

## History of English Verse-Satire down to Byron.

Satire is a literary work which searches out faults of men or institutions in order to hold them up to ridicule. The essential feature of the satiric spirit is its disposition to tear down and destroy. Variations in temper and aim may exist in different satirists but fundamentally the satiric spirit is negative and pessimistic. Satire dispels illusion by confronting romance with realism and fiction with fact. The satirist perceives and exposes incongruity, the discrepancy between profession and performance. He is actuated always by a destructive motive, and it is his function to condemn and to reprove. Humour is undoubtedly a usual concomitant of satire but authorities differ as to the value of humour. According to Dryden satiric humour must be delicate and refined: he thinks that the legitimate office of satire is to raise a gentle laugh at vice. Gifford, on the contrary, goes a step further and from the standpoint of a moralist says that the proper office of satire is to hold up the vicious as objects of scorn and hatred. When humour is wanting and the mood is entirely vituperative, the result is invective and sheer abuse. Although some critics are desirous of excluding invective from the category of satire yet it is not safe to do so because a large portion of the work of Churchill, Gifford and Byron is unmitigated and downright abuse. We cannot lay much emphasis upon the reformatory purpose working behind the satiric spirit. Although Dryden insists upon the satiric "to give his reader some one principle of moral virtue," yet it is by no means a universal law for satire. Exemplification of this theory may be found in particular

satirists who have deliberately pointed the way to goodness and virtue, but common practice has too often been at variance with this doctrine. Ultimately the one outstanding characteristic of the satiric spirit is the wish to deny, to rebuke, to destroy.

Satire may be of many kinds of which verse-satire is a species. Verse-satire may be defined as a formal literary composition in verse devoted to negative criticism, its deliberate object being the exposition and flagellation of vice. Verse-satire which flourished in England has an interesting history of its own. If we turn to the origins, there is no Old English satire. In "Beowulf" there is not a single instance of it. England produced many mediaeval Latin satires on the scandals of the Church. The satiric spirit was present in the poetry of Chaucer and Langland. Vice proper looms large in the "Canterbury Tales" and in "Piers Plowman" there is a large admixture of satirical elements. But these poems are not strictly speaking satires because their main motive is, not the holding of vice or folly to ridicule. The native literature before 1595 centres round religion and politics. There are many diatribes of ecclesiastical and political controversy, for instance, the vehement personal quarrels of Skelton; but not one of these is exactly satire. The writers of political songs did not rise much above the lampoonist.

Satire, like the essay, comes into existence when society becomes self-conscious and urban. Satire expresses not merely the grievances of the moment but the whole critical temperament and outlook on life. Native English satire which flourished in England before Wyatt had no permanent application but about the time of Wyatt men had begun to study the frailties of their kind. Classical satire was introduced into England for the first time by Wyatt. He wrote three satires, having adapted them from Horace and

Persius. The evils of court-life and the blessings of honest retirement are his theme. His satires are marked by strong feeling, sincerity, fervour and rectitude. They are the expression of his honest indignation. Wyatt's satires, like all first attempts in any field are dull, rugged and ill-constructed. But the one good gift which his classical satire brought in its train is form. It taught all later satirists how to begin and how to end.

Fifty years afterwards, in 1597, Joseph Hall claimed the honour of being the first English satirist with "Virgidedmiarum". It may be that his satires existed in mss. and that he was unacquainted with the work of Wyatt. But Prof. Saintsbury says that Hall's is but an empty bravado. In the opinion of the same critic, the satire proper—the following of the great Roman examples of Horace, Juvenal and Persius in general lashing of vice and folly,—cannot be traced further back than George Gascoigne's "Steel Glass" which preceded Hall's poem by twenty years. But Hall's boast of originality may be partly justified because he discovered Juvenal as the true model for Elizabethan and Jacobean satire. Hall was the first to reproduce Juvenal's method and spirit in English verse. He satirises the physicians, the gallants, the astrologers and Italianate Englishmen in a forcible manner. There is in Hall's satires a systematic thoroughness, an orderly arrangement and a sweep of indictment which are in marked contrast with the desultory manner of Wyatt and Gascoigne. A study of the Roman satirists refined his literary perceptions, quickened his sense of proportion and taught him how to enrich his verse with witty turns of expression.

