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‘THE ATHENIAN VIRTUOSI’ AND ‘THE ATHENIAN SOCIETY.’

IF any special apology is necessary for the treatment of two obscure institutions of essentially unrelated history and aims in a single paper, it is found in the fact that the obscurity surrounding both has led in the past to confusion, a confusion that is still continued, for example, in the ‘Academies’ section of the catalogue of the British Museum. There is plainly a purpose, then, in gathering together some matters of record and speculation suggested by these two names, if only to emphasize the fact of their distinct applications. There is also special point in a historical inquiry into the meaning of the two names, since each has been regarded from time to time as standing for an actual literary club or organization of some kind in a period when organized literary study, either vocational or amateur, was probably quite outside the order of the day. Still another justification for our inquiry lies in the fact that the ‘Athenian Virtuosi,’ whose publications furnished an episode among Dryden’s critical quarrels, has been the object of some degree of historical error, and that the ‘Athenian Society,’ an early English journalistic enterprise of no small merit, and at times of no little literary impressiveness, is in spite of its interesting associations still practically unknown save by name.

The causes of the frequent confusion of these two so-called societies may be traced in all probability to the lack of historical facts pertaining to each ; but this confusion may have been increased by some coincidental similarities of name in the publications relating to their separate histories. This can be illustrated specifically without anticipating too many of the points in the history of the two assumed organizations. Richard Leigh’s *Censure of the Rota*, for example, published in 1673, purports to record the debate at a meeting of the Athenian Virtuosi ‘in the Coffe-Academy instituted by Apollo for the advancement of Gazette Philosophy, Mercury’s Diurnals &c.’ Here we are by pure

accident reminded that the Athenian Society in 1691 met in the Apollo Coffee-House, and published the *Athenian Gazette*, afterwards called the *Athenian Mercury*. In addition to this, the dedicatory preface to the *History of the Athenian Society*, 1691, is signed by the initials R. L., ostensibly those of the author. These are, of course, the initials of Richard Leigh, whom Anthony à Wood names as the author of the *Censure of the Rota*; but here again we have a pure coincidence, for the author of the *History* was practically without doubt Charles Gildon, and the initials are not, then, those of the author.

My remarks have assumed a doubt as to the actual existence of the two societies, but for the present, for the sake of verbal economy, I shall use the two names simply as names, whatever they may stand for, whether they represented societies or not.

The tangible facts which show that the two societies were unquestionably distinct and unrelated can be indicated very briefly. John Dunton is admitted upon his own evidence and that of Gildon to have founded the Athenian Society in 1691. All the publications of or referring to the Athenian Virtuosi are of the year 1673. Dunton makes no reference to the Athenian Virtuosi, nor is he mentioned in publications relating to them. There is no possible connection between the historical data relating to the two societies. Finally, Dunton tells us that he was born in 1659; he would therefore have been fourteen years old at the time of the presumed existence of the Athenian Virtuosi, a society sitting in judgment upon a play of Dryden's. The separate identities of the two societies are, therefore, beyond question.

THE ATHENIAN VIRTUOSI.

There are four publications directly pertaining to the Athenian Virtuosi, all of them issued in 1673. The first of these is a critical pamphlet which Anthony à Wood ascribes to Richard Leigh¹, *The Censure of the Rota on Mr Dryden's Conquest of Granada*². The work was followed immediately by another pamphlet attack upon Dryden in the guise of a defence of the poet against the *Censure of the Rota* itself—*The Friendly Vindication of Mr Dryden*³. Dryden in his reply to these two pamphlets aptly alludes to their authors as 'Fastidious Brisk

¹ *Athenae Oxonienses*, ed. Philip Bliss, 5 vols., 1813—20, vol. iv, col. 533.

² [Richard Leigh], *The Censure of the Rota on Mr Dryden's Conquest of Granada*, Oxford, 1673.

