

Appendix 5.9: From Thomas James Mathias, *The Pursuits of Literature* (1794–1797)

The Pursuits of Literature is a series of four verse dialogues with notes, first published over four years, 1794–1797, and in many subsequent editions thereafter.

Thomas James Mathias (1753/4–1835) was a satirist and Italian scholar. He held progressively higher-ranked positions in the queen's treasury and later became librarian at the queen's house. He was a member of the Society of Antiquaries and a fellow of the Royal Society. *The Pursuits of Literature* is his best-known work.

The following excerpts are taken from the revised eighth edition (London: T. Becket, 1798), which collects all four dialogues and introductory matter from previous editions. The translations given in square brackets are taken from *A Translation of the passages from Greek, Latin, Italian, and French Writers, quoted in the Prefaces and Notes to the Pursuits of Literature; A Poem, in Four Dialogues* (London: T. Becket, 1798), also by Mathias.

from An Introductory Letter to A Friend of the general Subject of the following Poem on the Pursuits of Literature

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As to my poetry or versification, it was not written as a vehicle for the notes, but the notes were composed to ac-

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company the text. I offer the poetry to those who are conversant with the strength, simplicity, and dignity of Dryden and Pope,¹ and them alone. I submit both my Poems, "The Pursuits of Literature, and The Imperial Epistle,"² in this spirit and with this confidence to the publick. There are men, (and women too) who understand. But as to the lovers of exotick poetry, I refer them to the Botanick Garden of Dr. Darwin. My plants and flowers are produced and cherished by the natural invigorating influence of the common sun; I have not raised them by artificial heat.

If the root of a tree is sound and vigorous, you strengthen the shoots by repressing their luxuriance. I approve and would uphold our sacred and civil establishment. I would *therefore* mark the aberrations and misconduct even of men of talents and virtue, who compose it.

from Dialogue the First (lines 75–88)

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No: though in vain I may attempt to please,

I'll write with learning what I think with ease.

What?—from the Muse, by *cryptogamick* stealth,(v)
Must I purloin her native sterling wealth?

(v) See “The Botanick Garden and the Loves of the Plants, by Dr. Darwin.” I wish men would peruse the treatise *de Causis Corruptæ Eloquentiæ*,‡ [A treatise on the Causes why Eloquence has been so much corrupted] before they attempt by prettinesses, glittering words, points, conceits, and forced thoughts, to sacrifice propriety and just imagery to the rage of mere novelty. This will always be the case, when writers in prose, or verse (if I may be allowed to use Sancho’s phrase a little metaphorically) “want better bread than is made of wheat.”³ Modern ears are absolutely *debauched* by such poetry as Dr. Darwin’s, which marks the decline of simplicity and true taste in this country. It is to England, what Seneca’s prose was to Rome. Abundat *dulcibus* vitiis.† [He abounds with luscious faults.]

Dryden and Pope are the standards of excellence in this species of writing in our language; and when young minds

‡ Printed at the end of Tacitus, under the title “Dialogus de Oratoribus”, one of the most finished treatises of antiquity.⁴

† Quintil. lib. 10. c. I⁵

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In filmy, gawzy, gossamery lines,
With *lucid* language, and most dark designs, 80
In sweet *tetrandryan*, *monogynian* strains,
Pant for a *pystill* in botanick pains;
On the luxurious lap of Flora thrown,
On beds of yielding vegetable down,
Raise lust in pinks; and with unhallow'd fire
Bid the soft virgin violet expire? (x)

Is it for me to creep, or soar, or doze,
In modish song, or fashionable prose? (y)

are rightly instituted in their works, they may, without much danger, read such glittering verses as Dr. Darwin’s. They will then perceive the distortion of the sentiment, and the harlotry of the ornaments. It would also be a happy thing for all naturalists, whether poets or writers in prose, if they would in the words of a true poet, “Look through nature up to Nature’s *God!*”⁶ Dr. Darwin is certainly a man of great fancy; but I will not cease to repeat, that good writing and good poetry require something more.

Ου γαρ ενμοσοισι κειται
Δωρα δυσμαχητα Μοισᾶν
Τω ’πιτυχοντι φερειν

[The gifts of the Muses are not offered to every one who passes by, as common favours; they must be sought after, and obtained with difficulty.]⁷

(x) I would just hint that it is a matter of some curiosity to me to conceive, how young ladies are instructed in the terms of botany, which are *very significant*.

Dialogue the Second, lines 45–8

[p. 115]

Memory I have [...]
Plays I could frame [...]
Could sing of gardens, yet well pleas'd to see
Walpole (*l*) and Nature may, for once, agree;
Could give with Darwin, to the hecktick kind,
Receipts in verse to shift the north-east wind (*m*)

[...]

