

SAMUEL JOHNSON

LIVES OF THE ENGLISH
POETS : PRIOR,
CONGREVE,
BLACKMORE, POPE

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Johnson S.

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INTRODUCTION

When, at the age of sixty-eight, Johnson was writing these “Lives of the English Poets,” he had caused omissions to be made from the poems of Rochester, and was asked whether he would allow the printers to give all the verse of Prior. Boswell quoted a censure by Lord Hailes of “those impure tales which will be the eternal opprobrium of their ingenious author.” Johnson replied, “Sir, Lord Hailes has forgot. There is nothing in Prior that will excite to lewdness;” and when Boswell further urged, he put his questionings aside, and added, “No, sir, Prior is a lady’s book. No lady is ashamed to have it standing in her library.” Johnson distinguished strongly, as every wise man does, between offence against convention, and offence against morality.

In Congreve’s plays he recognised the wit but condemned the morals, and in the case of Blackmore the regard for the religious purpose of Blackmore’s poem on “The Creation” gave to Johnson, as to Addison, an undue sense of its literary value.

With his “Life of Pope,” which occupies more than two-thirds of this volume, Johnson took especial pains. “He wrote it,” says Boswell, “*con amore*,” both from the early possession which that writer had taken of his mind, and from the pleasure which he must have felt in for ever silencing all attempts to lessen his poetical fame. . . . I remember once to have heard Johnson say, ‘Sir, a thousand years may elapse before there shall appear another man with a power of versification equal to that of Pope.’”

Pope’s laurel, since Johnson’s days, has flourished, without showing a dead bough, for all the frosts of hostile criticism.

H. M.

PRIOR

Matthew Prior is one of those that have burst out from an obscure original to great eminence.

He was born July 21, 1664, according to some, at Wimborne, in Dorsetshire, of I know not what parents; others say that he was the son of a joiner of London: he was perhaps willing enough to leave his birth unsettled, in hope, like Don Quixote, that the historian of his actions might find him some illustrious alliance. He is supposed to have fallen, by his father's death, into the hands of his uncle, a vintner near Charing Cross, who sent him for some time to Dr. Busby, at Westminster; but, not intending to give him any education beyond that of the school, took him, when he was well advanced in literature, to his own house, where the Earl of Dorset, celebrated for patronage of genius, found him by chance, as Burnet relates, reading Horace, and was so well pleased with his proficiency, that he undertook the care and cost of his academical education. He entered his name in St. John's College, at Cambridge, in 1682, in his eighteenth year; and it may be reasonably supposed that he was distinguished among his contemporaries. He became a Bachelor, as is usual, in four years, and two years afterwards wrote the poem on the Deity, which stands first in his volume.

It is the established practice of that College to send every year to the Earl of Exeter some poems upon sacred subjects, in acknowledgment of a benefaction enjoyed by them from the bounty of his ancestor. On this occasion were those verses written, which, though nothing is said of their success, seem to have recommended him to some notice; for his praise of the countess's music, and his lines on the famous picture of Seneca, afford reason for imagining that he was more or less conversant with that family.

The same year he published "The City Mouse and Country Mouse," to ridicule Dryden's "Hind and Panther," in conjunction with Mr. Montague. There is a story of great pain suffered, and of tears shed, on this occasion by Dryden, who thought it hard that "an old man should be so treated by those to whom he had always been civil." By tales like these is the envy raised by superior abilities every day gratified. When they are attacked every one hopes to see them humbled; what is hoped is readily believed, and what is believed is confidently told. Dryden had been more accustomed to hostilities than that such enemies should break his quiet; and, if we can suppose him vexed, it would be hard to deny him sense enough to conceal his uneasiness.

"The City Mouse and Country Mouse" procured its authors more solid advantages than the pleasure of fretting Dryden, for they were both speedily preferred. Montague, indeed, obtained the first notice with some degree of discontent, as it seems, in Prior, who probably knew that his own part of the performance was the best. He had not, however, much reason to complain, for he came to London and obtained such notice that (in 1691) he was sent to the Congress at the Hague as secretary to the embassy. In this assembly of princes and nobles, to which Europe has perhaps scarcely seen anything equal, was formed the grand alliance against Louis, which at last did not produce effects proportionate so the magnificence of the transaction.

The conduct of Prior, in this splendid initiation into public business, was so pleasing to King William, that he made him one of the gentlemen of his bedchamber; and he is supposed to have passed some of the next years in the quiet cultivation of literature and poetry.

The death of Queen Mary (in 1695) produced a subject for all the writers—perhaps no funeral was ever so poetically attended. Dryden, indeed, as a man discountenanced and deprived, was silent; but scarcely any other maker of verses omitted to bring his tribute of tuneful sorrow. An emulation of elegy was universal. Mary's praise was not confined to the English language, but fills a great part of the *Musæ Anglicanæ*.

Prior, who was both a poet and a courtier, was too diligent to miss this opportunity of respect.

He wrote a long ode, which was presented to the king, by whom it was not likely to be ever read. In two years he was secretary to another embassy at the Treaty of Ryswick (in 1697), and next year had

the same office at the court of France, where he is said to have been considered with great distinction.

As he was one day surveying the apartments at Versailles, being shown the “Victories of Louis,” painted by Le Brun, and asked whether the King of England’s palace had any such decorations: “The monuments of my master’s actions,” said he, “are to be seen everywhere but in his own house.”

The pictures of Le Brun are not only in themselves sufficiently ostentatious, but were explained by inscriptions so arrogant, that Boileau and Racine thought it necessary to make them more simple.

He was in the following year at Leo with the king, from whom, after a long audience, he carried orders to England, and upon his arrival became Under Secretary of State in the Earl of Jersey’s office, a post which he did not retain long, because Jersey was removed, but he was soon made Commissioner of Trade.

This year (1700) produced one of his longest and most splendid compositions, the “Carmen Seculare,” in which he exhausts all his powers of celebration. I mean not to accuse him of flattery; he probably thought all that he writ, and retained as much veracity as can be properly exacted from a poet professedly encomiastic. King William supplied copious materials for either verse or prose. His whole life had been action, and none ever denied him the resplendent qualities of steady resolution and personal courage. He was really in Prior’s mind what he represents him in his verses; he considered him as a hero, and was accustomed to say that he praised others in compliance with the fashion, but that in celebrating King William he followed his inclination. To Prior, gratitude would dictate praise, which reason would not refuse.

Among the advantages to arise from the future years of William’s reign, he mentions a Society for Useful Arts, and among them:—

“Some that with care true eloquence shall teach,
And to just idioms fix our doubtful speech;
That from our writers distant realms may know
The thanks we to our monarchs owe,
And schools profess our tongue through every land
That has invoked his aid, or blessed his hand.”

Tickell, in his “Prospect of Peace,” has the same hope of a new academy:—

“In happy chains our daring language bound,
Shall sport no more in arbitrary sound.”

Whether the similitude of those passages, which exhibit the same thought on the same occasion, proceeded from accident or imitation, is not easy to determine. Tickell might have been impressed with his expectation by Swift’s “Proposal for Ascertaining the English Language,” then lately published.

In the Parliament that met in 1701 he was chosen representative of East Grinstead. Perhaps it was about this time that he changed his party, for he voted for the impeachment of those lords who had persuaded the king to the Partition Treaty, a treaty in which he himself had been ministerially employed.

A great part of Queen Anne’s reign was a time of war, in which there was little employment for negotiators, and Prior had, therefore, leisure to make or to polish verses. When the Battle of Blenheim called forth all the verse-men, Prior, among the rest, took care to show his delight in the increasing honour of his country by an epistle to Boileau. He published, soon afterwards, a volume of poems, with the encomiastic character of his deceased patron, the Earl of Dorset. It began with the College exercise, and ended with the “Nutbrown Maid.”

The Battle of Ramillies soon afterwards (in 1706) excited him to another effort of poetry. On this occasion he had fewer or less formidable rivals, and it would be not easy to name any other composition produced by that event which is now remembered.