³ *The friendly vindication of Mr Dryden from the Censure of the Rota by his cabal of wits*, Cambridge, 1673.

of Oxford,' and 'Fungoso in the play, who follows the fashion at a distance'¹, indicating clearly the authors of the first and second publications respectively. In spite of the fact that Wood ascribes the first work definitely to Leigh, Malone tentatively assigns the appellation 'Fastidious Brisk of Oxford' to Martin Clifford, Master of the Charterhouse, and one of the collaborators in the *Rehearsal*, though Clifford was from Cambridge, and Leigh from Oxford². The phrase, however, may clearly refer to the place of publication, since it is scarcely possible to assume that Dryden must have known the author of the pamphlet. Malone's assumption that Clifford was the author of any one of the *Rota* pamphlets, or connected directly with the *Rota* controversy, is probably occasioned by the misreading of a remark of Gerard Langbaine's. In applying to Dryden's own work some of his criticisms of earlier playwrights, Langbaine concludes: 'Mr Dryden having already been arraign'd before the Wits upon the Evidence of the Rota, and found Guilty by Mr Clifford, the Foreman of the Jury, I shall suppress my further Evidence, till I am serv'd with a Subpoena by him to appear before that Court, or have an Action clapp'd upon me by his Proctor, as guilty of a Scandalum Archi-Poetae, and then I shall readily give in my Depositions'³. It will be seen that in this passage there is no implication that Clifford was the author of the *Censure of the Rota*, for looking carefully into the value of Langbaine's figure, we see that Clifford is represented as delivering a verdict *based upon* 'the evidence of the Rota.' This seems to relieve him explicitly of the authorship of the book or of any connection with it. In Johnson's life of Dryden⁴, however, we find a paragraph or two which conveys a rational explanation of Langbaine's allusion (though without specific reference to Langbaine's remark). Johnson refers to Clifford's strictures on the play as conveyed in the four probably contemporary letters to Dryden—two of which he quotes in part—which were eventually printed some years later in a pamphlet now very rarely met with⁵. This explanation complies wholly with the substance and figurative suggestion of Langbaine's criticism, and obviates the necessity of discrediting Wood's evidence and drawing Clifford into another quarrel

¹ John Dryden, *Works*...ed. Scott and Saintsbury, 18 vols., Edinburgh, 1882—93, iv, 376.

² John Dryden, *Critical and miscellaneous prose works...Collected with notes and...life* ...by Edmond Malone, 3 vols. in 4, London, 1800, vol. 1, Pt. 2, pp. 377—8.

³ Gerard Langbaine, *An Account of the English dramatic poets*...Oxford, 1691, 151.

⁴ Samuel Johnson, *Works*...Oxford, 1825, vol. vii, pp. 259—60.

⁵ Martin Clifford, *Notes on Mr Dryden's Poems, in four letters...to which are annexed some reflections upon the Hind and the Panther by another hand*, London, 1687.

with Dryden in which there is no reason to assume that he felt any immediate interest.

As to the *Censure of the Rota* itself, the work presents a fabric of particularist criticism upon the *Conquest of Granada*, dealing principally with questions of diction and of the consistency of the plan and treatment of the play with Dryden's own published criticism. It is, in fact, little more than an elaborate and pedantical piece of fault-finding. From its manner one is inclined to agree with Dryden in imputing its motives largely to personal malice.

The Friendly Vindication of Mr Dryden was, like the rest of the pamphlets in the controversy, issued anonymously. Its author is not known. The piece is only ostensibly, of course, a vindication of the dramatist, and all its force is borrowed from the *Censure*. The *Friendly Vindication* represents Dryden in the midst of his literary friends discussing the criticisms of the earlier pamphlet. In a peevishly injured tone he brings up the points upon which he has been assailed and talks them over with his companions, who, while flattering him into complacency, quietly pass among themselves insinuations as to the justice of the criticisms, with a good deal of private laughter at his expense. This tract ends provocatively: '*Finis* or not *finis*, as Mr Dryden pleaseth.' Dryden's brief rejoinder is found in the dedication to the *Assignment*, which is addressed to Sir Charles Sedley; in this he deals rather over-seriously with the personal nature of the attack upon him, though his position is on the whole dignified¹. This is Dryden's only allusion to the entire controversy.

