

JOHN DRYDEN

Finding that if he continued to call himself a Protestant his services would be overlooked, he declared himself a Papist. The king's parsimony instantly relaxed. Dryden was gratified with a pension of £100 a year, and was employed to defend his new religion both in prose and verse.

THE great Whig historian's sneer at the Cavalier dramatist's conversion to the Catholic Faith was equally ungenerous and untrue. For Dryden had in all probability become a Catholic before Charles II died, as his wife and one of his sons had already been received into the Church. And the 'pension,' contemptuously referred to by Macaulay, was simply the belated payment of his salary as Laureate, already four years in arrears, together with other sums owing to the poet by the spendthrift King Charles. Lord Macaulay might have discovered if he liked, in the course of his historical researches among seventeenth century documents, the existing Treasury Warrant, signed by Rochester and dated May 6th, 1684, authorising the payment to Dryden of £50, being one quarter's annuity (as poet laureate) due at Midsummer, 1680, and also the sum of £25, being one quarter's additional annuity by Letters of Privy Seal, due Lady Day, 1680. James II, having a stricter sense of justice, thus paid off his brother's debts. But Dryden lost his court post, and had the mortification of seeing it transferred to Shadwell. And he died in William III's reign, a staunch Catholic and a poor man under a Protestant king.

From the beginning of his literary career to the end of his days, he was pursued and persecuted by an envious and malignant opposition. He was a mark for the jealous spite of all the ill-natured scribblers of the age. But there were two charges that were

John Dryden

never made against him. Even his bitterest enemies never breathed Macaulay's sneer nor dreamed of suggesting that John Dryden had become a Catholic to please King James, and they never attacked his moral character. How difficult it is for us to-day to understand that storm-centre of the literary life of the seventeenth century. For he seemed born to attract the lightning and make it harmless. Probably he enjoyed fighting the Sprats and Shadwells and Settles of his day, for he was Gulliver among the Lilliputians; but though they gnashed their teeth at *The Hind and the Panther*, never once did they suggest that he was not a sincere Catholic or that the discharge of a debt was the payment of a bribe. That was left for a prejudiced modern historian.

But even Macaulay's historical prejudice is not so grave an offence as his failure to appreciate the spiritual value of a fact to which he himself has drawn our attention. He fixes on the year 1678 as the date of 'a great change in his manner.' His life, he remarks, 'divides itself into two parts. There is some debateable ground on the common frontier; but the line may be drawn with tolerable accuracy . . . During the preceding period appeared some of his courtly panegyrics—his *Annus Mirabilis*, and most of his plays; indeed, all his rhyming tragedies. To the subsequent period belong his best dramas, *All for Love*, *The Spanish Friar*, and *Sebastian*, his satires, his translations, his didactic poems, his fables, and his odes.' In other words, it was a change from the artificial sentiment of the French school then in vogue to the real feeling of, say, *A Song for St. Cecilia's Day*: from inflated panegyrics to serious reflection upon life. And to the attentive student of Dryden himself, with ear undeafened by the literary strife around him, this change in what Lord Macaulay calls 'his manner' is deeply significant, and indicates an

Blackfriars

inward movement and experience of spiritual progress.

For it was in that year 1678 that his best play, *All for Love, or the World Well Lost*, was written, the play which was performed last winter at Oxford, in Merton College Hall, and in the Prologue to which occurs the well-known couplet which acquires significance from the course and direction of his later years :

Errors, like straws, upon the surface flow ;
He who would search for pearls must dive below.

It is well, therefore, to mark carefully the three following dates. *Absalom and Achitophel* was published in 1681 ; *Religio Laici* in 1682 ; and *The Hind and the Panther* in 1687. There is a growth and gradual development of religious thought in these three greatest works of Dryden. Of course, the development was influenced—deflected, arrested, accelerated, as the case might be—by his political and literary interests at the moment. Remember, too, that he was born in the strictest sect of the Puritans, and, therefore, like so many other pilgrims since his day, had a long, rough road to travel. Nevertheless, below the shining surface of his brilliant and varied career as political partizan, professional dramatist and laureate there ran, deep down, a hidden current of religion. And this it was that determined what Macaulay curtly calls ‘his change of manner.’ Listen to him in the opening lines of *The Hind and the Panther*, written in his fifty-sixth year :

My thoughtless youth was winged with vain desires ;
My manhood, long misled by wandering fires,
Followed false lights ; and, when their glimpse was gone,
My pride struck out new sparkles of her own.
Such was I, such by nature still I am ;
Be Thine the glory, and be mine the shame.