Everything has its day. Through the reigns of William and Anne no prosperous event passed undignified by poetry. In the last war, when France was disgraced and overpowered in every quarter of the globe, when Spain, coming to her assistance, only shared her calamities, and the name of an Englishman was revered through Europe, no poet was heard amidst the general acclamation; the fame of our counsellors and heroes was entrusted to the *Gazetteer*. The nation in time grew weary of the war, and the queen grew weary of her ministers. The war was burdensome, and the ministers were insolent. Harley and his friends began to hope that they might, by driving the Whigs from court and from power, gratify at once the queen and the people. There was now a call for writers, who might convey intelligence of past abuses, and show the waste of public money, the unreasonable conduct of the allies, the avarice of generals, the tyranny of minions, and the general danger of approaching ruin.

For this purpose a paper called the *Examiner* was periodically published, written, as it happened, by any wit of the party, and sometimes, as is said, by Mrs. Manley. Some are owned by Swift; and one, in ridicule of Garth's verses to Godolphin upon the loss of his place, was written by Prior, and answered by Addison, who appears to have known the author either by conjecture or intelligence.

The Tories, who were now in power, were in haste to end the war, and Prior, being recalled (1710) to his former employment of making treaties, was sent (July, 1711) privately to Paris with propositions of peace. He was remembered at the French court; and, returning in about a month, brought with him the Abbé Gaultier and M. Mesnager, a minister from France, invested with full powers. This transaction not being avowed, Mackay, the master of the Dover packet-boat, either zealously or officiously, seized Prior and his associates at Canterbury. It is easily supposed they were soon released.

The negotiation was begun at Prior's house, where the queen's ministers met Mesnager (September 20, 1711), and entered privately upon the great business. The importance of Prior appears from the mention made of him by St. John in his letter to the queen:—

“My Lord Treasurer moved, and all my Lords were of the same opinion, that Mr. Prior should be added to those who are empowered to sign; the reason for which is because he, having personally treated with Monsieur de Torcy, is the best witness we can produce of the sense in which the general preliminary engagements are entered into; besides which, as he is the best versed in matters of trade of all your Majesty's servants who have been trusted in this secret, if you shall think fit to employ him in the future treaty of commerce, it will be of consequence that he has been a party concerned in concluding that convention, which must be the rule of this treaty.”

The assembly of this important night was in some degree clandestine, the design of treaty not being yet openly declared and when the Whigs returned to power was aggravated to a charge of high treason; though, as Prior remarks in his imperfect answer to the Report of the Committee of Secrecy, no treaty ever was made without private interviews and preliminary discussions.

My business is not the history of the peace, but the life of Prior. The conferences began at Utrecht on the 1st of January (1711–12), and the English plenipotentiaries arrived on the 15th.

The ministers of the different potentates conferred and conferred; but the peace advanced so slowly that speedier methods were found necessary, and Bolingbroke was sent to Paris to adjust differences with less formality. Prior either accompanied him or followed him, and after his departure had the appointments and authority of an ambassador, though no public character. By some mistake of the queen's orders the court of France had been disgusted, and Bolingbroke says in his letter, “Dear Mat, —Hide the nakedness of thy country, and give the best turn thy fertile brain will furnish thee with to the blunders of thy countrymen, who are not much better politicians than the French are poets.”

Soon after, the Duke of Shrewsbury went on a formal embassy to Paris. It is related by Boyer that the intention was to have joined Prior in the commission, but that Shrewsbury refused to be

associated with a man so meanly born. Prior therefore continued to act without a title till the duke returned next year to England, and then he assumed the style and dignity of ambassador. But while he continued in appearance a private man, he was treated with confidence by Louis, who sent him with a letter to the queen, written in favour of the Elector of Bavaria. "I shall expect," says he, "with impatience, the return of Mr. Prior, whose conduct is very agreeable to me." And while the Duke of Shrewsbury was still at Paris, Bolingbroke wrote to Prior thus:—"Monsieur de Torcy has a confidence in you; make use of it, once for all, upon this occasion, and convince him thoroughly that we must give a different turn to our Parliament and our people according to their resolution at this crisis."

Prior's public dignity and splendour commenced in August, 1713, and continued till the August following; but I am afraid that, according to the usual fate of greatness, it was attended with some perplexities and mortifications. He had not all that is customarily given to ambassadors: he hints to the queen in an imperfect poem that he had no service of plate; and it appeared by the debts which he contracted that his remittances were not punctually made.

On the 1st of August, 1714, ensued the downfall of the Tories and the degradation of Prior. He was recalled, but was not able to return, being detained by the debts which he had found it necessary to contract, and which were not discharged before March, though his old friend Montague was now at the head of the Treasury. He returned, then, as soon as he could, and was welcomed on the 25th of March by a warrant, but was, however, suffered to live in his own house, under the custody of the messenger, till he was examined before a committee of the Privy Council, of which Mr. Walpole was chairman, and Lord Coningsby, Mr. Stanhope, and Mr. Lechmere were the principal interrogators, who, in this examination, of which there is printed an account not unentertaining, behaved with the boisterousness of men elated by recent authority. They are represented as asking questions sometimes vague, sometimes insidious, and writing answers different from those which they received. Prior, however, seems to have been overpowered by their turbulence; for he confesses that he signed what, if he had ever come before a legal judicature, he should have contradicted or explained away. The oath was administered by Boscawen, a Middlesex justice, who at last was going to write his attestation on the wrong side of the paper. They were very industrious to find some charge against Oxford, and asked Prior, with great earnestness, who was present when the preliminary articles were talked of or signed at his house? He told them that either the Earl of Oxford or the Duke of Shrewsbury was absent, but he could not remember which, an answer which perplexed them, because it supplied no accusation against either. "Could anything be more absurd," says he, "or more inhuman, than to propose to me a question, by the answering of which I might, according to them, prove myself a traitor? And notwithstanding their solemn promise that nothing which I should say should hurt myself, I had no reason to trust them, for they violated that promise about five hours after. However, I owned I was there present. Whether this was wisely done or no I leave to my friends to determine."

When he had signed the paper, he was told by Walpole that the committee were not satisfied with his behaviour, nor could give such an account of it to the Commons as might merit favour; and that they now thought a stricter confinement necessary than to his own house. "Here," says he, "Boscawen played the moralist, and Coningsby the Christian, but both very awkwardly." The messenger, in whose custody he was to be placed, was then called, and very indecently asked by Coningsby "if his house was secured by bars and bolts." The messenger answered, "No," with astonishment. At which Coningsby very angrily said, "Sir, you must secure this prisoner; it is for the safety of the nation: if he escape, you shall answer for it."

They had already printed their report; and in this examination were endeavouring to find proofs.

He continued thus confined for some time; and Mr. Walpole (June 10, 1715) moved for an impeachment against him. What made him so acrimonious does not appear; he was by nature no thirster for blood. Prior was a week after committed to close custody, with orders that "no person should be admitted to see him without leave from the Speaker." When, two years after, an Act of Grace was passed, he was excepted, and continued still in custody, which he had made less tedious

by writing his “Alma.” He was, however, soon after discharged. He had now his liberty, but he had nothing else. Whatever the profit of his employments might have been, he had always spent it; and at the age of fifty-three was, with all his abilities, in danger of penury, having yet no solid revenue but from the fellowship of his college, which, when in his exaltation he was censured for retaining it, he said he could live upon at last. Being, however, generally known and esteemed, he was encouraged to add other poems to those which he had printed, and to publish them by subscription. The expedient succeeded by the industry of many friends, who circulated the proposals, and the care of some who, it is said, withheld the money from him lest he should squander it. The price of the volume was two guineas; the whole collection was four thousand; to which Lord Harley, the son of the Earl of Oxford, to whom he had invariably adhered, added an equal sum for the purchase of Down Hall, which Prior was to enjoy during life, and Harley after his decease. He had now, what wits and philosophers have often wished, the power of passing the day in contemplative tranquillity. But it seems that busy men seldom live long in a state of quiet. It is not unlikely that his health declined, he complains of deafness; “for,” says he, “I took little care of my ears while I was not sure if my head was my own.”