Malone assumes, and his assumption has not been questioned by Sir Walter Scott and Mr Saintsbury, that Dryden's reply was addressed not only to the authors of the *Censure of the Rota* and the *Friendly Vindication*, but to the author of a third tract, *A Description of the Academy of the Athenian Virtuosi*². All the editors of Dryden have regarded this work as a continuation of the attack begun by Leigh and followed up in the *Friendly Vindication*. It seems really open to question, however, whether the pamphlet is not a *bona-fide* defence of Dryden's position. The book is said by Scott to possess the same 'frothy, flippant style of raillery' as the *Censure* itself³; but while there is no question that this characterization might very well apply to the

¹ *Works*, ed. Scott and Saintsbury, vol. iv, pp. 369—77.

² *A Description of the Academy of the Athenian Virtuosi: with a discourse held there in vindication of Mr Dryden's Conquest of Granada; against the authour of the Censure of the Rota*, London, 1673.

³ John Dryden, *Works*, ed. Scott and Saintsbury, vol. i, p. 133.

Friendly Vindication, a thoroughly careful reading and re-reading of the *Description of the Academy of the Athenian Virtuosi* has induced me to believe that the book, if not in fact a purposed defence of Dryden, is in any event sufficiently impartial to constitute an answer to the meticulous and frivolous personalities of the first two publications. As far as I can see, valid points of objection are raised and sustained in this pamphlet against the injustices of the *Censure* and the *Friendly Vindication*. The tone of the book in this respect is not at all that of the other two; this is indeed so strikingly the case that, far from resembling in style the *Censure* itself, it is sufficiently different from it to condemn for this reason alone Scott's surmise that the two may have been written by the same author¹. Disagreement on these questions with so distinguished a group of scholars as have dealt with this point may seem less dangerous in view of the proverbial risks of the ironic form. The two-edged sword has smitten others than Defoe and Swift—and this work is certainly one of two things: either a frank vindication, or a bit of irony very badly overdone. My own opinion is, I repeat, that the pamphlet is just what its title declares it to be.

Of the three pamphlets mentioned above, the second two were of course subsequent to the first one, but the relative times of their appearance are unknown and unimportant. A fourth pamphlet appeared in the controversy, however, which was designed as a sincere defence of Dryden in answer to the *Friendly Vindication*. This last pamphlet, the authorship of which is assigned to Charles Blount², is *Mr Dreyden vindicated, in a reply to the Friendly Vindication*³. It is important simply as the closing publication of the controversy, a sincere work, but a feeble one. It purports to deal specifically with the actual criticisms of the *Friendly Vindication*, but offers little more than accusations of plagiarism on the part of the author of the *Friendly Vindication*. Its replies to the particular points of criticism in the first two pamphlets are very lame indeed.

As to the underlying problem, whether the Athenian Virtuosi represented an actual society of literary amateurs, there is no clear reason to differ from the beliefs reflected in the historical treatment of the subject among all of Dryden's biographers, that the Rota controversy was a quarrel simply of persons, and that the club name was

¹ John Dryden, *Works*, ed. Scott and Saintsbury, vol. 1, p. 133.

² *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. v, p. 243.

³ *Mr Dreyden vindicated, in a reply to the Friendly Vindication of Mr Dreyden, with reflections on the Rota*, London, 1673.

assumed merely as a veil for the attack, or for the ends of authority and prestige. The name 'Rota' is in all probability borrowed from James Harrington's 'coffee-club' of that title, of which Pepys was a member¹. It is, of course, possible that the appropriated name may have covered the identities of actual foregatherers at a coffee-house; but the entire absence of collective variety in the method of attack seems to show clearly that the *Censure* itself scarcely represents the cursory judgments of a group of informal critics. Evidence of some finality lies in Wood's ascription of the *Censure* to an individual author, and in the reference of the title-page of the *Description of the Academy of the Athenian Virtuosi* to 'the authour of the *Censure of the Rota*.'

