucer, are of this naked and unveiled character; and there are in his *Tales* many pages of coarse, accurate, and minute, but very striking description. Many small poems in a subsequent age, of most impressive kind, are adapted and addressed to the common sense of the reader, and prevail by the strong language of truth and nature; they amused our ancestors, and they continue to engage our interest, and excite our feelings, by the same powerful appeals to the heart and affections. In times less remote, Dryden has given us much of this poetry, in which the force of expression and accuracy of description have neither needed nor obtained assistance from the fancy of the writer; the characters in his *Absalom* and *Achitophel* are instances of this, and more especially those of *Doeg* and *Og* in the second part: these, with all their grossness, and almost offensive accuracy, are found to possess that strength and spirit which has preserved from utter annihilation the dead bodies of *Tate*, to whom they were inhumanly bound, happily with a fate the reverse of that caused by the cruelty of *Mezentius*; for there the living perished in the putrefaction of the dead, and here the dead are preserved by the vitality of the living. And, to bring forward one other example, it will be found that *Pope* himself has no small portion of this actuality of relation, this nudity of description, and poetry without an atmosphere; the lines beginning, "In the worst inn's worst room," are an example, and many others may be seen in his *Satires*, *Imitations*, and above all in his *Dunciad*: the frequent absence of those "Sports of Fancy," and "Tricks of strong Imagination," have been so much observed, that some have ventured to question whether even this writer were a poet; and though, as *Dr. Johnson* has remarked, it would be difficult to form a definition of one in which *Pope* should not