Of any occurrences of his remaining life I have found no account. In a letter to Swift, “I have,” says he, “treated Lady Harriet, at Cambridge (a Fellow of a College treat!) and spoke verses to her in a gown and cap! What, the plenipotentiary, so far concerned in the damned peace at Utrecht; the man that makes up half the volume of terse prose, that makes up the report of the committee, speaking verses! *Sic est, homo sum.*”

He died at Wimpole, a seat of the Earl of Oxford, on the 18th of September, 1721, and was buried in Westminster; where on a monument, for which, as the “last piece of human vanity,” he left five hundred pounds, is engraven this epitaph:—

Sui Temporis Historiam meditant,

Paulatim obrepens Febris

Operi simul et Vitæ filum abrupt,

Sept. 18. An. Dom. 1721. Ætat. 57

H.S.E

Vir Eximius Serenissimis

Regi Gulielmo Reginaëque Mariæ

In Congressione Fœderatorum

Hagæ anno 1690 celebrata,

Deinde Magnæ Britanniaë Legatis

Tum iis,

Qui anno 1697 Pacem Ryswicki confecerunt,

Tum iis,

Qui apud Gallos annie proximis Legationem obierunt

Eodem etiani anno 1657 in Hiberniâ

Secretarius;

familiar practices. He lived at a time when the rage of party detected all which it was any man's interest to hide; and, as little ill is heard of Prior, it is certain that not much was known. He was not afraid of provoking censure; for when he forsook the Whigs, under whose patronage he first entered the world, he became a Tory so ardent and determinate, that he did not willingly consort with men of different opinions. He was one of the sixteen Tories who met weekly, and agreed to address each other by the title of *Brother*; and seems to have adhered, not only by concurrence of political designs, but by peculiar affection, to the Earl of Oxford and his family. With how much confidence he was trusted has been already told.

He was, however, in Pope's opinion, fit only to make verses, and less qualified for business than Addison himself. This was surely said without consideration. Addison, exalted to a high place, was forced into degradation by the sense of his own incapacity; Prior, who was employed by men very capable of estimating his value, having been secretary to one embassy, had, when great abilities were again wanted, the same office another time; and was, after so much experience of his own knowledge and dexterity, at last sent to transact a negotiation in the highest degree arduous and important, for which he was qualified, among other requisites, in the opinion of Bolingbroke, by his influence upon the French minister, and by skill in questions of commerce above other men.

Of his behaviour in the lighter parts of life, it is too late to get much intelligence. One of his answers to a boastful Frenchman has been related; and to an impertinent he made another equally proper. During his embassy he sat at the opera by a man who, in his rapture, accompanied with his own voice the principal singer.

Prior fell to railing at the performer with all the terms of reproach that he could collect, till the Frenchman, ceasing from his song, began to expostulate with him for his harsh censure of a man who was confessedly the ornament of the stage. "I know all that," says the ambassador, "mais il chante si haut, que je ne sçaurois vous entendre."

In a gay French company, where every one sang a little song or stanza, of which the burden was "Bannissons la Mélancolie," when it came to his turn to sing, after the performance of a young lady that sat next him, he produced these extemporary lines:—

"Mais cette voix, et ces beaux yeux,
Font Cupidon trop dangereux,
Et je suis triste quand je crie
Bannissons la Mélancolie."

Tradition represents him as willing to descend from the dignity of the poet and statesman to the low delights of mean company. His Chloe probably was sometimes ideal: but the woman with whom he cohabited was a despicable drab of the lowest species. One of his wenches, perhaps Chloe, while he was absent from his house, stole his plate and ran away, as was related by a woman who had been his servant. Of his propensity to sordid converse, I have seen an account so seriously ridiculous, that it seems to deserve insertion.

"I have been assured that Prior, after having spent the evening with Oxford, Bolingbroke, Pope, and Swift, would go and smoke a pipe and drink a bottle of ale with a common soldier and his wife in Long Acre before he went to bed, not from any remains of the lowness of his original, as one said, but I suppose that his faculties—

"—strained to the height,
In that celestial colloquy sublime,
Dazzled and spent, sunk down, and sought repair."

Poor Prior; why was he so *strained*, and in such *want of repair*, after a conversation with men not, in the opinion of the world, much wiser than himself? But such are the conceits of speculatists, who *strain* their *faculties* to find in a mine what lies upon the surface. His opinions, so far as the means of judging are left us, seem to have been right; but his life was, it seems, irregular, negligent, and sensual.

Prior has written with great variety, and his variety has made him popular. He has tried all styles, from the grotesque to the solemn, and has not so failed in any as to incur derision or disgrace.

His works may be distinctly considered as comprising Tales, Love Verses, Occasional Poems, “Alma,” and “Solomon.”

His tales have obtained general approbation, being written with great familiarity and great sprightliness; the language is easy, but seldom gross, and the numbers smooth, without appearance of care. Of these tales there are only four: “The Ladle,” which is introduced by a preface, neither necessary nor pleasing, neither grave nor merry. “Paulo Purganti,” which has likewise a preface, but of more value than the tale. “Hans Carvel,” not over-decent; and “Protogenes and Apelles,” an old story mingled, by an affectation not disagreeable, with modern images. “The Young Gentleman in Love” has hardly a just claim to the title of a tale. I know not whether he be the original author of any tale which he has given us. The adventure of Hans Carvel has passed through many successions of merry wits, for it is to be found in Ariosto’s “Satires,” and is perhaps yet older. But the merit of such stories is the art of telling them.

In his amorous effusions he is less happy; for they are not dictated by nature or by passion, and have neither gallantry nor tenderness. They have the coldness of Cowley, without his wit, the dull exercises of a skilful versifier, resolved at all adventures to write something about Chloe, and trying to be amorous by dint of study. His fictions, therefore, are mythological. Venus, after the example of the Greek epigram, asks when she was seen *naked and bathing*. Then Cupid is *mistaken*; then Cupid is *disarmed*; then he loses his darts to Ganymede; then Jupiter sends him a summons by Mercury.

Then Chloe goes a-hunting with an *ivory quiver graceful at her side*; Diana mistakes her for one of her nymphs, and Cupid laughs at the blunder. All this is surely despicable; and even when he tries to act the lover without the help of gods or goddesses, his thoughts are unaffecting or remote. He talks not “like a man of this world.”

The greatest of all his amorous essays is “Henry and Emma,” a dull and tedious dialogue, which excites neither esteem for the man nor tenderness for the woman. The example of Emma, who resolves to follow an outlawed murderer wherever fear and guilt shall drive him, deserves no imitation; and the experiment by which Henry tries the lady’s constancy is such as must end either in infamy to her or in disappointment to himself.

His occasional poems necessarily lost part of their value, as their occasions, being less remembered, raised less emotion. Some of them, however, are preserved by their inherent excellence.

The burlesque of Boileau’s ode on Namur has in some parts such airiness and levity as will always procure it readers, even among those who cannot compare it with the original. The epistle to Boileau is not so happy. The “Poems to the King,” are now perused only by young students, who read merely that they may learn to write; and of the “Carmen Seculare,” I cannot but suspect that I might praise or censure it by caprice without danger of detection; for who can be supposed to have laboured through it? Yet the time has been when this neglected work was so popular that it was translated into Latin by no common master.

His poem on the Battle of Ramillies is necessarily tedious by the form of the stanza. An uniform mass of ten lines thirty-five times repeated, inconsequential and slightly connected, must weary both the ear and the understanding. His imitation of Spenser, which consists principally in *I ween* and *I weet*, without exclusion of later modes of speech, makes his poem neither ancient nor modern. His mention of Mars and Bellona, and his comparison of Marlborough to the eagle that bears the thunder of Jupiter, are all puerile and unaffecting; and yet more despicable is the long tale told by Louis in

his despair of Brute and Troynovante, and the teeth of Cadmus, with his similes of the raven and eagle and wolf and lion. By the help of such easy fictions and vulgar topics, without acquaintance with life, and without knowledge of art or nature, a poem of any length, cold and lifeless like this, may be easily written on any subject.

In his epilogues to Phædra and to Lucius he is very happily facetious; but in the prologue before the queen the pedant has found his way with Minerva, Perseus, and Andromeda.

His epigrams and lighter pieces are, like those of others, sometimes elegant, sometimes trifling, and sometimes dull; among the best are the “Chamelion” and the epitaph on John and Joan.

Scarcely any one of our poets has written so much and translated so little: the version of Callimachus is sufficiently licentious; the paraphrase on St. Paul’s Exhortation to Charity is eminently beautiful.

“Alma” is written in professed imitation of “Hudibras,” and has at least one accidental resemblance: “Hudibras” wants a plan because it is left imperfect; “Alma” is imperfect because it seems never to have had a plan. Prior appears not to have proposed to himself any drift or design, but to have written the casual dictates of the present moment.