THE ATHENIAN SOCIETY.

In the Athenian Society we have a question of a different kind. This society was unquestionably organized, and was possibly chartered². Its contact with life and affairs was extensive and, in great degree, commendable. It had as patron Sir William Temple; as contributor, Swift; as panegyrist, Defoe; and its historian was the unillustrious Charles Gildon. It earned also the possible honour of having its aims and methods burlesqued in a comedy by the City Poet, Elkanah Settle. The published work of the Athenian Society is well known as an early venture in journalism, and a competent reflection of contemporary life; the society contributed extensively to the popularization of science and philosophy in its time; and the final proof of its surviving interest is found in the fact that two abridged reprints of its most popular publication were issued in the nineteenth century. In the present case the question of the validity of the society's claim to the name of 'learned society' depends upon the meaning that they themselves attached to the name, or upon their good faith in attaching to the name whatever meaning they wished it to convey. Despite the relatively great importance of the organization and its valuable literary connections, all historical evidence regarding it seems to point to the conclusion that it was not, after all, a *bona-fide* society of amateur aims.

The materials for the history of this society are derived principally from two sources, *The History of the Athenian Society*, 1691, written

¹ *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*...Edited...by Henry B. Wheatley, 9 vols., London, 1898—9, vol. I, pp. 14 n., 20, 59.

² [Elkanah Settle], *The New Athenian Comedy, containing the politicks, oeconomicks, tactics...of that most learned society*, London, 1693, 3.

without doubt by Charles Gildon¹, and John Dunton's *Life and Errors*, 1705².

Throughout the entire history of the society the name of Dunton is pre-eminent. Dunton tells us that the scheme of the society came to his mind when he was in grave perplexity as to a course of action to pursue in a case of personal trouble; he was greatly in need of advice, yet unwilling to submit the occasion of his trouble to the knowledge of those who might aid him. His difficulty brought to his mind the admirable plan of instituting as a commercial venture a publication which might have been of value to him in his uncertainty—a journal devoted to answering the questions of anonymous inquirers. This periodical he eventually established, enlisting in his service two capable assistants. The three writers assumed the name of 'The Athenian Society,' deriving it from the title which they had already agreed upon for their publication, *The Athenian Gazette*. The three original members of the society were, then, Dunton himself, the Rev. Samuel Wesley, father of the founder of the Methodist Church, and Dr Richard Sault, a Cambridge mathematician of high repute. Sault afterwards secured the occasional aid of Dr John Norris; but Norris refused the opportunity of becoming a regular member of the society³.

The first number of the *Athenian Gazette* appeared March 17, 1690/1⁴. The society had advertised the scheme until sufficient popular interest was excited to provide material for a few numbers; and with the publication of the first copies success was assured. The second number of the *Gazette* changed the title to *Athenian Mercury*, but the title-pages to the whole volumes retained throughout the title *Athenian Gazette or Casuisticall Mercury*⁵. Nineteen volumes of the *Gazette* were completed, and it was announced that after the completion of the twentieth volume the subsequent volumes would be issued

¹ *The history of the Athenian Society for resolving all nice and curious questions. By a gentleman who got secret intelligence of their whole proceedings...* London [1691].

² *The life and errors of John Dunton, written by himself in solitude... Together with the lives and characters of a thousand persons now living in London*, London, 1705.

³ Dunton's *Life and errors*, pp. 248—250.

⁴ *The Athenian Gazette: or Casuisticall Mercury, resolving all the most nice and curious questions proposed by the ingenious*, 20 vols., London, 1691—7.

