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THE  
LIFE  
OF  
JOHN DRYDEN.

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SECTION I.

Preliminary Remarks on the Poetry of England before the Civil Wars—The Life of Dryden from his Birth till the Restoration—His early Poems, including the «Anus Mirabilis.»

THE life of Dryden may be said to comprehend a history of the literature of England, and its changes, during nearly half a century. While his great contemporary Milton was in silence and secrecy laying the foundation of that immortal fame, which no poet has so highly deserved, Dryden's labours were ever in the eye of the public; and he maintained, from the time of the Restoration till his death, in 1700, a decided and acknowledged superiority over all the poets of his age. As he wrote from necessity, he was

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obliged to pay a certain deference to the public opinion; for he, whose bread depends upon the success of his volume, is compelled to study popularity: but, on the other hand, his better judgment was often directed to improve that of his readers; so that he alternately influenced and stooped to the national taste of the day. If, therefore, we would know the gradual changes which took place in our poetry during the above period, we have only to consult the writings of an author, who produced yearly some new performance, allowed to be most excellent in the particular style which was fashionable for the time. It is the object of this memoir to connect, with the account of Dryden's life and publications, such a general view of the literature of the time, as may enable the reader to estimate how far the age was indebted to the poet, and how far the poet was influenced by the taste and manners of the age. A few preliminary remarks on the literature of the earlier part of the seventeenth century will form a necessary introduction to this Biographical Memoir.

When James I. ascended the throne of England, he came to rule a court and people, as much distinguished for literature as for commerce and arms. Shakspeare was in the zenith of his reputation, and England

possessed other poets inferior to Spakspeare alone; or, indeed, the higher order of whose plays may claim to be ranked above the inferior dramas ascribed to him. Among these we may reckon Massinger, who approached to Shakspeare in dignity; Beaumont and Fletcher, who surpassed him in drawing female characters, and those of polite and courtly life; and Jonson, who attempted to supply, by depth of learning, and laboured accuracy of character, the want of that flow of imagination, which nature had denied to him. Others, who flourished in the reign of James and his son, though little known to the general readers of the present age even by name, had a just claim to be distinguished from the common herd of authors. Ford, Webster, Marston, Brome, Shirley, even Chapman and Decker, added lustre to the stage for which they wrote. The drama, it is true, was the branch of poetry most successfully cultivated; for it afforded the most ready appeal to the public taste. The number of theatres then open, in all parts of the city, secured to the adventurous poet the means of having his performance represented upon one stage or other; and he was neither tired nor disgusted by the difficulties, and disagreeable observances, which must now be necessarily undergone by every candidate for

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dramatic laurels.' But although, during the reigns of Queen Elizabeth and James I., the stage seems to have afforded the principal employment of the poets, there wanted not many who cultivated, with success, the other departments of Parnassus. It is only necessary to name Spenser, whose magic tale continues to interest us, in despite of the languor of a continued allegory; Drayton, who, though less known, possesses perhaps equal powers of poetry; Beaumont the elder, whose poem on Bosworth Field carries us back to the days of the Plantagenets; Fairfax, the translator of Tasso, the melody of whose numbers became the model of Waller; besides many others, who ornamented this æra of British literature.

Notwithstanding the splendour of these great names, it must be confessed, that one common fault, in a greater or less degree, pervaded the most admired poetry of Queen Elizabeth's age. This was the fatal propensity

I do not pretend to enter into the question of the effect of the drama upon morals. If this shall be found prejudicial, two theatres are too many. But, in the present woful decline of theatrical exhibition, we may be permitted to remember, that the gardener who wishes to have a rare diversity of a common flower, sows whole beds with the species; and that the monopoly granted to two huge theatres must necessarily diminish, in a complicated ratio, both the number of play writers, and the chance of any thing very excellent being brought forward.

to *false wit*; to substitute, namely, strange and unexpected connexions of sound, or of idea, for real humour, and even for the effusions of the stronger passions. It seems likely that this fashion arose at court, a sphere in which its denizens never think they move with due lustre, until they have adopted a form of expression, as well as a system of manners, different from that which is proper to mankind at large. In Elizabeth's reign, the court language was for some time formed on the plan of one Lillie, a pedantic courtier, who wrote a book, entitled «*Euphues and his England, or the Anatomy of Wit* ;» which quality he makes to consist in the indulgence of every monstrous and overstrained conceit, that can be engendered by a strong memory and a heated brain, applied to the absurd purpose of hatching unnatural conceits.<sup>1</sup> It

<sup>1</sup> Our deserved idolatry of Shakspeare and Milton was equalled by that paid to this pedantic coxcomb in his own time. He is called, in the title page of his plays (for, besides «*Euphues*,» he wrote what he styled «*Court Comedies*»), «the only rare poet of that time; the witty, comical, facetiously quick, and unparalleled John Lillie.» Moreover, his editor, Mr Blount, assures us, «that he sat at Apollo's table; that Apollo gave him a wreath of his own bays without snatching; and that the lyre he played on had no broken strings.» Besides which, we are informed, «Our nation are in his debt for a new English, which he taught them; '*Euphues and his England*' began first that language. All our ladies were then his scholars;

appears, that this fantastical person had a considerable share in determining the false taste of his age, which soon became so general, that the tares which sprung from it are to be found even among the choicest of the wheat. Shakspeare himself affords us too many instances of this fashionable heresy in wit; and he, who could create new worlds out of his own imagination, descended to low, and often ill-timed, puns and quibbles. This was not an evil to be cured by the accession of our Scottish James, whose qualifications as a punster were at least equal to his boasted *king-craft*.<sup>1</sup> The false taste, which had been gaining ground even in the reign of Elizabeth, now overflowed the whole kingdom with the impetuosity of a land-flood. These outrages upon language were committed without regard to time and place. They were held good arguments at the bar, though Bacon sat on the woolsack; and eloquence irresistible by the most hardened sinner, when king or Corbet were in the pulpit.<sup>2</sup> Where grave and

and that beauty in court who could not *parler Euphuism*, was as little regarded as she which now there speaks not French.» The satire in *Cynthia's Revels* is directed by Ben Jonson against this false and pedantic taste.