What Horace said when he imitated Lucilius, might be said of Butler by Prior; his numbers were not smooth nor neat. Prior excelled him in versification; but he was, like Horace, *inventore minor*; he had not Butler’s exuberance of matter and variety of illustration. The spangles of wit which he could afford he knew how to polish; but he wanted the bullion of his master. Butler pours out a negligent profusion, certain of the weight, but careless of the stamp. Prior has comparatively little, but with that little he makes a fine show. “Alma” has many admirers, and was the only piece among Prior’s works of which Pope said that he should wish to be the author.

“Solomon” is the work to which he entrusted the protection of his name, and which he expected succeeding ages to regard with veneration. His affection was natural; it had undoubtedly been written with great labour; and who is willing to think that he has been labouring in vain? He had infused into it much knowledge and much thought; had often polished it to elegance, often dignified it with splendour, and sometimes heightened it to sublimity: he perceived in it many excellences, and did not discover that it wanted that without which all others are of small avail—the power of engaging attention and alluring curiosity.

Tediousness is the most fatal of all faults; negligence or errors are single and local, but tediousness pervades the whole; other faults are censured and forgotten, but the power of tediousness propagates itself. He that is weary the first hour is more weary the second, as bodies forced into motion, contrary to their tendency, pass more and more slowly through every successive interval of space. Unhappily this pernicious failure is that which an author is least able to discover. We are seldom tiresome to ourselves; and the act of composition fills and delights the mind with change of language and succession of images. Every couplet, when produced, is new, and novelty is the great source of pleasure. Perhaps no man ever thought a line superfluous when he first wrote it, or contracted his work till his ebullitions of invention had subsided. And even if he should control his desire of immediate renown, and keep his work *nine years* unpublished, he will be still the author, and still in danger of deceiving himself: and if he consults his friends he will probably find men who have more kindness than judgment, or more fear to offend than desire to instruct. The tediousness of this poem proceeds not from the uniformity of the subject, for it is sufficiently diversified, but from the continued tenor of the narration; in which Solomon relates the successive vicissitudes of his own mind without the intervention of any other speaker or the mention of any other agent, unless it be Abra; the reader is only to learn what he thought, and to be told that he thought wrong. The event of every experiment is foreseen, and therefore the process is not much regarded. Yet the work is far from deserving to be neglected. He that shall peruse it will be able to mark many passages to which he may recur for instruction or delight; many from which the poet may learn to write and the philosopher to reason.

If Prior's poetry be generally considered, his praise will be that of correctness and industry, rather than of compass of comprehension or activity of fancy. He never made any effort of invention: his greater pieces are only tissues of common thoughts; and his smaller, which consist of light images or single conceits, are not always his own. I have traced him among the French epigrammatists, and have been informed that he poached for prey among obscure authors. The "Thief and Cordelier" is, I suppose, generally considered as an original production, with how much justice this epigram may tell, which was written by Georgius Sabinus, a poet now little known or read, though once the friend of Luther and Melancthon:—

“De Sacerdote Furem consolante

“Quidam sacrificus furem comitatus euntem
Huc ubi dat sontes carnificina neci.
Ne sis mœstus, ait; summi conviva Tonantis
Jam cum coelitibus (si modo credis) eris.
Ille gemens, si vera mihi solatia præbes,
Hospes apud superos sis meus oro, refert.
Sacrificus contra; mihi non convivia fas est
Ducere, jejunas hac edo luce nihil.”

What he has valuable he owes to his diligence and his judgment. His diligence has justly placed him amongst the most correct of the English poets; and he was one of the first that resolutely endeavoured at correctness. He never sacrifices accuracy to haste, nor indulges himself in contemptuous negligence, or impatient idleness; he has no careless lines, or entangled sentiments; his words are nicely selected, and his thoughts fully expanded. If this part of his character suffers an abatement, it must be from the disproportion of his rhymes, which have not always sufficient consonance, and from the admission of broken lines into his “Solomon;” but perhaps he thought, like Cowley, that hemistichs ought to be admitted into heroic poetry.

He had apparently such rectitude of judgment as secured him from everything that approached to the ridiculous or absurd; but as law operates in civil agency, not to the excitement of virtue, but the repression of wickedness, so judgment in the operations of intellect can hinder faults, but not produce excellence. Prior is never low, nor very often sublime. It is said by Longinus of Euripides, that he forces himself sometimes into grandeur by violence of effort, as the lion kindles his fury by the lashes of his own tail. Whatever Prior obtains above mediocrity seems the effort of struggle and of toil. He has many vigorous, but few happy lines; he has everything by purchase, and nothing by gift; he had no *nightly visitations* of the Muse, no infusions of sentiment or felicities of fancy. His diction, however, is more his own than of any among the successors of Dryden; he borrows no lucky turns, or commodious modes of language, from his predecessors. His phrases are original, but they are sometimes harsh; as he inherited no elegances, none has he bequeathed. His expression has every mark of laborious study, the line seldom seems to have been formed at once; the words did not come till they were called, and were then put by constraint into their places, where they do their duty, but do it sullenly. In his greater compositions there may be found more rigid stateliness than graceful dignity.

Of versification he was not negligent. What he received from Dryden he did not lose; neither did he increase the difficulty of writing by unnecessary severity, but uses triplets and alexandrines without scruple. In his preface to “Solomon” he proposes some improvements by extending the sense from one couplet to another with variety of pauses. This he has attempted, but without success; his interrupted lines are displeasing, and his sense, as less distinct, is less striking. He has altered the

stanza of Spenser as a house is altered by building another in its place of a different form. With how little resemblance he has formed his new stanza to that of his master these specimens will show:—

SPENSER

“She flying fast from Heaven’s fated face,
And from the world that her discovered wide,
Fled to the wasteful wilderness space,
From living eyes her open shame to hide,
And lurked in rocks and caves long unespied.
But that fair crew of knights, and Una fair,
Did in that castle afterwards abide,
To rest themselves, and weary powers repair,
Where store they found of all that dainty was and rare?”

PRIOR

“To the close rock the frightened raven flies,
Soon as the rising eagle cuts the air;
The shaggy wolf unseen and trembling lies,
When the hoarse roar proclaims the lion near.
Ill-starred did we our forts and lines forsake,
To dare our British foes to open fight:
Our conquest we by stratagem should make;
Our triumph had been founded in our flight.
’Tis ours by craft and by surprise to gain;
’Tis theirs to meet in arms, and battle in the plain.”

By this new structure of his lines he has avoided difficulties; nor am I sure that he has lost any of the power of pleasing, but he no longer imitates Spenser. Some of his poems are written without regularity of measures; for, when he commenced poet, he had not recovered from our Pindaric infatuation; but he probably lived to be convinced that the essence of verse is order and consonance.

His numbers are such as mere diligence may attain; they seldom offend the ear, and seldom soothe it; they commonly want airiness, lightness, and facility. What is smooth is not soft. His verses always roll, but they seldom flow.

A survey of the life and writings of Prior may exemplify a sentence which he doubtless understood well when he read Horace at his uncle’s, “The vessel long retains the scent which it first receives.” In his private relaxation he revived the tavern, and in his amorous pedantry he exhibited the college. But on higher occasions and nobler subjects, when habit was overpowered by the necessity of reflection, he wanted not wisdom as a statesman, or elegance as a poet.

CONGREVE

William Congreve descended from a family in Staffordshire of so great antiquity, that it claims a place among the few that extend their hue beyond the Norman Conquest, and was the son of William Congreve, second son of Richard Congreve, of Congreve and Stratton. He visited, once at least, the residence of his ancestors; and, I believe, more places than one are still shown in groves and gardens, where he is related to have written his *Old Bachelor*.

Neither the time nor place of his birth is certainly known. If the inscription upon his monument be true, he was born in 1672. For the place, it was said by himself that he owed his nativity to England, and by everybody else that he was born in Ireland. Southern mentioned him with sharp censure as a man that meanly disowned his native country. The biographers assigned his nativity to Bardsa, near Leeds, in Yorkshire, from the account given by himself, as they suppose, to Jacob.