⁵ There were thirty numbers of the *Gazette* to a volume, with a supplement to volume v consisting of answers to questions for which there was no room in the regular numbers. In this supplement, pages 1—6, appeared an ode and a letter from Jonathan Swift; the ode was one of the three poems that called forth Dryden's damning criticism of Swift's verse. Every fifth volume of the *Gazette*, it was announced, was to contain a supplement similar to that of the fifth volume; but no other supplements actually appeared. It was also intended that every fifth volume should have an alphabetical table of contents; but this, also, appeared only in vol. v. The single numbers of the *Gazette* were printed on both sides of a folio sheet, and pagged successively throughout each volume.

quarterly, instead of in single sheet numbers. Only ten numbers of the twentieth volume were issued, however, the last appearing June 14th, 1697. As volume XX was not completed, it has, of course, no title-page. The reason for the sudden discontinuance of the *Gazette* is not wholly clear. It was read with eagerness to the last, and Dunton tells us many years later that the society had an enormous amount of unanswered queries, sufficient, indeed, to suggest to him the possibility of printing the answers to this material in an entirely new publication to extend to several volumes. Dunton himself suggests facts that probably explain at least in part the discontinuance of the publication. In the first place, he complains that the query plan was liberally borrowed from the very moment of its first appearance in the *Gazette*; and again, he tells us that the great number of the readers of the paper were not themselves subscribers, but used the copies that were readily obtained in the coffee-houses.

In the unpagged table of contents to volume V, under the index-word 'History,' is found the statement that a history of the Athenian Society should be found prefixed to the first volume. In the Burney copy of the *Gazette* in the British Museum this is the case, but many copies of the *Gazette* are found without the *History*, and the *History* itself is generally seen detached. This volume, which appeared anonymously, has its own title-page and pagination. The Epistle Dedicatory, addressed to the Athenian Society, is signed R. L.; this is followed by commendatory poems by Tate, Motteux, Richardson, Defoe, and an unknown hand. The *History* opens with a modest regret that so worthy a society should lack a Sprat for its historian. In the author's expansion upon the personnel and objects of the society, we are informed that its merits alone had induced the author to attempt its history, and that in seeking facts for the purpose he would have been utterly lost in his generous design because of the modesty of the members, were it not that a certain C. B., assumedly one of the members of the society, imparted the information that the writer wished, under the pledge that the informant's identity should be kept secret. At the end of the *History* is appended a commendatory letter from C. B. upon the completion of the *History*, together with a deprecatory letter over the initials of Richard Sault expressing regret that the author had chosen to make so much of his small merits. Disingenuous as most of this sounds, Sault's letter has a note of unquestioned sincerity; and with good reason, for the *History* is a panegyric sufficiently unblushing to rouse the modesty of any of the three members with whom it particularly

deals. The historical facts are few and tenuous. The society is referred to as a 'learned society,' and a comparison with the province of the Royal Society's labour is invited in the reference to Sprat's *History of the Royal Society*. In addition to the characters of the three original members and of Dr Norris, the *History of the Athenian Society* refers to eight other members, who, the historian says, 'afford so ample and so just a Theme of Praise, that nothing but my Ignorance of them, can hinder me from giving the World a more particular knowledg of them.'

This question of the number and identity of the other members of the society is a puzzling one. The author of the *History*, as we have seen, admits that he can throw no light upon it, and all sources of information on the subject that are offered by the society or its members are unsatisfactory, and, I believe, in large part intentionally deceiving. The existence of C. B., the writer's informant, would naturally lead us to assume that there was at least one other member whose separate identity might be established, but, as I shall point out more specifically later, Dunton himself was in all probability the one who communicated the facts of the society's history to Gildon, the author. So we are brought back to the three original members.