<sup>1</sup> So that learned and sapient monarch was pleased to call his skill in politics.

<sup>2</sup> Witness a sermon preached at St Mary's before the university of Oxford. It is true the preacher was a layman, and harangued in a gold chain, and girt with a

learned professions set the example, the poets, it will readily be believed, ran headlong into an error, for which they could plead such respectable example. The affectation « of the word » and « of the letter, » for alliteration was almost as fashionable as punning, seemed, in some degree, to bring back English composition to the barbarous rules of the ancient Anglo-Saxons, the merit of whose poems consisted, not in the ideas, but in the quaint arrangement of the words, and the regular recurrence of some favourite sound or letter.

This peculiar taste for twisting and playing upon words, instead of applying them to their natural and proper use, was combined with the similar extravagance of those whom Dr Johnson has entitled metaphysical poets. This class of authors used the same violence towards images and ideas which had formerly been applied to words; in truth, the two styles

sword, as high sheriff of the county; but his eloquence was highly applauded by the learned body whom he addressed, although it would have startled a modern audience, at least as much as the dress of the orator. «Arriving,» said he, «at the Mount of St Mary's, in the stony stage where I now stand, I have brought you some fine biscuits, baked in the oven of charity, carefully conserved for the chickens of the church, the sparrows of the spirit, and the sweet swallows of salvation.»—«Which way of preaching,» says Anthony Wood, the reporter of the homily, «was then mostly in fashion, and commended by the generality of scholars.»—*Athenæ Oxon*

were often combined, and, even when separate, had a kindred alliance with each other. It is the business of the punster to discover and yoke together two words, which, while they have some resemblance in sound, the more exact the better, convey a totally different signification. The metaphysical poet, on the other hand, piqued himself in discovering hidden resemblances between ideas apparently the most dissimilar, and in combining, by some violent and compelled association, illustrations and allusions utterly foreign from each other. Thus did the metaphysical poet resemble the quibbler, exercising precisely the same tyranny over ideas, which the latter practised upon sounds only.

Jonson gave an early example of metaphysical poetry; indeed, it was the natural resource of a mind amply stored with learning, gifted with a tenacious memory and the power of constant labour, but to which was denied that vivid perception of what is naturally beautiful, and that happiness of expression, which at once conveys to the reader the idea of the poet. These latter qualities unite in many passages of Shakspeare, of which the reader at once acknowledges the beauty, the justice, and the simplicity. But such Jonson was unequal to produce; and he substituted the strange, forced, and most unnatural, though ingenious analogies, which



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were afterwards copied by Donne and Cowley.<sup>1</sup> In reading Shakspeare, we often meet passages so congenial to our nature and feelings, that, beautiful as they are, we can hardly help wondering they did not occur to ourselves; in studying Jonson, we have often to marvel how his conceptions could have occurred to any human being. The one is like an ancient statue, the beauty of which, springing from the exactness of proportion, does not always strike at first sight, but rises upon us as we bestow time in considering it; the other is the representation of a monster, which is at first only surprising, and ludicrous or disgusting ever after. When the taste for simplicity, however, is once destroyed, it is long ere a nation recovers it; and the metaphysical poets seem to have retained possession of the public favour from the reign of James I till the beginning of the civil wars silenced the muses. The universities were perhaps to blame during this period of usurpation; for which it may be admitted in excuse, that the metaphysical poetry could only be practised by men whose minds were deeply stored with learning, and who could boldly

<sup>1</sup> Look at Ben Jonson's «Ode to the Memory of Sir Lucius Carey and Sir H. Morison,» and at most of his Pindarics and Lyrical Pieces. But Ben, when he pleased, could assume the garb of classic simplicity; witness many of his lesser poems.

draw upon a large fund of acquired knowledge for supplying the expenditure of far-fetched and extravagant images, which their compositions required. The book of nature is before all men; but when her limits are to be overstepped, the acquirement of adventurous knowledge becomes of paramount necessity; and it was but natural that Cambridge and Oxford should prize a style of poetry, to which depth of learning was absolutely indispensable.

I have stated, that the metaphysical poetry was fashionable during the early part of Charles the First's reign. It is true, that Milton descended to upbraid that unfortunate prince, that the chosen companion of his private hours was one *William Shakspeare, a player*; but Charles admitted less sacred poets to share his partiality. Ben Jonson supplied his court with masques, and his pageants with verses; and, notwithstanding an ill-natured story, shared no inconsiderable portion of his bounty.<sup>1</sup> Donne, a leader among the metaphysical

<sup>1</sup> In Jonson's last illness, Charles is said to have sent him ten pieces. «He sends me so miserable a donation,» said the expiring satirist, «because I am poor, and live in an alley; go back and tell him, his soul lives in an alley.» Whatever be the truth of this tradition, we know, from an epigram by Jonson, that the king at one time gave him an hundred pounds; no trifling gift for a poor bard, even in the present day