(*l*) Read (it well deserves the attention) that quaint, but most curious and learned, writer's excellent Essay on Modern Gardening, at the end of his Lives of the Painters.⁸

(*m*) See Dr. Darwin's Loves of the Plants, and a long and pleasant note, in which the Doctor thinks it very feasible to

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manage the winds,⁹ (and every thing else I believe) at *his* pleasure, *by a little philosophy*. I never read any thing so comfortable in my life. Martinus Scriblerus¹⁰ will be, after all, a legitimate natural philosopher. It appears to me, that Dr. Darwin's *ingenious* understanding is peculiarly adapted to solve the following problem in *natural* philosophy: "WHETHER, *the hybernal frigidity of the Antipodes, passing in an orthogonal line through the homogeneous solidity of the center, might warm the superficial connexity of our heels by a soft antiperistasis?*" I have given a translation of this great and useful problem, (as the French Philosopher Pantagruel¹¹ is not quite so intelligible in the original,) that Dr. Darwin may discuss it at large in the next edition of his *Zoonomia*, which is much to be desired. I refer the reader to the "Creme Philosophique des Questions Encyclopedique," at the end of Rabelais Book 5.¹² The *true cream* of their *modern* Encyclopedie is to be found in the French Revolution, 1789, &c.

from Dialogue the Third, note to line 31

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Thomas Taylor¹³ [...] the would-be restorer of unintelligible mysticism and superstitious pagan nonsense [...] in conjunction with Dr. Darwin, might solve the

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following problem: "WHETHER *a Platonick idea, hovering to the right on the orifice of chaos, might drive away the squadrons of democratical atoms?*" ["] Rabelais, at the end of book 5.¹⁴ *Questions Philosophiques*. For my own part I am not disposed to go any further, as Lycophron, Cassand. v. 14,¹⁵ expresses it, Λοξων ες επων.¹⁶ [Into all the meandrings of verbal obliquity].

from Dialogue the Third, note to line 177

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[on *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) by William Godwin (1756–1836), radical philosopher and novelist]

The first trait of the work is, a certain cold-blooded indifference to all the mild, pious, and honourable feelings of our common nature, like all the Philosophers of the new Sect. The next thing observable, is a most affectionate concern and regard for the welfare of mankind, who are to exist *some centuries hence*, when the *endless perfectibility of the human species* (for such is their jargon) shall receive *its completion* on earth; when the disciples of Dr. Darwin have learned to *manage the winds* and direct their currents at pleasure, and the descendants of Abbè Sieyès¹⁷ have calmed the waves of a stormy people with the essential oil of democracy.

¹ John Dryden (1631–1700) and Alexander Pope (1688–1744), neoclassical poets.

² Mathias's *The Imperial Epistle from Kien Long, Emperor of China, to George the Third* (1795), a satire.

³ A reference to *Don Quixote*, Book 4, Chapter 15. Sancho is Don Quixote's down-to-earth squire.

⁴ *De causis corruptae eloquentiae* [On the causes of the corruption of eloquence] by Roman rhetorician Quintilian (c.35/40–c.96 CE) is not extant. It was once thought to be the *Dialogus de oratoribus* [Dialogue on orators] now attributed to Tacitus.

⁵ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* [The Orator's Education], Book 10, Chapter 1, 130, in the section on Roman author Seneca the Younger.

⁶ Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man* (1733–1734), Epistle 4, line 332.

⁷ Mathias does not give a source for these Greek lines.

⁸ Horace Walpole published *Essay on Modern Gardening* in the fourth volume of his *Anecdotes of Painting* (1780).

⁹ Not in *LOTP* but *The Economy of Vegetation* IV:305–20, specifically IV:308n.

¹⁰ An imaginary pedant and antiquarian invented by the Scriblerus Club, of which Alexander Pope was a member. Among other writings the group attributed to "Martinus Scriblerus" are "Prolegomena" and many of the notes to Pope's *Dunciad Variorum* (1729), a mock-epic satire of contemporary writers.

¹¹ Hero of *Pantagruel* (1532) by French satirist François Rabelais (1483–1553), and of the following books in his series *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel* (1532–1564). He is initially a very thirsty giant and develops into an embodiment of cheerful wisdom.

¹² *La Chresme Philosophale des Questions Encyclopediques de Pantagruel*, attributed to Rabelais, translated as *The Philosophical Cream of Encyclopedic Questions by Pantagruel* in *The Works of Francis Rabelais, M.D.*, Vol. 5 (1737, pp. 234–36), edited and translated by John Ozell (d. 1743). The quotation above is one of the satirical questions; Mathias gives Ozell's translation.

¹³ Thomas Taylor (1758–1835) published many translations of ancient philosophers beginning in 1787, and had a particular enthusiasm for Neoplatonism.

¹⁴ Also one of the satirical questions in *La Chresme Philosophale*, given in Ozell's translation. Interestingly, "Democriticques" [Democritean], alluding to the atomist theory of Democritus, is translated as "democratical."

¹⁵ Pseudo-Lycophron, a Hellenistic writer of the early 2nd century BCE, probably borrowed his name and some material from the earlier Lycophron of the early 3rd century BCE, a Hellenistic writer from Alexandria. The monodrama *Alexandra* refers to events of 197 BCE. It is a prophecy by Cassandra framed by the report of a guard assigned to watch her. Mathias's reference is to line 14.

¹⁶ In Mathias's *A Translation*, the full Greek phrase is given: Λοξων ες διεξοδῶς επων.

¹⁷ Emmanuel-Joseph Siéyès (1748–1836), author and politician in the Revolutionary assemblies in France. He was one of the drafters of the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1798.