To doubt whether a man of eminence has told the truth about his own birth is, in appearance, to be very deficient in candour; yet nobody can live long without knowing that falsehoods of convenience or vanity, falsehoods from which no evil immediately visible ensues, except the general degradation of human testimony, are very lightly uttered, and once uttered are sullenly supported. Boileau, who desired to be thought a rigorous and steady moralist, having told a pretty lie to Louis XIV., continued it afterwards by false dates; thinking himself obliged *in honour*, says his admirer, to maintain what, when he said it, was so well received. [Congreve was baptised at Bardsey, February 10, 1670.]

Wherever Congreve was born, he was educated first at Kilkenny, and afterwards at Dublin, his father having some military employment that stationed him in Ireland; but after having passed through the usual preparatory studies, as may be reasonably supposed, with great celerity and success, his father thought it proper to assign him a profession, by which something might be gotten, and about the time of the Revolution sent him, at the age of sixteen, to study law in the Middle Temple, where he lived for several years, but with very little attention to statutes or reports. His disposition to become an author appeared very early, as he very early felt that force of imagination, and possessed that copiousness of sentiment, by which intellectual pleasure can be given. His first performance was a novel called “Incognita; or, Love and Duty Reconciled;” it is praised by the biographers, who quote some part of the preface, that is, indeed, for such a time of life, uncommonly judicious. I would rather praise it than read it.

His first dramatic labour was *The Old Bachelor*, of which he says, in his defence against Collier, “That comedy was written, as several know, some years before it was acted. When I wrote it I had little thoughts of the stage; but did it to amuse myself in a slow recovery from a fit of sickness.

Afterwards, through my indiscretion it was seen, and in some little time more it was acted; and I, through the remainder of my indiscretion suffered myself to be drawn into the prosecution of a difficult and thankless study, and to be involved in a perpetual war with knaves and fools.”

There seems to be a strange affectation in authors of appearing to have done everything by chance. *The Old Bachelor* was written for amusement in the languor of convalescence. Yet it is apparently composed with great elaborateness of dialogue, and incessant ambition of wit. The age of the writer considered, it is indeed a very wonderful performance; for, whenever written, it was acted (1693) when he was not more than twenty-one years old; and was then recommended by Mr. Dryden, Mr. Southern, and Mr. Maynwaring. Dryden said that he never had seen such a first play; but they found it deficient in some things necessary to the success of its exhibition, and by their greater experience fitted it for the stage. Southern used to relate of one comedy, probably of this, that when Congreve read it to the players he pronounced it so wretchedly, that they had almost rejected it; but they were afterwards so well persuaded of its excellence that, for half a year before it was acted, the manager allowed its author the privilege of the house.

Few plays have ever been so beneficial to the writer, for it procured him the patronage of Halifax, who immediately made him one of the commissioners for licensing coaches, and soon after gave him a place in the Pipe-office, and another in the Customs, of six hundred pounds a year. Congreve's conversation must surely have been at least equally pleasing with his writings.

Such a comedy, written at such an age, requires some consideration. As the lighter species of dramatic poetry professes the imitation of common life, of real manners, and daily incidents, it apparently presupposes a familiar knowledge of many characters, and exact observation of the passing world; the difficulty, therefore, is to conceive how this knowledge can be obtained by a boy.

But if *The Old Bachelor* be more nearly examined, it will be found to be one of those comedies which may be made by a mind vigorous and acute, and furnished with comic characters by the perusal of other poets, without much actual commerce with mankind. The dialogue is one constant reciprocation of conceits or clash of wit, in which nothing flows necessarily from the occasion, or is dictated by nature. The characters, both of men and women, are either fictitious and artificial, as those of Heartwell and the ladies, or easy and common, as Wittol, a tame idiot; Bluff, a swaggering coward; and Fondlewife, a jealous Puritan; and the catastrophe arises from a mistake, not very probably produced, by marrying a woman in a mask. Yet this gay comedy, when all these deductions are made, will still remain the work of very powerful and fertile faculties; the dialogue is quick and sparkling, the incidents such as seize the attention, and the wit so exuberant that it "o'er-informs its tenement."

Next year he gave another specimen of his abilities in *The Double Dealer*, which was not received with equal kindness. He writes to his patron the Lord Halifax a dedication, in which he endeavours to reconcile the reader to that which found few friends among the audience. These apologies are always useless: *de gestibus non est disputandum*. Men may be convinced, but they cannot be pleased, against their will. But though taste is obstinate, it is very variable, and time often prevails when arguments have failed. Queen Mary conferred upon both those plays the honour of her presence; and when she died soon after, Congreve testified his gratitude by a despicable effusion of elegiac pastoral, a composition in which all is unnatural and yet nothing is new.

In another year (1695) his prolific pen produced *Love for Love*, a comedy of nearer alliance to life, and exhibiting more real manners, than either of the former. The character of Foresight was then common. Dryden calculated nativities; both Cromwell and King William had their lucky days; and Shaftesbury himself, though he had no religion, was said to regard predictions. The Sailor is not accounted very natural, but he is very pleasant. With this play was opened the New Theatre, under the direction of Betterton, the tragedian, where he exhibited two years afterwards (1687) *The Mourning Bride*, a tragedy, so written as to show him sufficiently qualified for either kind of dramatic poetry. In this play, of which, when he afterwards revised it, he reduced the versification to greater regularity; there is more bustle than sentiment; the plot is busy and intricate, and the events take hold on the attention; but, except a very few passages, we are rather amused with noise and perplexed with stratagem, than entertained with any true delineation of natural characters. This, however, was received with more benevolence than any other of his works, and still continues to be acted and applauded.

But whatever objections may be made either to his comic or tragic excellence, they are lost at once in the blaze of admiration, when it is remembered that he had produced these four plays before he had passed his twenty-fifth year, before other men, even such as are some time to shine in eminence, have passed their probation of literature, or presume to hope for any other notice than such as is bestowed on diligence and inquiry. Among all the efforts of early genius, which literary history records, I doubt whether any one can be produced that more surpasses the common limits of nature than the plays of Congreve.

About this time began the long-continued controversy between Collier and the poets. In the reign of Charles I. the Puritans had raised a violent clamour against the drama, which they considered as an entertainment not lawful to Christians, an opinion held by them in common with the Church

of Rome; and Prynne published “Histriomastix,” a huge volume in which stage-plays were censured.

The outrages and crimes of the Puritans brought afterwards their whole system of doctrine into disrepute, and from the Restoration the poets and players were left at quiet; for to have molested them would have had the appearance of tendency to puritanical malignity. This danger, however, was worn away by time, and Collier, a fierce and implacable non-juror, knew that an attack upon the theatre would never make him suspected for a Puritan; he therefore (1698) published “A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage,” I believe with no other motive than religious zeal and honest indignation. He was formed for a controvertist, with sufficient learning, with diction vehement and pointed, though often vulgar and incorrect, with unconquerable pertinacity, with wit in the highest degree and sarcastic, and with all those powers exalted and invigorated by just confidence in his cause. Thus qualified and thus incited, he walked out to battle, and assailed at once most of the living writers, from Dryden to Dufey. His onset was violent; those passages, which, while they stood single, had passed with little notice, when they were accumulated and exposed together, excited horror. The wise and the pious caught the alarm, and the nation wondered why it had so long suffered irreligion and licentiousness to be openly taught at the public charge.

Nothing now remained for the poets but to resist or fly. Dryden’s conscience or his prudence, angry as he was, withheld him from the conflict. Congreve and Vanbrugh attempted answers.

Congreve, a very young man, elated with success, and impatient of censure, assumed an air of confidence and security. His chief art of controversy is to retort upon his adversary his own words: he is very angry, and hoping to conquer Collier with his own weapons, allows himself in the use of every term of contumely and contempt, but he has the sword without the arm of Scanderbeg; he has his antagonist’s coarseness but not his strength. Collier replied, for contest was his delight. “He was not to be frightened from his purpose or his prey.”

The cause of Congreve was not tenable; whatever glosses he might use for the defence or palliation of single passages, the general tenour and tendency of his plays must always be condemned.

It is acknowledged, with universal conviction, that the perusal of his works will make no man better, and that their ultimate effect is to represent pleasure in alliance with vice, and to relax those obligations by which life ought to be regulated.

The stage found other advocates, and the dispute was protracted through ten years: but at last comedy grew more modest, and Collier lived to see the reformation of the theatre.

