CHAPTER I.

JOHN DRYDEN AS A POET.

John Dryden was born August 9, 1631, at Aldwinkle All Saints, between Thrapston and Oundle, in Northamptonshire. He was the grandson of Sir Erasmus Dryden, baronet, of Canons Ashby, in the same county; and his father possessed a small landed property, which he transmitted to the poet. Dryden maintained a connection with his native county all his life, but it was never close; of the rest of the world, outside London and Cambridge, he only occasionally saw anything. Few of our great writers have been so thoroughly identified with the metropolis, of which he became an inhabitant at an early age by his entry at Westminster School, the precise date of which is unknown. Locke and South were among his schoolfellows. He must have distinguished himself, having been elected to Cambridge in 1650. Before leaving Westminster he had made his first appearance as an author by the publication of a copy of verses on the death from smallpox of his schoolfellow Lord Hastings, an unintentional *reductio ad absurdum* of the reigning fashion of extravagant conceits in the style of Marino and Gongora. This composition, otherwise worthless, foreshadows in a manner the whole of Dryden's career. He was not one of the writers who themselves form the taste by which they are ultimately judged, but rather one of those who achieve fame by doing best what all desire to be done; the representatives of their age, not its reformers. Little is known of his career at Cambridge except that he was on one occasion 'discommoned and gated' for some irregularity, that he took his degree in 1654, and, though obtaining no fellowship, continued to reside until about 1657, when he removed to London, with what precise plans or expectations is uncertain.[1] The general knowledge displayed in his critical writings (he scarcely ever, says Johnson, appears to want book-learning but when he mentions books) justifies the conclusion that his time had been employed in study: how greatly his mind had matured was attested by his verses on the death of Cromwell (1658), which, if disfigured by some conceits, exhibit a more sustained elevation than any contemporary except Milton or Marvell could have attained. They were rivalled by his congratulatory verses on the Restoration (1660), which naturally exposed him to the reproach of inconsistency, but, as Johnson remarks, 'If he changed, he changed with the nation.' There can, indeed, be no doubt that the establishment of a settled government was approved by the good sense as well as by the loyalty of the country, and although circumstances were to make Dryden the most formidable of political controversialists upon paper, his temperament was not that of a polemic, and, save when he had committed himself too far to retreat, he was always ready to acquiesce in what commended itself to the general sentiment of his countrymen. The Restoration was also a joyful event to men of letters, if for no other reason than that it re-opened the stage, which, while as yet the periodical press was not, afforded the best market and the readiest opportunity for literary talent. Dryden is said to have had a play ready soon after the Restoration, and it is difficult to understand, except from a certain inertness in his constitution, ever most readily responsive to the spur of necessity, why he should have so long delayed his appearance as a dramatist. The determining motive may ultimately have been his marriage (not, apparently, a very fortunate one) to Lady

Elizabeth Howard, eldest daughter of the Earl of Berkshire, in December, 1663; for in that year he produced his first play, *The Wild Gallant*, and from that time we find him, for many years, sedulously at work to earn money by a description of literary activity notoriously uncongenial to him. Only one of his numerous plays, he tells us, was written to please himself. The long list includes, *The Indian Emperor* (1665), in which, instead of reforming the weak blank verse of his day, which would have been a most important service, he fell in with the prevalent fashion of rhymed tragedy; *Tyrannic Love* (1669), and *The Conquest of Granada* (1672), in which he carries rhymed bombast as far as it would go, but at the same time displays surprising energy and vigour; *Aurengzebe* (1675), also a rhyming play, but a great improvement; *All for Love* (1678), and *Don Sebastian* (1690), examples of a purer taste; and *The Spanish Friar* (1683), and *Amphitryon* (1690), his best comedies. These pieces, the chief landmarks of his dramatic career, will be subsequently considered.

Returning to the incidents of Dryden's life, we find little to chronicle for several years except the births of three children, his elevation to the laureateship in 1670, and various literary controversies of no interest at this day except as they served to call forth the admirable critical prefaces by which he did more for English prose style than his poetry was at that time effecting for English verse. It is remarkable how late his genius flowered, and how long he was in discovering his proper path. He might never have found it at all but for the accidental coincidence of the political controversies of his time with his official position as poet laureate. This seemed to impose on Dryden the duty of coming to the assistance of the Court, and his recognition of the obligation produced (1681) *Absalom and Achitophel*, which at once gave him the distinction of the greatest satirist our literature had yet produced, the most consummate artist in the heroic couplet, and the most cogent reasoner in rhyme. *The Medal*, occasioned by a medal struck by the City in honour of the failure of the indictment of Shaftesbury, was suggested as the subject of a poem by Charles II. The fact has been doubted, and does not rest upon very strong external authority, but is confirmed by a letter from Dryden to the Treasurer, Hyde, now in the British Museum, shown by internal evidence to have been written after the publication of *Absalom and Achitophel*, and consequently after the striking of the medal on occasion of Shaftesbury's acquittal. In this, after speaking of his expense in the education of his children, complaining of the irregular receipt of his pension, and remarking that even a quarter in advance 'is but the Jesuits' powder to my disease, the fit will return a fortnight hence,' he adds, 'I am going to write somewhat by his Majesty's command, and cannot stir into the country for my health and studies till I secure my family from want.' This can hardly have been anything but *The Medal*.[2] The appeal, after some delay, brought Dryden an addition to his pension and a sinecure office in the Customs.

