

OF VERS DE SOCIETE

In the letter "Of Vers De Societe" addressed to Mr. Gifted Hopkins, the writer critiques Hopkins's poem "To Delia in Girton," advising against his attempt at society verses, highlighting the challenge of this genre even for the ancients who excelled in other poetic forms. The writer navigates through historical and cultural contexts, from Theocritus's AEolic verses, emblematic of tasteful gift-giving and unobtrusive flattery, to the limitations observed in Roman and Greek poetry, where societal norms restricted the themes and expressions suitable for 'society verses.'

The writer expresses admiration for the precise yet limited application of vers de societe in ancient times, marked by cultural constraints and a different understanding of women's roles. The scrutiny extends to Roman poetry, where Catullus's passionate expressions and Horace's reflections on life and politics, albeit in delicate form, diverge from the essence of 'society verses' – light, decorous, yet thoughtful. Horace's subtle playfulness is noted as a closer match, yet the writer suggests that the true spirit of society verse seldom surged in Roman poetics, restrained by customs and a more grave contemplation of life's brevity.

Ovid's work is briefly entertained for its lighter touch and playful approach, pointing out the balance between elegant jest and sentimentality, a characteristic deemed essential for successful vers de societe. However, Ovid's inclination towards a monotone style disqualifies him from mastering this delicate art form. The letter criticizes the necessity for variety and subtleness in tone, qualities that evade many despite their literary prowess.

The letter briefly traverses modern interpretations, challenging the prevailing norms and celebrating the finesse required to captivate with brevity and wit. Martial is extolled for combining humor with a personal touch, although his content often strays far from being socially acceptable today. The writer emphasizes the uniqueness of successfully mastering society verse, underlining it as a pursuit for the genuinely gifted, hinting at Hopkins's potential yet advising a cautious refinement of his craft in aligning with societal elegance and subtlety.