Of the powers by which this important victory was achieved, a quotation from *Love for Love*, and the remark upon it, may afford a specimen:—

Sir Samps. “Sampson’s a very good name; for your Sampsons were strong dogs from the beginning.”

Angel. “Have a care—if you remember, the strongest Sampson of your name pulled an old house over his head at last.”

“Here you have the sacred history burlesqued, and Sampson once more brought into the house of Dagon, to make sport for the Philistines!”

Congreve’s last play was *The Way of The World*, which, though, as he hints in him dedication it was written with great labour and much thought, was received with so little favour, that being in a high degree offended and disgusted, he resolved to commit his quiet and his fame no more to the caprices of an audience.

From this time his life ceased to be public; he lived for himself and his friends, and among his friends was able to name every man of his time whom wit and elegance had raised to reputation. It may be therefore reasonably supposed that his manners were polite, and his conversation pleasing.

He seems not to have taken much pleasure in writing, as he contributed nothing to the *Spectator*, and only one paper to the *Tatler*, though published by men with whom he might be supposed willing to associate: and though he lived many years after the publication of his “Miscellaneous Poems,” yet he added nothing to them, but lived on in literary indolence, engaged in no controversy, contending

with no rival, neither soliciting flattery by public commendations, nor provoking enmity by malignant criticism, but passing his time among the great and splendid, in the placid enjoyment of his fame and fortune.

Having owed his fortune to Halifax, he continued, always of his patron's party, but, as it seems, without violence or acrimony, and his firmness was naturally esteemed, as his abilities were revered. His security therefore was never violated; and when, upon the extrusion of the Whigs, some intercession was used lest Congreve should be displaced, the Earl of Oxford made this answer:

—

“Non obtusa adeo gestamus pectora Pœni,
Nec tam aversus equos Tyriâ sol jungit ab urbe.”

He that was thus honoured by the adverse party might naturally expect to be advanced when his friends returned to power, and he was accordingly made secretary for the island of Jamaica, a place, I suppose without trust or care, but which, with his post in the Customs, is said to have afforded him twelve hundred pounds a year. His honours were yet far greater than his profits. Every writer mentioned him with respect, and among other testimonies to his merit, Steele made him the patron of his “Miscellany,” and Pope inscribed to him his translations of the “Iliad.” But he treated the muses with ingratitude; for, having long conversed familiarly with the great, he wished to be considered rather as a man of fashion than of wit; and, when he received a visit from Voltaire, disgusted him by the despicable foppery of desiring to be considered not as an author but a gentleman; to which the Frenchman replied, “that, if he had been only a gentleman, he should not have come to visit him.”

In his retirement he may be supposed to have applied himself to books, for he discovers more literature than the poets have commonly attained. But his studies were in his later days obstructed by cataracts in his eyes, which at last terminated in blindness. This melancholy state was aggravated by the gout, for which he sought relief by a journey to Bath: but, being overturned in his chariot, complained from that time of a pain in his side, and died at his house in Surrey Street in the Strand, January 29, 1728–9. Having lain in state in the Jerusalem Chamber, he was buried in Westminster Abbey, where a monument is erected to his memory by Henrietta Duchess of Marlborough, to whom, for reasons either not known or not mentioned, he bequeathed a legacy of about ten thousand pounds, the accumulation of attentive parsimony, which, though to her superfluous and useless, might have given great assistance to the ancient family from which he descended, at that time, by the imprudence of his relation, reduced to difficulties and distress.

Congreve has merit of the highest kind; he is an original writer, who borrowed neither the models of his plot nor the manner of his dialogue. Of his plays I cannot speak distinctly, for since I inspected them many years have passed, but what remains upon my memory is, that his characters are commonly fictitious and artificial, with very little of nature, and not much of life. He formed a peculiar idea of comic excellence, which he supposed to consist in gay remarks and unexpected answers; but that which he endeavoured, he seldom failed of performing. His scenes exhibit not much of humour, imagery, or passion: his personages are a kind of intellectual gladiators; every sentence is to ward or strike; the contest of smartness is never intermitted; his wit is a meteor playing to and fro with alternate coruscations. His comedies have, therefore, in some degree, the operation of tragedies, they surprise rather than divert, and raise admiration oftener than merriment. But they are the works of a mind replete with images, and quick in combination.

Of his miscellaneous poetry I cannot say anything very favourable. The powers of Congreve seem to desert him when he leaves the stage, as Antæus was no longer strong than when he could touch the ground. It cannot be observed without wonder, that a mind so vigorous and fertile in dramatic compositions should on any other occasion discover nothing but impotence and poverty. He has in these little pieces neither elevation of fancy, selection of language, nor skill in versification: yet, if I

were required to select from the whole mass of English poetry the most poetical paragraph, I know not what I could prefer to an exclamation in the “Mourning Bride”:—

ALMERIA

It was a fancied noise; for all is hushed.

LEONORA

It bore the accent of a human voice.

ALMERIA

It was thy fear, or else some transient wind
Whistling through hollows of this vaulted isle:
We'll listen—

LEONORA

Hark!

ALMERIA

No, all is hushed and still as death.—’Tis dreadful!
How reverend is the face of this tall pile,
Whose ancient pillars rear their marble heads,
To bear aloft its arched and ponderous roof,
By its own weight made steadfast and immovable,
Looking tranquillity! It strikes an awe
And terror on my aching sight; the tombs
And monumental caves of death look cold,
And shoot a chillness to my trembling heart.
Give use thy hand, and let me hear thy voice;
Nay, quickly speak to me, and let me hear
Thy voice—my own affrights me with its echoes.

He who reads these lines enjoys for a moment the powers of a poet; he feels what he remembers to have felt before, but he feels it with great increase of sensibility; he recognises a familiar image, but meets it again amplified and expanded, embellished with beauty and enlarged with majesty. Yet

could the author, who appears here to have enjoyed the confidence of Nature, lament the death of Queen Mary in lines like these:—

“The rocks are cleft, and new-descending rills
Furrow the brows of all the impending hills.
The water-gods to floods their rivulets turn,
And each, with streaming eyes, supplies his wanting urn.
The fauns forsake the woods, the nymphs the grove,
And round the plain in sad distractions rove:
In prickly brakes their tender limbs they tear,
And leave on thorns their locks of golden hair.
With their sharp nails, themselves the satyrs wound,
And tug their shaggy beards, and bite with grief the ground.
Lo Pan himself, beneath a blasted oak,
Dejected lies, his pipe in pieces broke
See Pales weeping too in wild despair,
And to the piercing winds her bosses bare.
And see yon fading myrtle, where appears
The Queen of Love, all bathed in flowing tears;
See how she wrings her hands, and beats her breast,
And tears her useless girdle from her waist:
Hear the sad murmurs of her sighing doves!
For grief they sigh, forgetful of their loves.”

And many years after he gave no proof that time had improved his wisdom or his wit, for, on the death of the Marquis of Blandford, this was his song:—

“And now the winds, which had so long been still,
Began the swelling air with sighs to fill;
The water-nymphs, who motionless remained
Like images of ice, while she complained,
Now loosed their streams; as when descending rains
Roll the steep torrents headlong o’er the plains.
The prone creation who so long had gazed
Charmed with her cries, and at her griefs amazed,
Began to roar and howl with horrid yell,
Dismal to hear, and terrible to tell!
Nothing but groans and sighs were heard around,
And echo multiplied each mournful sound.”

In both these funeral poems, when he has *yelled* out many *syllables* of senseless *dolour*, he dismisses his reader with senseless consolation. From the grave of Pastora rises a light that forms a star, and where Amaryllis wept for Amyntas from every tear sprung up a violet. But William is his hero, and of William he will sing:—

“The hovering winds on downy wings shall wait around,
And catch, and waft to foreign lands, the flying sound.”

It cannot but be proper to show what they shall have to catch and carry:—

“’Twas now, when flowery lawns the prospect made,
And flowing brooks beneath a forest shade,
A lowing heifer, loveliest of the herd,
Stood feeding by; while two fierce bulls prepared
Their arméd heads for light, by fate of war to prove
The victor worthy of the fair one’s love;
Unthought presage of what met next my view;
For soon the shady scene withdrew.
And now, for woods, and fields, and springing flowers,
Behold a town arise, bulwarked with walls and lofty towers;
Two rival armies all the plain o’erspread,
Each in battalia ranged, and shining arms arrayed
With eagle eyes beholding both from far,
Namur, the price and mistress of the war.”