This was the most active period of Dryden's life as a poet. A personal altercation occasioned by an attack on *The Medal* by Thomas Shadwell produced *MacFlecknoe*, the bitterest of his satires, and in the same year of 1682 appeared the second part of *Absalom and Achitophel*, chiefly by Nahum Tate, but containing upwards of two hundred lines from Dryden's own pen, dealing with his literary antagonists in a style of sovereign mastery. Almost simultaneously appeared *Religio Laici*, 'a serious argument in verse on the credibility of the Christian religion and the merits of the Anglican form of doctrine and church government.' Dryden's mastery over metrical ratiocination made the subject attractive; but the Church of England had hardly done rejoicing in her champion when she was scandalized by his exodus to the Church of Rome. It is not likely that he was altogether insincere;

but it can hardly be doubted that the death of a monarch of taste and parts, who valued him for his genius, and the accession of a successor who valued men only for their theology, and gently hinted the fact by docking his salary of a hundred pounds, had more to do with his resolution than he quite acknowledged to himself. The position of the Protestant laureate of a Popish sovereign called upon to bid Protestants rejoice over the birth of a Popish Prince of Wales, generally in that age believed to have been smuggled into the palace in a warming-pan, would assuredly have presented difficulties even to those who found none in extolling George II.'s patronage of the arts. Dryden was too deeply committed to expect anything from the other side. The apology for his conversion was given to the world in his *Hind and Panther* (1687), a poem displaying even augmented power of reasoning in rhyme, and which might have ranked with his best but for the absurdity of the machinery. Soon afterwards the unsoundness of the foundation on which he had built his fortunes was demonstrated by the Revolution, which deprived him of the laureateship and swept away all official sources of income. But for his change of religion he might have taken the oaths to the new government without censure, but he had broken down the bridges behind him, and seemed for a moment to have left himself no alternative between want and infamy. A third nevertheless remained, hard labour for the booksellers. To his great honour, Dryden grappled with the situation with all the sturdy tenacity of his lymphatic temperament, and in the same spirit which Scott afterwards displayed under similar circumstances. He may probably have reformed his system of living, which can hardly have been other than extravagant; certain it is that if he could not keep entirely out of debt, he at least kept out of disgrace, and that the years which followed his apparent ruin, if not the most brilliant part of his life, were the most honourable and honoured. It should be added that he appears to have been largely assisted by the generosity of friends, especially Dorset.

The work which Dryden now found to do, for which he possessed extraordinary qualifications, and for which there was a genuine demand in the age, was that of translation from the Latin classics. The derivative character of Latin literature was not then recognized, and Roman authors received the veneration due of right only to the greatest of the Greeks. No one doubted that they gave unsurpassable models of style in their respective branches, and not many among Dryden's contemporaries questioned that he had given a definite and durable form to English poetry. In 1667, a few days before the publication of *Paradise Lost*, Pepys had overheard men saying that there would never be such another English poet as Cowley, and Dryden now stood in Cowley's place. It seemed then a highly desirable thing to bring these two classics together, and Dryden was perfectly competent to do whatever was expected of him. He would hardly have succeeded so well with the Greek writers, even had his knowledge of the language been more extensive; but he was well qualified to reproduce the more distinctive qualities of Roman poetry, its dignity, sometimes rising into majesty, its manly sense, its vehemence, pregnancy, and terseness. By 1693 he had rendered all Persius, much of Juvenal (the remainder was supplied by his sons), considerable portions of Ovid, the first book of Homer, and something from Theocritus, Horace, and Lucretius. In this year he commenced a more ambitious work, a complete version of Virgil. Of the merits of these works we shall speak hereafter; it is sufficient to observe here that they for a long time prescribed the laws of metrical translation in English. It is pleasant to notice how many of them were executed at the country seats of friends, where the old man, discharged from the strife of faction and the noise and glare of theatres, relieved his intellectual toil by the simple amusements of a country life. Virgil was published in

1697, and remained, in the judgment of the age, at the head of all English translations until Pope's *Homer* came to dethrone it. It was immediately succeeded by a greater work still, his *Fables* from Chaucer and Boccaccio. Though the representative of the literary taste of his time, Dryden was by no means the representative of its prejudices. He saw much more in Chaucer than his contemporaries were capable of seeing, and, rightly judging that the antiquated style of the old poet (who, however, appeared to him much more uncouth than he really was) would effectually keep him out of readers' hands, he determined to modernize and adapt some of his stories, to which narrative poems founded on Boccaccio were afterwards added. The undertaking precisely suited the genius of Dryden, which lay more in expressing and adorning what he found ready to hand than in original invention, and his *Fables*, published in 1699, are deservedly placed at the head of his works. It is of course impossible that they should exhibit the same intellectual strength as his argumentative and satirical poems, but this is more than compensated by their superior attractiveness, the additional scope offered for the display of art, and their comparative freedom from everything that can repel. The same volume contained his greatest lyrical effort, the universally known *Alexander's Feast*. He received forty pounds for it; the Virgil is said to have brought him twelve hundred; for the *Fables* he got only three hundred. From a private letter of about this date it appears that there was some idea of his receiving assistance from the government, which he seems not unwilling to accept, provided that it proves to require no sacrifice of principle. It is not likely that he would have been allowed to die in want; and indeed, early in 1700, a dramatic performance was got up for his benefit. He died shortly afterwards (May 1st, 1700) in narrow pecuniary circumstances, but in the enjoyment of a more unquestioned literary supremacy among his contemporaries than any Englishman had held before him. The cause of his death was the mortification of a toe inflamed by gout. He was buried in Westminster Abbey. The funeral, for the splendour of which Farquhar vouches in a contemporary letter, is said to have been accompanied by tumultuary scenes, but the absence of any reference to these in a malevolent contemporary libel, ascribed to Thomas Brown, is sufficient evidence that they did not occur.

There are few English writers of eminence whom it is so difficult to realize satisfactorily to the mind's eye as Dryden. Personal enough in one respect, his writings are singularly impersonal in another; he never paints, and seldom reveals himself, and the aid which letters or reminiscences might have afforded is almost entirely wanting. No one noted his conversation; his enemies' attacks and his friends' panegyrics are equally devoid of those traits of character which might have invested a shadowy outline with life and substance. The nearest approach to a portrait is Congreve's, which leaves most of the character in the shade, and even this is somewhat suspicious, for Congreve was Dryden's debtor for noble praise, and the vindication of Dryden's repute had been imposed upon him by the poet himself. The qualities, however, which he commends are such as seem entirely reconcilable with the lymphatic temperament which, partly on his own authority ('my conversation,' he says, 'is slow and dull, my humour saturnine and reserved'), we have seen reason to attribute to Dryden. We are told of his humanity and compassion, of his readiness to forgive injuries, of a friendship that exceeded his professions, of his diffidence in general society and horror of intrusiveness, of his patience in accepting corrections of his own errors, of which he must be allowed to have given a remarkable instance in his submission to Jeremy Collier. All these traits give the impression of one who, though by no means pedantic, was only a wit when he had the pen in his hand, and entirely correspond with his apparent aversion

to intellectual labour, except under the pressure of want or the stimulus of Court favour. When at length he did warm to his work, we know from himself that thoughts crowded so rapidly upon him that his only difficulty was to decide what to reject. Such a man may well have appeared a negative character to his contemporaries, and the events of his life were not of a nature to force his virtues or his failings into notice. We can only say that there is no proof of his having been a bad husband; that there is clear evidence of his having been a good father; and that, although he took the wrong side in the political and religious controversies of his day, this is no reason why he may not, according to his light, have been a good citizen. His references to illustrious predecessors like Shakespeare and Milton, and promising young men like Congreve, indicate a real generosity of character. The moral defects of his writings, coarse licentiousness, unmeasured invective, and equally unmeasured adulation, belong to the age rather than to the man. On the whole, we may say that he was one whom we should probably have esteemed if we could have known him; but in whom, apart from his writings, we should not have discovered the first literary figure of his generation.