Hall was followed by a host of imitators in verse satire. But the later satirists are wanting in Hall's moral earnestness. Lodge's "A Fig for Momus" is modelled on Horace and Lodge was the first to show in this poem how verse

satire could be most effectively written in the decasyllabic couplet. Donne's "Satires" are also written in the couplet with a rough, unmusical cadence. The outlines of Donne's portraits are very clear. Marston wrote two satires, called "The Metamorphosis of Pygmalion's Image" and "The Scourge of Villainy." Prof Sainbury says that Marston in his satires "out-Halled Hall in all his literary misdeeds." "Pygmalion" is of a licentious character, being a veiled satire on the amorous poetry of the day. In his "Scourge of Villainy" he indulged in indiscriminate attack on everything and everybody. Scurrility in the hands of Marston became an end in itself.

A few words may now be said on the general character of Elizabethan satire. The misanthropy, the cynicism and the humorous tolerance of evil, one or other of which must go to the making of a great satire, are not to be found among the Elizabethan writers. The Elizabethans were too much in love with life to satirise it effectively. Their genius was lyrical and dramatic and satire is inconsistent with passion and imagination. Elizabethan satire, therefore is artificial and a merely literary pose. It is feeble and purely imitative. Hall and Donne alone stand outside the general run by some saving graces of their own. Hall has literary finish and acute observation, and Donne's hatred is marked by sincerity. Hall even anticipates sometimes the manner of Pope by the polish of his couplet. But vigour and point and concentrated intensity which were the aim of the best of later English satirists are totally wanting in any of the Elizabethans. In the words of Prof. Courthope, "time had not yet come when it was possible to imitate the spirit of the Roman satirist. The nation had not advanced so far in self-government as to fix the public attention on the sayings and doings of ambitious statesmen, contending factions and rival wits; this was to

come in the days of Dryden and Pope under the rule of the English Parliament".

During the period of the Civil Wars formal classical satire disappears. But it flourishes again in a remarkable manner from the accession of Charles II onwards. The boundless enthusiasm of the Elizabethans had been carried to such a riotous excess that literature had become fantastic and extravagant. As a reaction against this license, the new age became gradually more and more reasonable and practical. The intuitive spirit of the Elizabethans now gave place to an introspective and critical tendency. Society found amusement in laughing at its own follies and frivolities. This critical, analytical and rationalistic spirit naturally found its best expression in satire. A second cause for the preponderance of satire in the eighteenth century lies in the growth of a violent party-feeling; most of the prominent writers of the day flocked under the banner of either the Whigs or the Tories. Men who sharpened their wits against one another valued logic and good sense more than passion, idealism or romantic fancy. Therefore this practical period,—this "age of common-sense and criticism" found its most satisfactory expression in satire.

Genuine satire was first re-introduced by Marvell in 1679. He was a staunch Puritan and after the Restoration he stoutly attacked tyranny and crime in Church and State. His satires are written in heroic couplets. Ten years later satire was revived by Oldham who is styled by Edmund Gosse as "the Ajax among English satirists". His cynicism and misanthropy find expression in the "satire upon the Jesuits". The example of Oldham directed the genius of Dryden to this species of poetry. But neither Marvell nor Oldham understood that coolness of irony and that polished banter which gave to Dryden his extraordinary influence as a satirist.

Before, 1700, interest in English satire centres around the name of Dryden. Dryden took up satire at the age of fifty. He avoided the faults of his predecessors and contemporaries, polished and improved the verse-satire, and gave to it vigour and refinement and dignity. His satire is marked by clearness, good taste and self-control. He is never in a rage and never rails indiscriminately. He made his victims ridiculous and absurd rather than hateful; he did not draw them as monsters or unnatural villains, but as foolish or weak human beings. The two parts of his "Absalom and Achitophel" remain the greatest political satires in English literature. The political satire in the poem is veiled under the guise of one of the most familiar episodes of Old Testament history which the existing crisis in English affairs resembled. The general scheme is to show the rebellious character of the puritans, who insisted on the exclusion of the Duke of York from the succession, on account of his being a pronounced catholic, and the determination of Charles II to resist this interference with his royal prerogative, even at the cost of a civil war. The Earl of Shaftesbury (*Achitophel*), an out and out protestant, used every effort to induce Monmouth (*Absalom*) to compel King Charles (*David*) to set aside the Duke of York. The poem consists of a series of satirical portraits and the supreme excellence of the poem lies in these portraits which are "cut and polished like jewels, flashing malignant light from all their facets." The character of *Zimri* (Buckingham) is a masterpiece of wit. Quotation of a few lines from Dryden's immortal picture of *Zimri* may not be out of place,