This is more than ‘a change of manner.’

John Dryden

The circumstances in which *Absalom and Achitophel* was written are a well-known episode in English history. The Old Testament tragedy became the story of the rebellion of Monmouth and his evil counsellor, Shaftesbury, against Charles II and his brother, the Duke of York. Dryden satirised with ferocious force the pretended Popish Plot and the infamous character of Titus Oates. He laid bare the iniquity of the Exclusion Bill, by which a bastard was to be legitimised and placed on the throne in order to please the anti-Catholic party. Shaftesbury actually boasted that the forgery of the Popish Plot was his invention, and that his design was to scare the nation into extreme measures against the Catholics. 'I won't pretend to pronounce who started the game,' he was heard to say, exultingly, 'but I am sure I have had the full hunting.' The kingdom was in a dangerous state of fever, and the satire was written, it was said, at the king's own urgent request. In it Dryden 'let himself go.' 'They who think,' he said in the Preface, 'that I have done my worst may be convinced, at their own cost, that I can write severely with more ease than I can gently.' He called the English nation

God's pampered people, whom debauched with ease,
No king could govern, nor no god could please; . . .
These Adam-wits, too fortunately free,
Began to dream they wanted liberty;
And when no rule, no precedent was found,
Of men, by laws less circumscribed and bound,
They led their wild desires to woods and caves,
And thought that all but savages were slaves.

His characterisations are exquisitely drawn. Shaftesbury is Achitophel:

A daring pilot in extremity:
Pleased with the danger, when the waves went high
He sought the storms; but for a calm unfit,
Would steer too nigh the sands to boast his wit.

Blackfriars

Great wits are sure to madness near allied,
And thin partitions do their bounds divide.

George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, is Zimri :

A man so various, that he seemed to be
Not one, but all mankind's epitome :
Stiff in opinions, always in the wrong ;
Was everything by starts, and nothing long ;
But in the course of one revolving moon,
Was chymist, fiddler, statesman, and buffoon.

Titus Oates is Corah :

Yet Corah, thou shalt from oblivion pass ;
Erect thyself, thou monumental brass, . . .
Prodigious actions may as well be done
By weaver's issue as by prince's son.
This arch-attestor for the public good
By that one deed ennobles all his blood.
Who ever asked the witness's high race,
Whose oath with martyrdom did Stephen grace?

Now, the noticeable fact about this remarkable poem is that Dryden's sympathies are with the Catholics. He is not merely the king's agent. He is not simply the official laureate. It was largely by the irresistible force of its sincerity that the conspiracy failed, although the Exclusion Bill was withdrawn only by the king's direct interference, and the Earl of Shaftesbury, on his trial for treason, was acquitted. Had it not been for the genius of Dryden, English history might have taken a different direction.

Absalom and Achitophel was followed a year later by *Religio Laici*. The king was harassed by the extreme Puritans on the one side, and the extreme Catholics on the other. He therefore commissioned Dryden to explain and defend the position of the Established Church as the point of reconciliation and harmony between them. Hence it was written as a 'politico-theological pamphlet.' But anyone to-day who reads this *Layman's Faith* carefully, now that

John Dryden

the 'shouting and the tumult' has died away, can see that Dryden is really examining the foundations of the English Church for his own satisfaction, and finding them wanting. A distinguished critic in the *D.N.B.* has said that Dryden's language in the *Religio Laici*, 'while retailing the ordinary arguments for the Anglican position, expresses a marked desire for an infallible guide.' That is the case. Dryden had, in fact, advanced another stage. He had begun to make researches. Like some earnest men in later times, he set out to defend a position which he ended by criticising and abandoning. He speaks of 'The Book thus put in every vulgar hand, which each presumed he best could understand,' and of 'the fruit the private spirit brought: occasioned by great zeal and little thought,' and discusses the question of Tradition and concludes in its favour:

In doubtful questions 'tis the safest way
To learn what unsuspected ancients say:
For 'tis not likely we should higher soar
In search of Heaven, than all the Church before: . . .
And after hearing what our Church can say,
If still our reason runs another way,
That private reason 'tis more just to curb,
Than by disputes the public peace disturb.
For points obscure are of small use to learn;
But common quiet is mankind's concern.