Dryden's early poems, the *Heroic Stanzas* on the death of Cromwell, the *Astraea Redux* on the Restoration, the panegyric of Clarendon, and the verses on the Coronation, are greatly marred for modern readers by extravagant conceits, but are sobriety itself compared to the exploits of contemporary poets, especially the Pindaric. In a more important particular, Dryden, as Scott remarks, has observed a singular and happy delicacy. The topic of the Civil War is but slightly dwelt on; and, although Cromwell is extolled, his eulogist abstains from any reflections against those through whom he cut his way to greatness. Isolated couplets in the other poems occasionally display that perfection of condensed and pointed expression which Dryden habitually attained in his later poems:

'Spain to your gift alone her Indies owes;
For what the powerful takes not, he bestows:
And France, that did an exile's presence fear,
May justly apprehend you still too near.'—Astraea Redux.

These early attempts, however, were completely thrown into the shade by the *Annus Mirabilis*, a poem on the memorable events of 1666, written at Charlton, near Malmesbury, the seat of Lord Berkeley, where Dryden and his family had resorted in 1665 to escape the plague, and published in February, 1667. The author was then thirty-five, and, judged in the light of his subsequent celebrity, had as yet achieved surprisingly little either in quantity or quality. Youth is generally the most affluent season of poetical activity; and those poets whose claim to inspiration is the most unimpeachable—Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley—have irradiated their early writings with flashes of genius which their maturer skill hardly enabled them to eclipse. This cannot be said of Dryden, who of our great poets, unless Pope be an exception, probably owed least to inspiration and most to pains and practice. Even Pope at this age had produced *The Rape of the Lock*, *The Temple of Fame*, *Eloisa to Abelard*, and his translation of the Iliad, enough to have given him a high place among English poets. The *Annus Mirabilis* was the first production of Dryden that could have insured him remembrance with posterity, and even this is sadly disfigured with conceits. After all, the poet finds only two marvels of his wonderful year worthy of record—the Dutch war, which had been going on for two years, and which produced a much greater wonder in the year ensuing, when the Dutch sailed up to Gravesend and burned the English fleet; and the Great Fire of London. The

treatment of the former is very tedious and dragging; there are many striking lines, but more conceits like the following, descriptive of the English attack upon the Dutch East Indiamen:

'Amidst whole heaps of spices lights a ball,
And now their odours armed against them fly;
Some preciously by shattered porcelain fall,
And some by aromatic splinters die.'

The second part, treating of the Fire of London, is infinitely better. Dryden exhibits one of the most certain marks of a good writer, he rises with his subject. Yet there is no lack of absurdities. The Deity extinguishes the conflagration precisely in the manner in which Dryden would have put out his own candle:

'An hollow crystal pyramid he takes,
In firmamental waters dipt above;
Of it a broad extinguisher he makes,
And hoods the flames that to their quarry drove.'

Nothing in Dryden is more amazing than his inequality. This stanza is succeeded by the following:

'The vanquished fires withdraw from every place,
Or, full with feeding, sink into a sleep;
Each household genius shows again his face,
And from the hearths the little Lares creep.'

Other quatrains are still better, as, for instance, this on the burning of St. Paul's:

'The daring flames peeped in, and saw from far
The awful beauties of the sacred quire;
But since it was profaned by civil war,
Heaven thought it fit to have it purged by fire.'

A thought so striking, that the reader does not pause to reflect that the celestial sentence would have been equally applicable to every cathedral in the country. Perhaps the following stanzas compose the passage of most sustained excellence. In them, as in the apostrophe to the Royal Society, in an earlier part of the poem, Dryden appears truly the *vates sacer*, and his poetry becomes prophecy:

'Methinks already from this chymic flame
I see a city of more precious mould;
Rich as the town which gives the Indies name,
With silver paved, and all divine with gold.

'Already labouring with a mighty fate
She shakes the rubbish from her mounting brow,
And seems to have renewed her charter's date,
Which heaven will to the death of Time allow.

'More great than human now, and more august,
Now deified she from her fires doth rise;
Her widening streets on new foundations trust,

And opening into larger parts she flies.

'Before, she like some shepherdess did show,
Who sat to bathe her by a river's side;
Not answering to her fame, but rude and low,
Nor taught the beauteous arts of modern pride.

'Now like a Maiden Queen she will behold
From her high turrets hourly suitors come;
The East with incense and the West with gold
Will stand like suppliants to receive her doom.

'The silver Thames, her own domestic flood,
Shall bear her vessels like a sweeping train;
And often wind, as of his mistress proud,
With longing eyes to meet her face again.

'The wealthy Tagus, and the wealthier Rhine,
The glory of their towns no more shall boast;
And Seine, that would with Belgian rivers join,
Shall find her lustre stained and traffic lost.

'The venturous merchant, who designed more far,
And touches on our hospitable shore,
Charmed with the splendour of this northern star,
Shall here unlade him, and depart no more.'