The “Birth of the Muse” is a miserable fiction. One good line it has which was borrowed from Dryden. The concluding verses are these:—

“This said, no more remained. The ethereal host
Again impatient crowd the crystal coast.
The father now, within his spacious hands,
Encompassed all the mingled mass of seas and lands;
And, having heaved aloft the ponderous sphere,
He launched the world to float in ambient air.”

Of his irregular poems, that to Mrs. Arabella Hunt seems to be the best; his Ode for St. Cecilia’s Day, however, had some lines which Pope had in his mind when he wrote his own. His imitations of Horace are feebly paraphractical, and the additions which he makes are of little value. He sometimes retains what were more properly omitted, as when he talks of *vervain* and *gums* to propitiate Venus.

Of his Translations, the “Satire of Juvenal” was written very early, and may therefore be forgiven, though it had not the massiness and vigour of the original. In all his versions strength and sprightliness are wanting; his “Hymn to Venus,” from Homer, is perhaps the best. His lines are weakened with expletives, and his rhymes are frequently imperfect. His petty poems are seldom worth the cost of criticism; sometimes the thoughts are false and sometimes common. In his verses on Lady Gethin, the latter part is in imitation of Dryden’s ode on Mrs. Killigrew; and “Doris,” that has been so lavishly flattered by Steele, has indeed some lively stanzas, but the expression might be mended, and the most striking part of the character had been already shown in “Love for Love.”

His “Art of Pleasing” is founded on a vulgar, but perhaps impracticable principle, and the staleness of the sense is not concealed by any novelty of illustration or elegance of diction. This tissue of poetry, from which he seems to have hoped a lasting name, is totally neglected, and known only as it is appended to his plays.

While comedy or while tragedy is regarded, his plays are likely to be read; but, except what relates to the stage, I know not that he has ever written a stanza that is sung, or a couplet that is quoted. The general character of his “Miscellanies” is that they show little wit and little virtue. Yet to him it must be confessed that we are indebted for the connection of a national error, and for the cure of our Pindaric madness. He first taught the English writers that Pindar’s odes were regular; and though certainly he had not the lire requisite for the higher species of lyric poetry, he has shown us that enthusiasm has its rules, and that in mere confusion there is neither grace nor greatness.

BLACKMORE

Sir Richard Blackmore is one of those men whose writings have attracted much notice, but of whose life and manners very little has been communicated, and whose lot it has been to be much oftener mentioned by enemies than by friends. He was the son of Robert Blackmore, of Corsham in Wiltshire, styled by Wood *Gentleman*, and supposed to have been an attorney, having been for some time educated in a country school, he was at thirteen sent to Westminster, and in 1668 was entered at Edmund Hall in Oxford, where he took the degree of MA. June 8, 1676, and resided thirteen years, a much longer time than is usual to spend at the university, and which he seems to have passed with very little attention to the business of the place; for, in his poems, the ancient names of nations or places, which he often introduces, are pronounced by chance. He afterwards travelled. At Padua he was made doctor of physic, and, after having wandered about a year and a half on the Continent, returned home.

In some part of his life, it is not known when, his indigence compelled him to teach a school, a humiliation with which, though it certainly lasted but a little while, his enemies did not forget to reproach him, when he became conspicuous enough to excite malevolence; and let it be remembered for his honour, that to have been once a schoolmaster is the only reproach which all the perspicacity of malice, animated by wit, has ever fixed upon his private life.

When he first engaged in the study of physic, he inquired, as he says, of Dr. Sydenham, what authors he should read and was directed by Sydenham to “Don Quixote”: “which” said he, “is a very good book; I read it still.” The perverseness of mankind makes it often mischievous to men of eminence to give way to merriment; the idle and the illiterate will long shelter themselves under this foolish apophthegm. Whether he rested satisfied with this direction, or sought for better, he commenced physician, and obtained high eminence and extensive practice. He became Fellow of the College of Physicians, April 12, 1687, being one of the thirty which, by the new charter of King James, were added to the former fellows. His residence was in Cheapside, and his friends were chiefly in the City. In the early part of Blackmore’s time a citizen was a term of reproach; and his place of abode was another topic, to which his adversaries had recourse in the penury of scandal.

Blackmore, therefore, was made a poet not by necessity but inclination, and wrote not for a livelihood but for fame; or, if he may tell his own motives, for a nobler purpose, to engage poetry in the cause of virtue.

I believe it is peculiar to him that his first public work was an heroic poem. He was not known as a maker of verses till he published (in 1695) “Prince Arthur,” in ten books, written, as he relates, “by such catches and starts, and in such occasional uncertain hours as his profession afforded, and for the greatest part in coffee-houses, or in passing up and down the streets.” For the latter part of this apology he was accused of writing “to the rumbling of his chariot wheels.” He had read, he says, “but little poetry throughout his whole life; and for fifteen years before had not written a hundred verses except one copy of Latin verses in praise of a friend’s book.” He thinks, and with some reason, that from such a performance perfection cannot be expected; but he finds another reason for the severity of his censurers, which he expresses in language such as Cheapside easily furnished. “I am not free of the Poet’s Company, having never kissed the governor’s hands: mine is therefore not so much as a permission poem, but a downright interloper. Those gentlemen, who carry on their poetical trade in a joint stock, would certainly do what they could to sink and ruin an unlicensed adventurer, notwithstanding I disturbed none of their factories, nor imported any goods they have ever dealt in.”

He had lived in the City till he had learned its note.

That “Prince Arthur” found many readers is certain; for in two years it had three editions, a very uncommon instance of favourable reception, at a time when literary curiosity was yet confined to particular classes of the nation. Such success naturally raised animosity; and Dennis attacked it by

a formal criticism, more tedious and disgusting than the work which he condemns. To this censure may be opposed the approbation of Locke, and the admiration of Molyneux, which are found in their printed "Letters." Molyneux is particularly delighted with the song of Mopas, which is therefore subjoined to this narrative.

It is remarked by Pope, that "what raises the hero, often sinks the man." Of Blackmore it may be said that, as the poet sinks, the man rises; the animadversions of Dennis, insolent and contemptuous as they were, raised in him no implacable resentment; he and his critic were afterwards friends; and in one of his latter works he praises Dennis "as equal to Boileau in poetry, and superior to him in critical abilities." He seems to have been more delighted with praise than pained by censure, and instead of slackening, quickened his career. Having in two years produced ten books of "Prince Arthur," in two years more (1697) he sent into the world "King Arthur" in twelve. The provocation was now doubled, and the resentment of wits and critics may be supposed to have increased in proportion. He found, however, advantages more than equivalent to all their outrages. He was this year made one of the physicians in ordinary to King William, and advanced by him to the honour of knighthood, with the present of a gold chaise and medal. The malignity of the wits attributed his knighthood to his new poem, but King William was not very studious of poetry; and Blackmore perhaps had other merit, for he says in his dedication to "Alfred," that "he had a greater part in the succession of the house of Hanover than ever he had boasted."

What Blackmore could contribute to the Succession, or what he imagined himself to have contributed, cannot now be known. That he had been of considerable use, I doubt not but he believed, for I hold him to have been very honest; but he might easily make a false estimate of his own importance. Those whom their virtue restrains from deceiving others, are often disposed by their vanity to deceive themselves. Whether he promoted the Succession or not, he at least approved it, and adhered invariably to his principles and party through his whole life.

His ardour of poetry still continued; and not long after (1700) he published a "Paraphrase on the Book of Job, and other parts of the Scripture." This performance Dryden, who pursued him with great malignity, lived long enough to ridicule in a Prologue.

The wits easily confederated against him, as Dryden, whose favour they almost all courted, was his professed adversary. He had, besides, given them reason for resentment, as, in his preface to "Prince Arthur," he had said of the dramatic writers almost all that was alleged afterwards by Collier; but Blackmore's censure was cold and general, Collier's was personal and ardent; Blackmore taught his reader to dislike what Collier incited him to abhor.

In his preface to "King Arthur" he endeavoured to gain at least one friend, and propitiated Congreve by higher praise of his "Mourning Bride" than it has obtained from any other critic.