The Preface to this poem is longer than the poem itself, and more closely woven. It is written in Dryden's matchless prose. Byron, it may be remembered, recommends us to 'Read all the Prefaces of Dryden, for these the critics most confide in.' Well, in this preface are two remarkable sentences which show the drift of Dryden's reflections. The first is, 'How many heresies the first translation of Tindal produced in few years, let my lord Herbert's History of Henry the Eighth inform you'; and the second is, 'It is the observation of Maimbourg in his History

Blackfriars

of Calvinism, that wherever that discipline was planted and embraced, rebellion, civil war and misery attended it. And how indeed should it happen otherwise? Reformation of Church and State has always been the ground of our divisions in England.'

Five years later, in 1687, *The Hind and the Panther* was published. Dryden had been received into the Catholic Church. As everybody knows, the poem is a defence of that Church against her enemies and an exposition of her true teaching for the benefit of a generation that was ignorant of it. The Hind—the 'milk-white Hind, immortal and unchanged'—is the Church of Rome; and the Panther—'sure the noblest, next the Hind, and fairest creature of the spotted kind'—is the Church of England. It was written, he tells us in the preface, to please himself. 'It was neither imposed on me, nor so much as the subject given me by any man. It was written during the last winter (1686) and the beginning of this spring, though with long interruptions of ill-health and other hindrances. About a fortnight before I had finished it, his majesty's declaration for liberty of conscience came abroad; which, if I had so soon expected, I might have spared myself the labour of writing many things which are contained in the third part of it. But I was always in some hope that the Church of England might have been persuaded to have taken off the Penal Laws and the Test, which was one design of the poem when I proposed to myself the writing of it.' The poem, as all its readers know, is very beautiful. The subdued soberness of its tone, its gentle charity, its restraint and reserve of magnificent eloquence, are as much a revelation of Dryden's change of heart as any direct statement could be; and, if he ever read it, ought to have silenced Macaulay's sneers. The defence of the doctrine of the Real Presence is worth quoting:

John Dryden

Can I believe eternal God could lie
Disguised in mortal mould and infancy?
That the great Maker of the world could die?
And after that trust my imperfect sense,
Which calls in question His Omnipotence?
Can I my reason to my faith compel,
And shall my sight, and touch, and taste rebel?
Superior faculties are set aside;
Shall their subservient organs be my guide?

And also his description of the Church :

But, gracious God, how well dost Thou provide
For erring judgments an unerring guide !
Thy throne is darkness in the abyss of light,
A blaze of glory that forbids the sight.
Oh, teach me to believe Thee thus concealed,
And search no further than Thyself revealed ;
But her alone for my director take,
Whom Thou hast promised never to forsake !

The change in Dryden is apparent, too, in the sweetness and tenderness of some of his later work, as, for example, in the lovely parable of *The Flower and the Leaf*. It must have been a reflection of the serene sunset of his own life, after how stormy a day, when he wrote :

For laurel is the sign of labour crowned,
Which bears the bitter blast, nor shaken falls to ground ;
From winter winds it suffers no decay,
For ever fresh and fair, and every month is May.

His wife, Lady Elizabeth Dryden, and his three sons, whom he had had educated at Rome, were also Catholics. The third son, Erasmus, entered the Dominican novitiate in 1692, was ordained priest in 1694, and, later, became subprior in the Convent of Holy Cross, Bornheim. The great English Catholic poet's tomb in Westminster Abbey is simply and royally inscribed : J. DRYDEN.

JOHN FOSTER MAKEPEACE.