For several years after *Annus Mirabilis*, Dryden produced but little poetry apart from his dramas. Fashion, Court encouragement, and the necessity of providing for his family, had bound him to what was then the most conspicuous and lucrative form of authorship. In one point of view he committed a great error in addicting himself to the drama. He was not naturally qualified to excel in it, and could only obtain even a temporary success by condescending to the prevalent faults of the contemporary stage, its bombast and its indecency. The latter transgression was eventually so handsomely confessed by himself that but little need be said of it. Bombast is natural to two classes of writers, the ardent and the phlegmatic, and those whose emotions require the most working up are frequently the worst offenders. Such was Dryden's case, and his natural proclivity was much enhanced by his adoption of the new fashion of writing in rhyme, beloved at Court, but affording every temptation and every facility for straining after effect in the place of Nature. Mr. Saintsbury justly reminds us that Dryden was not forsaking the blank verse of Shakespeare and Fletcher, the secret of which had long been lost; nevertheless, although, as we shall see when we come to his critical writings, he pleaded very ingeniously for rhyme in 1665, his adoption of it was condemned by his maturer judgment and practice. It was, however, fortunate in the long run; his rhyming plays, of which we shall speak in another place, would not have been great successes in any metre, while practice in their composition, and the necessity of expressing the multitude of diverse sentiments required by bustling scenes and crowds of characters, gradually gave him that command of the heroic couplet which bestows such strength and brilliancy on his later writings. His 'fourteen years of dramatic practice,' as Mr. Saintsbury justly says, 'acted as a filtering reservoir for his poetical powers, so that the stream, which, when it ran into them, was the turbid and rubbish-laden current of *Annus Mirabilis*, flowed out as impetuous, as strong, but clear and

without base admixture, in the splendid verse of *Absalom and Achitophel*.'[3]

This great poem, published in November, 1681, at the height of the contest over the Exclusion Bill and its consequences, remains to this day the finest example of political satire in English literature. The theme was skilfully selected. James II. had not yet convinced the most sceptical of the justice and wisdom of the Exclusion Bill, and its advocates laboured under the serious disadvantage of having no strong claimant for the succession if they prevailed in setting the Duke of York aside. James's son-in-law, the Prince of Orange, would not, it is safe to say, ever have been accepted by the nation as king if James's folly and tyranny had not, years afterwards, given him the opportunity of presenting himself in the character of Deliverer; and, failing him, there was no one but the popular but unfortunately illegitimate Monmouth. The character of Absalom seemed exactly made for this handsome and foolish prince. The resemblance of his royal father to David, except in matters akin to the affair of Bathsheba, was not quite so obvious. Dryden might almost have been suspected of satirizing his master when he wrote:

'When nature prompted, and no law denied
Promiscuous use of concubine and bride;
Then Israel's monarch after heaven's own heart
His vigorous warmth did variously impart
To wives and slaves; and, wide as his command,
Scattered his Maker's image through the land.
Of all the numerous progeny was none
So beautiful, so brave as Absolon.'

The management of Absalom was a difficult matter. With all his transgressions, the rebel Monmouth was still beloved by his father, and Dryden could not have ventured to treat him as his prototype is treated by Scripture. He has extricated himself from the dilemma with abundant dexterity, but at some expense to his poem. The catastrophe required by poetical justice does not come to pass, and the conclusion is tame. All such defects, however, are forgotten in the splendour of the execution. The versification is the finest in its style that English literature had yet seen, the perfection of heroic verse. The sense is weighty and massive, as befits such an organ of expression, and, whatever may be thought of Dryden's flatteries of individuals, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity with which he here expresses his political convictions. He unquestionably belonged to that class of mankind who cannot discern principles apart from persons, and his contempt for abstractions is pointedly expressed in one of his ringing couplets:

'Thought they might ruin him they could create,
Or melt him to that golden calf—a state.'

This is not a very high manifestation of the intellect in its application to political questions, but it bespeaks the class of persons who provide ballast for the vessel of the state in tempestuous times; and, on the whole, *Absalom and Achitophel* is a poem which the patriot as well as the admirer of genius may read with complacency. The royal side of the question could not be better put than in these lines placed in the mouth of David:

'Thus long have I, by native mercy sway'd,
My wrongs dissembled, my revenge delay'd;
So willing to forgive the offending age,
So much the father did the king assuage.
But now so far my clemency they slight,
The offenders question my forgiving right.
That one was made for many, they contend;
But 'tis to rule; for that's a monarch's end.
They call my tenderness of blood, my fear;
Though manly tempers can the longest bear.
Yet since they will divert my native course,
'Tis time to shew I am not good by force.
Those heap'd affronts, that haughty subjects bring,
Are burdens for a camel, not a king.
Kings are the public pillars of the state,
Born to sustain and prop the nation's weight:
If my young Sampson will pretend a call
To shake the column, let him share the fall.
But oh, that he yet would repent and live!

How easy 'tis for parents to forgive!
With how few tears a pardon might be won
From nature pleading for a darling son!
Poor, pitied youth, by my paternal care
Raised up to all the height his frame could bear!
Had God ordain'd his fate for empire born,
He would have given his soul another turn:
Gull'd with a patriot's name, whose modern sense
Is one that would by law supplant his prince;
The people's brave, the politician's tool;
Never was patriot yet, but was a fool.
Whence comes it, that religion and the laws
Should more be Absolom's than David's cause?
His old instructor, ere he lost his place,
Was never thought endued with so much grace.
Good heavens, how faction can a patriot paint!
My rebel ever proves my people's saint.
Would they impose an heir upon the throne?
Let Sanhedrims be taught to give their own.
A king's at least a part of government;
And mine as requisite as their consent.
Without my leave a future king to choose,
Infers a right the present to depose.
True, they petition me to approve their choice;
But Esau's hands suit ill with Jacob's voice.
My pious subjects for my safety pray;
Which to secure, they take my power away.
From plots and treasons heaven preserve my years,
And save me most from my petitioners!'

It will be observed that 'the right the present to depose,' is mentioned by Dryden as something manifestly preposterous, and the derivation of it as a logical corollary from the Exclusion Bill is assumed to be a sufficient *reductio ad absurdum* of the latter. In the view of the majority of the nation, this was sound doctrine until the Revolution, which reduced Dryden's poem from the rank of a powerful political manifesto to that of a brilliant exercise of fancy and dialectic. As such, it will never cease to please and to impress. The finest passages are, no doubt, those descriptive of character, whether carefully studied portraits or strokes against particular foibles imputed to the poet's adversaries, such as this mock apology for the parsimonious kitchen of the Whig sheriff, Slingsby Bethel:

'Such frugal virtue malice may accuse,
But sure 'twas necessary to the Jews:
For towns, once burnt, such magistrates require,
As dare not tempt God's providence by fire.'

The elaborate and glowing characters of Achitophel (Shaftesbury) and Zimri (Buckingham) it is needless to transcribe, as they are universally known. It may be remarked that the character of the turbulent and adventurous Shaftesbury does not match very well with that of the Ulyssean Achitophel of Scripture, but Dryden has wisely drawn from what he had before his eyes.

