MARGINAL NOTES BY LORD MACAULAY

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Marginal Notes by Lord Macaulay by Thomas Babington Macaulay

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LORD MACAULAY

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SIR GEORGE OTTO TREVELYAN, BART.

AUTHOR OF

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MACAULAY'S library contained many books, of no great intrinsic value in themselves, which are readable, from the first page to the last, for the sake of his manuscript notes inscribed in immense profusion down their margins. He was contented, when the humour took him, to amuse his solitary hours with such productions as Percival Stockdale's memoirs, and the six volumes of Miss Anna Seward's Letters. His running commentary on those trivial and pretentious authors was as the breaking of a butterfly beneath the impact of a cheerful steam-hammer. "Ingenious," (so Miss Seward wrote to a correspondent,) "is your parallel between the elder and the modern Erasmus." "The modern Erasmus," said Macaulay, "is Darwin. That anybody should have thought of making a parallel between him and the elder Erasmus is odd indeed. They had nothing but the name in common. One might as well make a parallel between Cæsar and Sir Cæsar Hawkins." "The chief amusement," wrote Miss Seward, "that the

Inferno gives me is from tracing the plagiarisms which have been made from it by more interesting and pleasing bards than Dante; since there is little for the heart, or even for the curiosity as to story, in this poem. Then the plan is most clumsily arranged:—Virgil, and the three talking quadrupeds, as guides! An odd association!" "What can she mean?" said Macaulay. "She must allude to the panther, the lion, and the she-wolf in the First Canto. But they are not guides; and they do not talk."

The lady, who claimed rank as a Lyric poet, had published what she called a paraphrase of Horace's Odes without knowing a word of Horace's native language. Her version, which is inconceivably bad, was based upon an English translation by the Reverend Philip Francis; and from that time forward she always considered herself entitled to lay down the law on classical questions. "Pleasant Mrs. Piozzi," she said, "is somewhat ignorant upon poetic subjects. She speaks of ode-writing as an inferior species of composition, which can place no man on a level with the epic, the dramatic, or the didactic bard. Now the rank of the lyric poet, as settled by the ancients, succeeds immediately to that of the epic. She ought to know that the Latins place their lyric Horace next to their epic Virgil, much more on account of his

odes than of his satires." "What Latins?" asked Macaulay. "There is not a word of the sort in any Latin writer." Macaulay, who was a purist in spelling, took exception to Miss Seward calling a speech a "Phillipic," and seldom speaking of a pretty girl except as a "Syren;" and he was always greatly puzzled by the references in her letters to her collection of "centennial" sonnets. At length he caught her meaning. "Now I understand. She calls her sonnets 'centennial' because there were a hundred of them. Was ever such pedantry found in company with such ignorance?"

It was worse with French than with Greek and Latin; and worst of all with English. "My conviction was perfect," (Miss Seward wrote to a lady friend,) "that you would all four be delightful acquisitions to each other. I might travel far ere I should find so interesting a *parté quarré*." "What language is that?" said Macaulay. He was soon to know. A year later Miss Seward received from her friend what she praises as a graceful and sparkling epistle. "It speaks of a plan in agitation to visit me, accompanied by Helen Williams, the poetic; Albinia Mathias, the musical; and Miss Maylin, the beauteous." "So this," exclaimed Macaulay, "is the *parté quarré*. She did not know that a *partie carrée* means a party

of two gentlemen and two ladies." Macaulay was at some pains to correct Miss Seward's grammar. "Come, my dear Lady, let you and I attend these gentlemen in the study!" That was Miss Seward's report of Doctor Johnson's words. "Nay:" observed Macaulay; "Johnson said *me*, I will be sworn." Miss Seward characterised some sonnets, in the style of Petrarch, as "Avignon little gems." "Little Avignon gems, if you please, Miss Seward!" is the comment in the margin. "So the brilliant Sophia," remarked the lady, "has commenced Babylonian!" "That is to say," explained Macaulay, "she has taken a house in town." "Taste," said Miss Seward on one occasion, "is extremely various. Where good sense, metaphoric consistency, or the rules of grammar are accused of having suffered violation, the cause may not be tried at her arbitrary tribunal." "A most striking instance," wrote Macaulay, "of metaphoric inconsistency. You may accuse a bad writer of violating good sense and grammar; but who can accuse good sense and grammar of having suffered violation?"[1]

[1] Macaulay was never implacable when a woman was concerned,—even a woman who could describe a country-house as an "Edenic villa in a bloomy garden." Miss Seward, after her father's death, gave a friend an account of his long illness. "The pleasure he took in my attendance and caresses survived till within the last three months. His reply to my inquiries after his health was always 'Pretty well, my darling;' and,—when I gave him his food and his

That will serve for a specimen of the manner in which Macaulay diverted himself with the follies of a silly author. A good book was very differently handled. It is a rare privilege to journey in his track through the higher regions of literature. His favourite volumes are illustrated and enlivened by innumerable entries, of which none are prolix, pointless, or dull; while interest and admiration are expressed by lines drawn down the sides of the text,—and even by double lines, for whole pages together, in the case of Shakspeare and Aristophanes, Demosthenes and Plato, Paul Louis Courier and Jonathan Swift. His standard of excellence was always at the same level, his mind always on the alert, and his sense of enjoyment always keen. Frederic Myers, himself a fine scholar and an eager student, once said to me: "He seems habitually to have read as I read only during my first half-hour with a great author." Macaulay began with the frontispiece, if the book possessed one. "Said to be very like, and certainly full of the character. Energy, acuteness, tyranny, and audacity in every line of the face." Those words are written above the portrait of Richard Bentley, in Bishop Monk's

wine,—'That's my darling!' with a smile of comfort and delight inexpressibly dear to my heart. I often used to ask him if he loved me. His almost constant answer was, 'Do I love my own eyes?'" "Why," (asked Macaulay,) "could she not always write thus?"