Dunton makes a number of conflicting statements in regard to the membership of the society. In the preface to the first volume of the *Gazette*, after referring to the difficulty of carrying on the query project with only one assistant (for we are told by Dunton that the first two *Gazettes* were written by himself and Sault unaided¹) the writer continues: 'This inconvenience we have now taken care to remedy; and as we gave the Publick notice in some former Advertisements, engaged such Persons in the affair, that what would have been *impar onus* to any one or two, may now be dispatched with much more ease and accuracy.' Since, again, as I shall point out later, Dunton was in reality responsible for the statements of Gildon's *History of the Athenian Society*, we can take it for his own assertion that the society in 1691 numbered eleven members. In addition to this, testimony as to the number of members in the society is offered in the *Young Students Library*², which the society published in 1692, in the engraved frontispiece of which there were represented the members, twelve in number, seated before a table. A diaphanous curtain lowered before their faces, however, effectually baffles any attempt at identification of the majority

¹ *Life and Errors*, pp. 249—50.

² *The Young-Students-Library, containing, extracts and abridgments of the most valuable books printed in England, and in the forreign journals, from the year sixty-five, to this time* ... London, 1692.

of them. Dunton seems to be recognizable by his position in the centre of the group and by his beard, and Wesley by his clerical dress. The crude verses beneath the plate point out that the picture represents the membership of the society. In Dunton's *Life and Errors*, on the other hand, which was written, we may remember, eight years after the *Gazette* had ceased to exist, we find an absolute contradiction of all Dunton's previous statements and intimations. After referring to the accession of Wesley as the third member of the society, he says: 'With this new addition we found ourselves to be masters of the whole design, and thereupon we neither lessen'd nor increas'd our number¹.' But evidence as to the falsity of the society's pretensions on this point is found even during its actual existence. In the 'Preface to the Reader' of Elkanah Settle's *New Athenian Comedy*, published in 1693, Settle refers, with sublime indifference to grammatical structure, to the frontispiece to the *Young Students Library*: 'Tis true our generous Athenians have lately vouchsafed to give us some small lineaments of theirs in miniature...But there alas, they are pleased to wrap their faces in Mosaic Veils, very magisterially intimating that they are persons that daily converse so near with Divinity, that their shining faces are too dazling for humane View, and therefore no less kindly than modestly, thus like Bays his Morning pictur'd in a Cloud. I confess Mr Engraver has made a pretty Jolly Company of 'em: but there indeed the painter is a little too poetical; and our Athenians have a little strained a point: for when the true Muster Roll of that not overnumerous Society shall be examined, for the supply of that defect, you must consider that the Veil'd Faces are by way of Faggots to fill up the Troop: and in that fair Convention of divine Enthusiasts you must not take 'em all for the Boanerges of Wit, the Organs of Thunder, but like Guns in a Fireship, a Tire of painted wooden Tools to make up the Show.' For whatever reason, therefore, the society thought it advisable to pretend to fictitious numbers, there is no reason to doubt Dunton's final statement, made while the society was no longer prominently before the public, that at least during the publication of the *Gazette* there were three members only.

Eventually, however, the society did increase its numbers; but this was after the *Gazette* had ceased publication, and when Dunton himself was the sole surviving member. Dunton wished to revive the query plan again, making use in part of the material left over when the *Gazette* was abandoned. In the meantime Sault had died, Dr Norris

¹ *Life and Errors*, p. 256.

had written a sharp reply to the Athenians' comments upon his criticism of Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*¹, and from many acerbitous allusions to Wesley, it is evident that Dunton had quarrelled with the last of his three original collaborators². It was necessary, therefore, for Dunton to enlist an entirely new corps of workers. This he did, calling the revived society New Athens. In referring to the reorganized society he says: 'Our Triumvirate is not only supply'd, but the number increas'd by a new election of Nine Members, all masters in their several faculties, so that the World shall shortly hear from New Athens, in a supplementary way to the performances of the old.'³ The dedication to the *Athenian Spy*, 1709⁴, also shows that the New Athenians were more numerous than their predecessors, adding a fact of incidental interest, that 'the most Pindarick lady,' in all probability Mrs Elizabeth Singer Rowe, had been asked, and had refused, to become one of the new number. Dunton's plan to produce a continuation of the *Gazette* took form in the publication of the *Athenian Oracle*⁵. This was in part a reprint and in part a continuation of the *Gazette* material. Its extracts from the *Gazette* were judicious and representative; so it is in reality more consistently entertaining than the *Gazette* itself.