The Medal, which we have seen reason for attributing to the suggestion of

Charles II. himself, appeared in March, 1682. It is a bitter invective against Shaftesbury, its theme the medal which his partisans had very naturally struck upon the occasion of his acquittal in the preceding autumn. It is entirely in a serious vein, and wants the grace and urbanity of some parts of *Absalom and Achitophel*, but is no way inferior as a piece of strong, vehement satire. Shaftesbury's conduct as a minister, before his breach with the Court, is thus described:

'Behold him now exalted into trust;
His counsel's oft convenient, seldom just:
Even in the most sincere advice he gave
He had a grudging still to be a knave.
The frauds he learned in his fanatic years
Made him uneasy in his lawful gears;
At best, as little honest as he could,
And, like white witches, mischievously good.'

The second part of *Absalom and Achitophel* appeared in November, 1682. It was mainly the work of Nahum Tate, who imitated his master's versification with success, but has numerous touches from the pen of Dryden, who inserted a long passage of unparalleled satire against his adversaries, especially Settle and Shadwell:

'Who by my means to all succeeding times
Shall live in spite of their own doggrel rhymes.'

The character of Shadwell (Og) is well known, but it is impossible to avoid quoting a portion of it:

'The midwife laid her hand on his thick skull,
With this prophetic blessing—"Be thou dull;
Drink, swear and roar; forbear no lewd delight
Fit for thy bulk; do any thing but write.
Thou art of lasting make, like thoughtless men,
A strong nativity—but for the pen;
Eat opium, mingle arsenic in thy drink,
Still thou mayst live, avoiding pen and ink."
I see, I see, 'tis counsel given in vain,
For treason, botch'd in rhyme, will be thy bane;
Rhyme is the rock on which thou art to wreck,
'Tis fatal to thy fame and to thy neck.
Why should thy metre good King David blast?
A psalm of his will surely be thy last.
Darest thou presume in verse to meet thy foes,
Thou, whom the penny pamphlet foil'd in prose?
Doeg, whom God for mankind's mirth has made,
O'ertops thy talent in thy very trade;
Doeg, to thee, thy paintings are so coarse,
A poet is, though he's the poet's horse.
A double noose thou on thy neck dost pull,
For writing treason, and for writing dull.
To die for faction is a common evil,
But to be hang'd for nonsense is the devil.
Hadst thou the glories of thy king exprest,

Thy praises had been satire at the best;
But thou in clumsy verse, unlickt, unpointed,
Hast shamefully defiled the Lord's anointed.
I will not rake the dunghill of thy crimes,
For who would read thy life that reads thy rhymes?
But of King David's foes, be this the doom,
May all be like the young man Absolom;
And, for my foes, may this their blessing be,
To talk like Doeg, and to write like thee!'

Only a month before the appearance of this annihilating attack, Dryden had devoted an entire poem to Shadwell, who had justly provoked him by a scandalous libel. The title of *MacFlecknoe* is derived from an Irish priest and, with the exception of some good lines pointed out by Southey and Lamb, a bad poet, already satirized by Marvell. It is a vigorous attack, but not equal to the passage in *Absalom and Achitophel*, and chiefly memorable inasmuch as the machinery evidently suggested that of Pope's *Dunciad*.

Dryden's next poetical efforts, the dramatic excepted, were of quite another kind. Simultaneously with the second part of *Absalom and Achitophel* appeared *Religio Laici*, an argument for the faith of the Church of England as a *juste milieu* between Popery and Deism. In one respect this takes the highest place among the works of Dryden, for it is the most perfect example he has given of that reasoning in rhyme of which he was so great a master. There is not and could not be any originality in the reasonings themselves, but Pope's famous couplet was never so finely illustrated, except by Pope himself:

'True wit is nature to advantage drest;
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well exprest.'

At the same time the poetry hardly rises to the height which the theme might have justified. There is little to captivate or astonish, but perpetual admiration attends upon the masterly conduct of the argument, and the ease with which dry and difficult propositions melt and glide in harmonious verse. The execution is singularly equable; but perhaps hardly maintains the elevation of the fine exordium:

'Dim as the borrow'd beams of moon and stars
To lonely, weary, wandering travellers,
Is reason to the soul: and as, on high,
Those rolling fires discover but the sky,

Not light us here; so reason's glimmering ray	
Was lent, not to assure our doubtful way,	
But guide us upwards to a better day.	

And as those nightly tapers disappear,
When day's bright lord ascends our hemisphere;
So pale grows reason at religion's sight,
So dies, and so dissolves in supernatural light.
Some few, whose lamp shone brighter, have been led
From cause to cause, to nature's sacred head,
And found that one First Principle must be:
But what, or who, that universal He;

Whether some soul, encompassing this ball,
Unmade, unmoved; yet making, moving all;
Or various atoms' interfering dance
Leap'd into form, the noble work of chance;

Or this great All was from eternity.—	
Not even the Stagyrite himself could see,	
And Epicurus guess'd as well as he.	

As blindly groped they for a future state,
As rashly judged of providence and fate;
But least of all could their endeavours find
What most concern'd the good of human kind;
For happiness was never to be found,
But vanish'd from them like enchanted ground.
One thought content the good to be enjoy'd;
This very little accident destroy'd:
The wiser madmen did for virtue toil,
A thorny, or, at best, a barren soil:

In pleasure some their glutton souls would steep;	
But found their line too short, the well too deep,	
And leaky vessels which no bliss could keep.	

Thus anxious thoughts in endless circles roll,
Without a centre where to fix the soul:
In this wild maze their vain endeavours end:—
How can the less the greater comprehend?
Or finite reason reach infinity?
For what could fathom God were more than he.'