The same year he published a "Satire on Wit," a proclamation of defiance which united the poets almost all against him, and which brought upon him lampoons and ridicule from every side.

This he doubtless foresaw, and evidently despised; nor should his dignity of mind be without its praise, had he not paid the homage to greatness which he denied to genius, and degraded himself by conferring that authority over the national taste, which he takes from the poets, upon men of high rank and wide influence, but of less wit and not greater virtue.

Here is again discovered the inhabitant of Cheapside, whose head cannot keep his poetry unmingled with trade. To hinder that intellectual bankruptcy which he affects to fear he will erect a "Bank for Wit." In this poem he justly censured Dryden's impurities, but praised his powers, though in a subsequent edition he retained the satire, and omitted the praise. What was his reason, I know not; Dryden was then no longer in his way. His head still teemed with heroic poetry; and (1705) he published "Eliza," in ten books. I am afraid that the world was now weary of contending about Blackmore's heroes, for I do not remember that by any author, serious or comical, I have found "Eliza" either praised or blamed.

She “dropped,” as it seems, “dead-born from the press.” It is never mentioned, and was never seen by me till I borrowed it for the present occasion. Jacob says “it is corrected and revised from another impression,” but the labour of revision was thrown away.

From this time he turned some of his thoughts to the celebration of living characters, and wrote a poem on the Kit-Cat Club, and “Advice to the Poets how to celebrate the Duke of Marlborough” but on occasion of another year of success, thinking himself qualified to give more instruction, he again wrote a poem of “Advice to a Weaver of Tapestry.” Steele was then publishing the *Tatler*, and, looking round him for something at which he might laugh, unluckily alighted on Sir Richard’s work, and treated it with such contempt that, as Fenton observes, he put an end to that species of writers that gave advice to painters.

Not long after (1712) he published “Creation,” a philosophical poem, which has been, by my recommendation, inserted in the late collection. Whoever judges of this by any other of Blackmore’s performances will do it injury. The praise given it by Addison (*Spectator*, 339) is too well known to be transcribed; but some notice is due to the testimony of Dennis, who calls it a “philosophical poem, which has equalled that of ‘Lucretius’ in the beauty of its versification, and infinitely surpassed it in the solidity and strength of its reasoning.”

Why an author surpasses himself it is natural to inquire. I have heard from Mr. Draper, an eminent bookseller, an account received by him from Ambrose Philips, “That Blackmore, as he proceeded in this poem, laid his manuscript from time to time before a club of wits with whom he associated, and that every man contributed, as he could, either improvement or correction; so that,” said Philips, “there are perhaps nowhere in the book thirty lines together that now stand as they were originally written.”

The relation of Philips, I suppose, was true; but when all reasonable, all credible allowance is made for this friendly revision, the author will still retain an ample dividend of praise; for to him must always be assigned the plan of the work, the distribution of its parts, the choice of topics, the train of argument, and, what is yet more, the general predominance of philosophical judgment and poetical spirit. Correction seldom effects more than the suppression of faults: a happy line, or a single elegance, may perhaps be added; but of a large work, the general character must always remain. The original constitution can be very little helped by local remedies; inherent and radical dulness will never be much invigorated by intrinsic animation. This poem, if he had written nothing else, would have transmitted him to posterity among the first favourites of the English muse; but to make verses was his transcendent pleasure, and, as he was not deterred by censure, he was not satiated with praise.

He deviated, however, sometimes into other tracks of literature, and condescended to entertain his readers with plain prose. When the *Spectator* stopped, he considered the polite world as destitute of entertainment, and in concert with Mr. Hughes, who wrote every third paper, published three times a week the “Lay Monastery,” founded on the supposition that some literary men, whose characters are described, had retired to a house in the country to enjoy philosophical leisure, and resolved to instruct the public by communicating their disquisitions and amusements. Whether any real persons were concealed under fictitious names is not known. The hero of the club is one Mr. Johnson, such a constellation of excellence, that his character shall not be suppressed, though there is no great genius in the design nor skill in the delineation.

“The first I shall name is Mr. Johnson, a gentleman that owes to nature excellent faculties and an elevated genius, and to industry and application many acquired accomplishments. His taste is distinguishing, just, and delicate; his judgment clear, and his reason strong, accompanied with an imagination full of spirit, of great compass, and stored with refined ideas. He is a critic of the first rank and, what is his peculiar ornament, he is delivered from the ostentation, malevolence, and supercilious temper, that so often blemish men of that character. His remarks result from the nature and reason of things, and are formed by a judgment free and unbiassed by the authority of those who have lazily followed each other in the same beaten track of thinking, and are arrived only at the

reputation of acute grammarians and commentators; men who have been copying one another many hundred years without any improvement, or, if they have ventured farther, have only applied in a mechanical manner the rules of ancient critics to modern writings, and with great labour discovered nothing but their own want of judgment and capacity. As Mr. Johnson penetrates to the bottom of his subject, by which means his observations are solid and natural, as well as delicate, so his design is always to bring to light something useful and ornamental; whence his character is the reverse to theirs, who have eminent abilities in insignificant knowledge, and a great felicity in finding out trifles.

He is no less industrious to search out the merit of an author, than sagacious in discerning his errors and defects, and takes more pleasure in commending the beauties than exposing the blemishes of a laudable writing. Like Horace, in a long work he can bear some deformities, and justly lay them on the imperfection of human nature, which is incapable of faultless productions. When an excellent drama appears in public, and by its intrinsic worth attracts a general applause, he is not stung with envy and spleen; nor does he express a savage nature in fastening upon the celebrated author, dwelling upon his imaginary defects, and passing over his conspicuous excellences. He treats all writers upon the same impartial foot, and is not, like the little critics, taken up entirely in finding out only the beauties of the ancient and nothing but the errors of the modern writers. Never did any one express more kindness and good-nature to young and unfinished authors, he promotes their interests, protects their reputation, extenuates their faults, and sets off their virtues, and by his candour guards them from the severity of his judgment. He is not like those dry critics who are morose because they cannot write themselves, but is himself master of a good vein in poetry; and though he does not often employ it, yet he has sometimes entertained his friends with his unpublished performances.”

The rest of the lay monks seem to be but feeble mortals an comparison with the gigantic Johnson, who yet, with all his abilities and the help of the fraternity, could drive the publication but to forty papers, which were afterwards collected into a volume, and called in the title “A Sequel to the *Spectators*.”

Some years afterwards (1716 and 1717) he published two volumes of essays in prose, which can be commended only as they are written for the highest and noblest purpose—the promotion of religion. Blackmore’s prose is not the prose of a poet, for it is languid, sluggish, and lifeless; his diction is neither daring nor exact, his flow neither rapid nor easy, and his periods neither smooth nest strong. His account of *wit* will show with how little clearness he is content to think, and how little his thoughts are recommended by his language.

“As to its efficient cause, *wit* owes its production to an extraordinary and peculiar temperament in the constitution of the possessor of it, in which is found a concurrence of regular and exalted ferments, and an affluence of animal spirits, refined and rectified to a great degree of purity; whence, being endowed with vivacity, brightness, and celerity, as well in their reflections as direct motions, they become proper instruments for the sprightly operations of the mind, by which means the imagination can with great facility range the wide field of Nature, contemplate an infinite variety of objects, and, by observing the similitude and disagreement of their several qualities, single out and abstract, and then suit and unite, those ideas which will best serve its purpose. Hence beautiful allusions, surprising metaphors, and admirable sentiments, are always ready at hand; and while the fancy is full of images, collected from innumerable objects, and their different qualities, relations, and habitudes, it can at pleasure dress a common notion in a strange but becoming garb, by which, as before observed, the same thought will appear a new one, to the great delight and wonder of the hearer. What we call *genius* results from this particular happy complexion in the first formation of the person that enjoys it, and is Nature’s gift, but diversified by various specific characters and limitations, as its active fire is blended and allayed by different proportions of phlegm, or reduced and regulated by the contrast of opposite ferments. Therefore, as there happens in the composition of facetious genius a greater or less, though still an inferior, degree of judgment and prudence, one man of wit will be varied and distinguished from another.”

In these essays he took little care to propitiate the wits, for he scorns to avert their malice at the expense of virtue or of truth.

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