It will have been seen in the last few paragraphs that the most noteworthy single fact in the history of the society is the pre-eminence of Dunton from beginning to end. In Settle's *New Athenian Comedy* he is represented as presiding at the meetings of the society. In all of his works in which he refers to the society, he alludes to himself as the organizer and conductor of the project. But his less guarded references reveal still more; for although he tried to establish a popular belief in the amateur and elective status of the society, we find him to have held a personal relation to it which must dismiss any doubt as to the true plan and motives of the organization. Gildon's *History* is plainly intended to convey the impression that the aims of the society were philanthropic and instructive, and Gildon himself asserts that he

¹ John Norris, *Christian Blessedness: or discourses upon the Beatitudes...To which are added, Reflections upon a late Essay concerning Human Understanding: with a reply to the remarks made upon them by the Athenian Society*, 2nd ed., London, 1692, pp. 45—65.

² *Life and Errors*, passim, and *Athenian Sport: or, two thousand paradoxes merrily argued...by a member of the Athenian Society* [John Dunton], London, 1707, passim.

³ *Life and Errors*, pp. 261—2.

⁴ *The Athenian Spy: discovering the secret letters which were sent to the Athenian Society by several ingenious ladies, relating to the management of their affections. Being a complete system of love cases...* 2nd ed., London, 1709.

⁵ *The Athenian Oracle: being an entire collection of all the valuable questions and answers in the old Athenian Mercuries. Intermixed with many cases...never before published...* 4 vols., London, 1708—10. (Vol. 4 contains a reprint of Gildon's *History of the Athenian Society*. New editions of the *Oracle* were published in 1820 and 1892.)

undertook the *History* upon his own initiative and solely because of the merits of the society's project. Dunton, when he tells us that Gildon wrote the *History*, says simply that 'Mr Gildon thought it worth his while' to write the work¹. But in recording his personal impression of Gildon he says: 'He [Gildon] was always very just in the Engagements where I had any concern, and his Performances were done, as well as the Designs would admit. He writ the History of the Athenian Society, which contain'd the just Merits of that Cause²'; this is apparently a clear implication that the writing of the *History* was an 'engagement' in which Dunton had some concern. Again, in writing the character of Defoe, Dunton says with a passing allusion to the hard necessity which kept Defoe at his hack-work—and which Dunton himself felt continually in the latter part of his career—'Mr Foe writ for me the Character of Dr Annesley and a Pindarick in Honour of the Athenian Society which was prefix'd to the History of it, and he might have ask'd me the Question before he had inserted either of 'em in the Collection of his Works, in Regard, he writes so bitterly against the same Injustice in others³.' Again, although we find the Epistle Dedicatory to Gildon's *History* signed with the initials R. L., there is strong reason for the assumption that Dunton himself wrote this dedication, as he appropriates *verbatim* a long passage from it in his own dedication to *Athenianism*, 1710⁴. Furthermore, in the reprint of the *History* in the fourth volume of the *Athenian Oracle* Dunton edits the history liberally, and often significantly. This evidence seems, cumulatively, to establish the fact that the society's reticence toward's Gildon's undertaking was merely assumed—that, in fact, it was at Dunton's instance that Gildon wrote the *History*, for the purpose of advertising the society, and that Dunton regarded the work as his own literary property, to be used as he saw fit for the furtherance of his projects.

These facts and deductions seem to warrant the opinion that in a large part of the society's transactions Dunton alone stood as the responsible officer; and this conclusion is supported by a quantity of evidence from the same and similar sources. In the first place, shortly after the appearance of the *Gazette*, action was brought against the society, apparently by the proprietors of a journal of similar title. It

¹ *Life and Errors*, p. 258.

² *Ibid.*, p. 241.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 239—40.