Dryden's next important poem brought obloquy upon him in his own day, and must be perused with mingled feelings in this. Between 1682 and 1687, the date of the publication of *The Hind and the Panther*, the laureate of the Church of England had, as we have seen, become a Roman Catholic, and most reasonably desired to justify this step to the world. The Court also expected his pen to be drawn in their service, and hence the double purpose which runs through the poem, of vindicating his personal change of conviction and of justifying the political measures to which James had had recourse for establishing the supremacy of his church. All this was perfectly natural; the extraordinary thing is that so great a master of ridicule should have been blind to the ludicrous character of the machinery which he devised to carry out his purpose. The comparison of the true church to the milk-white hind, and of the corrupt church to the beautiful but spotted panther, might have been employed with propriety as an ornament or illustration of the poem, but the endeavour to make it the groundwork of the entire piece is pregnant with absurdity. Animals may very well be introduced as actors in a fiction upon condition that they behave like animals; and their faculties may even be expanded to suit the author's purpose so long as their exercise is confined to visible and concrete things; but the notion of a pair of quadrupeds discussing the sacraments, tradition, and the infallibility of the Pope, is only fit for burlesque, and constitutes, indeed, a running burlesque upon the poem. Dryden probably took up the idea without sufficient consideration, and when he had made some progress in his work he may well have been too enamoured

with the beautiful but preposterous exordium to surrender it to common sense. Perverse and fantastic as is the plan of his poem, none of his works is richer in beauties of detail. ‘In none,’ says Macaulay, ‘can be found passages more pathetic and magnificent, greater ductility and energy of language, or a more pleasing and various music.’ The power of reasoning in rhyme is little inferior to that displayed in *Religio Laici*, and the narrative character of the piece allows of a diversified variety excluded by the simply didactic character of its predecessor. The invective against Calvinists and Socinians, typified by the wolf and the fox, is an average, and not beyond an average, example of Dryden’s matchless force. Near the end, it will be perceived, he suddenly bethinks himself that, as the apologist of James’s ostensible policy, it is his business to recommend not persecution but toleration, and he caps his objurgation with a passage conceived in a widely different spirit, a severe though unintentional reflection upon the practice of his own church:

‘O happy pair, how well you have increased!
What ills in church and state have you redress’d!
With teeth, untried, and rudiments of claws,
Your first essay was on your native laws;
Those having torn with ease, and trampled down,
Your fangs you fasten’d on the mitred crown,
And freed from God and monarchy your town.
What though your native kennel still be small,
Bounded betwixt a puddle and a wall;
Yet your victorious colonies are sent
Where the north ocean girds the continent.
Quicken’d with fire below, your monsters breed
In fenny Holland, and in fruitful Tweed;
And, like the first, the last affects to be
Drawn to the dregs of a democracy.
As, where in fields the fairy rounds are seen,
A rank sour herbage rises on the green;
So, springing where those midnight elves advance,
Rebellion prints the footsteps of the dance.
Such are their doctrines, such contempt they show
To heaven above, and to their prince below,
As none but traitors and blasphemers know.
God, like the tyrant of the skies, is placed,
And kings, like slaves, beneath the crowd debased.
So fulsome is their food, that flocks refuse
To bite, and only dogs for physic use.
As, where the lightning runs along the ground,
No husbandry can heal the blasting wound;
Nor bladed grass, nor bearded corn succeeds,
But scales of scurf and putrefaction breeds;
Such wars, such waste, such fiery tracks of dearth
Their zeal has left, and such a teemless earth.
But, as the poisons of the deadliest kind
Are to their own unhappy coasts confined;

As only Indian shades of sight deprive,
And magic plants will but in Colchos thrive
So presbytery and pestilential zeal
Can only flourish in a commonweal.
From Celtic woods is chased the wolfish crew;
But ah! some pity e'en to brutes is due;
Their native walks, methinks, they might enjoy,
Curb'd of their native malice to destroy.
Of all the tyrannies on human kind,
The worst is that which persecutes the mind.
Let us but weigh at what offence we strike;
'Tis but because we cannot think alike.
In punishing of this, we overthrow
The laws of nations and of nature too.
Beasts are the subjects of tyrannic sway,
Where still the stronger on the weaker prey;
Man only of a softer mould is made,
Not for his fellows' ruin, but their aid;
Created kind, beneficent and free,
The noble image of the Deity.'

Dryden produced yet one more poem in the interest of the Court, his *Britannia Rediviva*, an official panegyric on the birth of the Prince of Wales, June, 1688. Literature has perhaps no more signal instance of adulation wasted and prediction falsified. Many lines are spirited, but others betray Dryden's fatal insensibility to the ridiculous in his own person:

'When humbly on the royal babe we gaze,
The manly lines of a majestic face
Give awful joy.'

The raptures of the Byzantine courtiers over the imperial infant Protus were nothing to this. Dryden did not want eloquence or dignity to celebrate the hero if he could have found him; it was his and our misfortune that when the hero did at last come to the throne the poet had disqualified himself from extolling him. The landing in Torbay and the triumphal march to London; the victory at the Boyne and the defence of Londonderry were transactions as worthy of epical treatment as any history records; but the only man in England who could have treated them epically deemed them rather matter for elegy; and to have indulged in elegy he must have fled to France. Public events and political and religious controversy were no longer for him: stripped of his means and position he betook himself to translation and playwriting as the readiest means of repairing his shattered fortunes, and it was not until the mellow sunset of his life that he turned to the compositions which, of all he ever wrote, have given the most delight and the least offence, his *Fables*. These, published at the beginning of 1700, include five adaptations from Chaucer, and three stories told after Boccaccio, as well as *Alexander's Feast*, and a few other pieces. It would not be too much to say that this book achieved two things, either of which would have immortalized a poet: it fixed the standard of narrative poetry, except of the metrical romance or ballad class, and also that of heroic versification. The latter, indeed, was thought for a time to have been transcended by Pope, but modern ears have tired of the balanced seesaw of the Popian couplet, and crave the ease and variety of Dryden, restored to literature in Leigh Hunt's *Story of Rimini*,

and afterwards imitated by Keats in *Lamia*. The freedom which so great a master allows himself in rhyming should be a lesson to modern purists: final sounds so slightly akin as *guard* and *prepared*, *placed* and *last*, are of continual occurrence. In matters still more important than versification Dryden is in general equally admirable. He subjected himself to a severe test in competing with Chaucer—severer than he knew, for Chaucer was not yet, even by Dryden, valued at his full worth. In some respects Dryden certainly suffers greatly by the comparison. He is pre-eminently an intellectual poet, to whom the tree of knowledge had been the tree of life; there is perhaps scarcely a thought in his writings that charms by absolute simplicity and pure nature. Wherever, therefore, Chaucer is transparently simple and unaffected, we find him altered for the worse in Dryden. The very important part, however, of *The Knight's Tale* which is concerned with courts, camps, and chivalry is even better in Dryden than in his model. He might have defined his sphere in the words of Ariosto, a poet who has many points of contact with him:

'Le donne, i cavalier, l'arme, gli amori,
Le cortesie, l'audaci imprese io canto.'

If this is true of portions of *Palamon and Arcite*, it is still truer of *The Flower and the Leaf* (then believed to be a genuine work of Chaucer's), throughout a most brilliant picture of natural beauty and courtly glitter, painted in language of chastened splendour. The other pieces modelled after Chaucer are of inferior interest, yet all excellent in their way. Two of the three tales from Boccaccio are acknowledged masterpieces, *Cymon and Iphigenia* and *Theodore and Honoria*. The interest of the first chiefly consists in the narrative itself, and that of the second in the way of telling it. The story, indeed, though striking, is fantastic and hardly pleasing, but Dryden's treatment of it is perhaps the most perfect specimen in our language of *l'art de conter*.

An example of Dryden's descriptive power may be given in a passage from *The Flower and the Leaf*:

'Thus while I sat intent to see and hear,
And drew perfumes of more than vital air,
All suddenly I heard the approaching sound
Of vocal music, on the enchanted ground:
An host of saints it seem'd, so full the choir;
As if the bless'd above did all conspire
To join their voices, and neglect the lyre.
At length there issued from the grove behind
A fair assembly of the female kind:
A train less fair, as ancient fathers tell,
Seduced the sons of heaven to rebel.
I pass their forms, and every charming grace;
Less than an angel would their worth debase:
But their attire, like liveries of a kind,
All rich and rare, is fresh within my mind.
In velvet white as snow the troop was gown'd,
The seams with sparkling emeralds set around:
Their hoods and sleeves the same; and purpled o'er
With diamonds, pearls, and all the shining store

Of eastern pomp; their long-descending train
With rubies edged, and sapphires, swept the plain.
High on their heads, with jewels richly set,
Each lady wore a radiant coronet.
Beneath the circles, all the choir was graced
With chaplets green on their fair foreheads placed;
Of laurel some, of woodbine many more,
And wreath of Agnus castus others bore:
These last, who with those virgin crowns were dress'd,
Appear'd in higher honour than the rest.
They danced around; but in the midst was seen
A lady of a more majestic mien;
By stature, and by beauty, mark'd their sovereign queen.
She in the midst began with sober grace;
Her servants' eyes were fix'd upon her face,
And as she moved or turn'd, her motions view'd,
Her measures kept, and step by step pursued.
Methought she trod the ground with greater grace,
With more of godhead shining in her face;
And as in beauty she surpass'd the choir,
So, nobler than the rest was her attire.
A crown of ruddy gold inclosed her brow,
Plain without pomp, and rich without a show:
A branch of Agnus castus in her hand
She bore aloft (her sceptre of command;)
Admired, adored by all the circling crowd,
For wheresoe'er she turn'd her face, they bow'd.
And as she danced, a roundelay she sung,
In honour of the laurel, ever young.
She raised her voice on high, and sung so clear,
The fawns came scudding from the groves to hear,
And all the bending forest lent an ear.
At every close she made, the attending throng
Replied, and bore the burden of the song:
So just, so small, yet in so sweet a note,
It seem'd the music melted in the throat.'

One remarkable feature of the principal poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is the infrequency of the casual visitations of the Muse. They seem to have hardly ever experienced an unsought lyrical inspiration, or to have sung merely for singing's sake. Hence Dryden is permitted to appear only twice in the *Golden Treasury*. His songs, to be treated of more fully when we consider the lyrical poetry of the period, though often instinct with true lyrical spirit, seem to have been deliberately composed for insertion in his plays, and the same is the case with almost the whole of what he would have called his occasional poetry. His two chief odes, *Alexander's Feast* and the memorial verses to Anne Killigrew, were indubitably commissions; and it is probable that few of the epistles, elegies, dedications, and prologues which form so considerable a portion of his poetical works were composed without some similar inducement. As a whole, this collection

is creditable to his powers of intellect, quickness of wit, and command of nervous masculine diction. It is frequently the work of a master, though conceived in the spirit of a journeyman. The adulation of the patron or the defunct is generally fulsome enough; yet some compliments are so graceful that it is difficult not to believe them sincere, as when he apostrophizes the Duchess of Ormond:

‘O daughter of the Rose, whose cheeks unite
The differing titles of the Red and White!
Who heaven’s alternate beauty well display,
The blush of morning and the milky way.’

Or the conclusion of his epistle to Kneller:

‘More cannot be by mortal art exprest,
But venerable age shall add the rest.
For Time shall with his ready pencil stand,
Retouch your figures with his ripening hand,
Mellow your colours, and imbrown the teint,
Add every grace which Time alone can grant;
To future ages shall your fame convey,
And give more beauties than he takes away.’

Or these from the epistle to his kinsman, John Driden, more likely than any of the others to have been the unbought manifestation of genuine regard:

‘O true descendant of a patriot line!
Who while thou shar’st their lustre lendest thine!
Vouchsafe this picture of thy soul to see,
’Tis so far good as it resembles thee.
The beauties to the original I owe,
Which when I miss my own defects I show;
Nor think the kindred Muses thy disgrace;
A poet is not born in every race;
Two of a house few ages can afford,
One to perform, another to record.
Praiseworthy actions are by thee embraced,
And ’tis my praise to make thy praises last.’

The last couplet, excellent in sense, is an example of Dryden’s one metrical defect. He is not sufficiently careful to vary his vowel-sounds.

Dryden’s translations alone would give him a conspicuous place in English literature. The most important, his complete version of Virgil, has been improved upon in many ways, and yet after all it remains true, that ‘Pitt is quoted, and Dryden read.’ Had he never translated Virgil, his renderings or imitations of Juvenal, Horace, and others, would suffice to entitle him to no inconsiderable rank among those who have enriched their native literature from foreign stores. His principle of translation was correct, and accords with that of the greatest of English critics. Coleridge assured Wordsworth that there were only two legitimate systems of metrical translation, strict literality, or compensation carried to its fullest extent.