⁴ *Athenianism: or the new projects of Mr John Dunton, ...being six hundred distinct treatises...and is an entire collection of all his writings...* Vol. I, ...London, 1710.

was evidently for this reason that the title *Athenian Gazette* was changed to *Athenian Mercury*. From Settle's reference to the matter we learn that the society secured at the same time some sort of governmental protection, probably incorporation, to warrant their continued use of the new title. In alluding to this transaction, Settle indicates that Dunton himself had paid the costs of it—thirty guineas¹. This fact supports the probability that Dunton was not only the founder and leader of the society, but also its financial factor, a probability further emphasized by his constant allusion to the society as 'my project,' a phrase which was applied to all of his financial ventures. We infer, too, from Dunton's mention of the early Athenians that it was he personally who enlisted the services of Wesley and Sault after he had found himself unable to command the entire project single-handed². Our surmises on this point are supported also by references to his connection with the New Athenians. In mentioning the publication of the *Oracle*, he tells us that he personally sold the publisher's rights to 'Mr Bell of Cornhill³'; and later, in the 'character' of Mr Bell, we see that Dunton regarded it as a personal grievance that Bell had in some way presumed upon his privileges as purchaser. Referring again to the *Oracle* project he says: 'If my Honored Mother (Madame Jane Nicholas) will be so kind, as to lend me Two Hundred Pound, to carry on this New-Oracle, I doubt not by Christmas next...to pay all I owe to the World⁴.' These references establish with certainty Dunton's financial responsibility for the society; the final piece of evidence as to the extent of his connection with the society is found, however, in the Dedicatory Preface to *Athenianism*, published in 1710. Here, addressing the society, he congratulates himself on 'being Honour'd so far as to be chosen and continu'd a Member of your Society,' endeavouring here to sustain his old deception as to the elective nature of the society. But with his curiously thoughtless but characteristic inadvertency, in the same preface he proposes the publication of a weekly paper, the *Athenian News, or Dunton's Apollo, containing Twenty distinct Posts*, regarding which he says: 'If I find the Twenty Posts too many to gallop through Dunton's quill, I shall Press a TROOP of New Athenians, which I'll call—Number Twenty—and will oblige every one of these Listed Authors to affix his Name to his own Post⁵.'

¹ *The New Athenian Comedy*, p. 3.

² *Life and Errors*, pp. 248—250.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 261—2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁵ *Athenianism*, 1710, Dedicatory Preface.

This passage indicates Dunton's relation to the society to have been nothing less than absolute proprietorship.

To close the question, then, there can be little doubt as to the exact status of the Athenian Society; it was an organization varying in the number of its members according to the scope of the work which it had in hand, founded by Dunton and constantly referred to as one of his 'projects,' and apparently wholly under his rule as its promoter and the owner of its name and rights. Gildon's claim for it of the title 'learned society' is therefore seen to be wholly invalid, for the society was organized and conducted for purely commercial purposes, its members constantly changing according to the proprietor's personal judgments as to their efficiency as collaborators. The society was, in short, simply an editorial staff, working under the name of 'learned society' for the sake of its prestige.

Dismissing the justice of the claims to special interest implied in the titles 'Athenian Virtuosi' and 'Athenian Society' does not necessarily force us to a definite position on the question as to the existence of literary societies in this period. However, the fact that we can concede no importance in this respect to either of the groups with which we have dealt recalls the general belief—probably a correct one—that there was not, up to this time in England, a scholarly or amateur society concerned primarily with literature in its objective aspect. Such organizations and projects as the Areopagus, Parker's Society of Antiquaries, Bolton's Academy, Jeremy Taylor's Society of Friendship, the Royal Society Committee, may all have possessed functional or incidental literary interests; but it is probably a mistake to assume the existence of any institution of the type of our modern literary societies, for the reason that these owe their own existence to an essentially modern conception of literature as an object of scholarship—a conception which was scarcely defined before the middle of the eighteenth century.

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