Dryden most probably had not sufficient Latin to be literal; but in any case his genius would have disdained such trammels, not to mention the more prosaic, but not less potent consideration, that what is written for bread must usually be written in haste—a fact which weighed with Dryden when he discontinued rhyme in his tragedies. Thus thrown back on the system of compensation, he has richly repaid his authors for the beauties of which he has bereaved them, by the beauties which he has bestowed—or which, as he maintains, were actually latent in them—and has expressed many of their thoughts with even enhanced energy. He has, in fact, made them write very much as they would have written if they had been English poets of the seventeenth century, and his work is less translation than transfusion. They necessarily appear much metamorphosed from the originals, but the fault is less that of Dryden than of his age. Could he have attempted the same task in our day with equal resources of genius, and on the same principles of workmanship, he would have succeeded much better, for he would have enjoyed more comprehension of the spirit of his originals than was possible in the seventeenth century. The scholarship of that age had not vivified the information which it had amassed; the idealized, but still vital conceptions of the Renaissance had given place to inanimate conventionality; the people of Greece and Rome appeared to the moderns like people in books; and such warm, affectionate contact between the souls of the present and the past as afterwards inspired Shelley's versions from Homer and Euripides was in that age impossible.

So great and versatile were Dryden's powers that, after all that has been said, his performances as a lyric poet, as a dramatist, and as a critic remain to be spoken of, and his rank in each has to be recognized as that of the foremost writer of his country in his own day. These will be treated in their appropriate places. The present is, perhaps, the most appropriate for a few words on his position as a poet. It is most difficult to determine whether he and his successor, Pope, should be placed at the bottom of the first class, or at the head of the second class of great English poets. If the very highest gifts of all—originality, creative imagination, unstudied music, unconscious inspiration, lofty ideal, the power to interpret nature, are essential conditions of rank in the first class, then assuredly Dryden and Pope must be contented with the second. If not positively excluded by the very nature of the case—if deficiency in the very highest qualities can be compensated by consummate excellence in all the rest—if intellect will supply the place of inspiration, and art that of nature—then they stand so high above the average of the second rank that it seems injurious not to place them in the first. The principle of exclusion, logically carried out, might involve the elevation above them of other writers whom we instinctively feel to be their inferiors; too absolute an insistence, on the other hand, upon the claims of intellectual power and perfect execution as qualifications for supreme poetical rank, must result in preferring Pope to Dryden. Inferior to his successor in both these respects, Dryden may still justly be preferred to him on the ground of his more ample endowment with that divine insanity without which, as Plato truly says, no one can be a poet. But this consideration cannot be invoked in his favour against Pope without admitting his inferiority to poets of the very first order; and it may be seriously questioned whether any poet can belong to the first order who is so exclusively a town poet as Dryden and Pope, and has so little knowledge of nature. The resemblances and contrasts between him and Pope have been frequently discussed; there are two other poets with whom comparison is less hackneyed and

not unprofitable. In fecundity, in versatility, in energy, in the frequent application of his poetry to public affairs, in his influence on contemporary literature, position as head of a school, and incontestable superiority to all the poets around him, no less, unfortunately, in bombast and incomprehensible breaches of good taste, he strongly reminds us of Victor Hugo. Hugo, undoubtedly, was a much greater lyrical poet than Dryden, and was enkindled by spontaneous inspirations which never visited Dryden; yet the two are essentially of the same genus; the differences between them are rather characteristic of their eras than of themselves; and while Hugo's imagination would have pined in the seventeenth century, Dryden's intellect and Dryden's modesty would have been highly serviceable to Hugo in the nineteenth. Another poet, whose talent and career offer many analogies to Dryden's, is one whom Dryden himself disparages upon metrical grounds. Claudian, like Dryden, is a remarkable instance of a poet owing a large portion of his fame to his dexterous treatment of occasional subjects. As Dryden drew material for his most powerful writings from the political and religious controversies of his day, so Claudian found his themes in the exploits of Stilicho and the misdeeds of Rufinus. Both have made uninteresting subjects attractive by admirable treatment; both are greatly indebted to art and little to nature; both in their latter days[4] sought relief from politics in more ideal compositions, Dryden in his *Fables*, Claudian in his *Rape of Proserpine*, a poem imbued with the characteristic qualities of Dryden.

Among the greatest services which Dryden rendered to our language and literature are to be reckoned his improvements in heroic versification, of which he has left an unsurpassed model.

> *'Waller was smooth, but Dryden taught to join*
> *The varying verse, the full majestic line,*
> *The long-resounding march, and energy divine.'*

His changes, nevertheless, were not always improvements. He is too uniform, though not absolutely uniform, in confining the sense to the couplet; and, in adding dignity to Chaucer's verse, he has lost something of its sweetness. Leigh Hunt well observes: 'Though Dryden's versification is noble, beautiful, and so complete of its kind that to an ear uninstructed in the metre of the old poet all comparison between the two in this respect seems out of the question and even ludicrous, yet the measure in which Dryden wrote not only originated, but attained to a considerable degree of its beauty in Chaucer; and the old poet's immeasurable superiority in sentiment and imagination, not only to Dryden, but to all, up to a very late period, who have written in the same form of verse, left him in possession of beauties, even in versification, which it remains for some future poet to amalgamate with Dryden's in a manner worthy of both, and so carry England's noble heroic rhyme to its pitch of perfection.' It need not be said that Pope's magnificent eulogy solely respects Dryden as a rhyming poet. His blank verse, though in general good enough for the stage, and better than that of most of his contemporaries, is utterly destitute of the sweetness and variety of the Elizabethans.

Dryden's works were edited with exemplary zeal and fidelity by Sir Walter Scott. The standard modern edition is Mr. Saintsbury's; the one most convenient for general use, Mr. Christie's.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] He was an ungrateful son of his *alma mater*, having pointedly declared his preference for Oxford. Perhaps this disloyalty may be connected with the appearance at Cambridge of a pamphlet against him, in the form of a mock defence against “the censure of the Rota,” in the same year (1673).

[2] Malone thinks that it was the translation of *The History of the League*, but Dryden can have hardly deemed country retirement necessary for a work of this nature.

[3] It is perhaps worth remarking that, although not yet a Roman Catholic, Dryden in this name employs the orthography, not of the authorized English version, but of the Vulgate.

[4] In his dedication to the second book of *De Raptu Proserpinae*, Claudian says:

‘Tu mea plectra moves,
Antraque Musarum longo torpentia somno
Excutis et placito ducis ab ore sonos.’