"In the first rank of these did *Zimri* stand ;  
 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 Chemist, Fiddler, Statesman and Buffoon ;  
 Then all for women, painting, rhiming, drinking,  
 Besides ten thousand freaks that died in thinking,  
 Blest Madman, who could every hour employ,  
 With something new to wish or to enjoy !  
 Railing and praising, were his usual themes ;  
 And both (to show his judgment) in extremes ;  
 So over violent, or over evil,  
 That every man, with him, was God or devil."

—*Absalom and Achitophel*, Part I, ll 544-558.

In this vivacious satirical painting every hit is calculated and every stroke goes home. Dryden's second satire "The Medal" is a diatribe against the political career of Shaftesbury, but as it is wanting in brilliant portraits it tends to become monotonous. In "Mac Flecknoe" Dryden attacked the poet Shadwell (*Og*) in a violent and scurrilous manner. Besides these political satires, he wrote two religious satires. His "Religio Laici" is a plea for the Anglican Church. "The Hind and the Panther" is his apology on the occasion of his conversion to the Roman Church. It is in the shape of an allegory, the hind standing for the Catholic Church and the panther for the Church of England. Edmund Gosse speaks of Dryden's four political satires in the following rapturous accents. "They are marked by daring eloquence, gusts of triumphant wit, majestic crash of the couplet which are all forged into a war-trumpet through which the trumpeter can peal what notes he pleases."

Defoe's "True-born Englishman" (1701) was the most popular satire between "Absalom and Achitophel" and the "Dunciad." Defoe undoubtedly owed much to Dryden's work. But Dryden was overshadowed by his successor and rival Pope. Pope's satirical poetry is didactic in its aim. It has a positive purpose ; it contrasts excellence and virtue with dulness and vice ; and its examples are illustrations

of its precepts. Pope boasted that he had "moralised his song," i. e. he had employed his satire for definite ethical purposes. Pope's ability in representing types of character is unsurpassed. Personal spleen may have generally suggested their selection, but this fact fails to interfere with the triumphant success of the result. The men and women of his satires and Epistles, his Atticus and Atossa, and Sappho and Sporus, are real types, whether they may be more or less faithful portraits of Addison and the Duchess, of Lady Mary, and Lord Harvey. His Dunces are the Dunces of all times. His orator Henley the mob-orator is of all epochs. In Pope's hands individuals, like Theobald and Bentley become types, and his creative power in this respect surpasses that of the Roman satirists, and leaves Dryden himself behind. It may be well to quote Pope's celebrated portrait of Atticus, the most brilliant passage in modern satirical literature ;—

"Peace to all such ! but were there one whose fires  
 True genius kindles and fair fame inspires ;  
 Blest with each talent and each art to please,  
 And born to write, converse, and live with ease ;  
 Should such a man, too fond to rule alone,  
 Bear, like the Turk, no brother near the throne ;  
 View him with scornful, yet with jealous eyes,  
 And hate for arts that caused himself to rise ;  
 Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,  
 And without sneering, teach the rest to sneer ;  
 Willing to wound and yet afraid to strike,  
 Just hint a fault and hesitate dislike ;  
 Alike reserved to praise or to commend,  
 A timorous foe and a suspicious friend ;  
 Dreading ev'n fools, by flatterers besieged,  
 And so obliging that he ne'er obliged ;  
 Like Cato, give his little senate laws,  
 And sit attentive to his own applause ;



While wits and templars every sentence raise,  
 And wonder with a foolish face of praise ;  
 Who would not laugh if such a man there be ?  
 Who would not weep, if Atticus were he ?”

—Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot, ll. 193-214.

The excellence of this celebrated satire is due in part to the fact that, for once, Pope does not lose his temper. His attack is qualified and really sharpened by an admission of Addison's excellence. It is therefore a real masterpiece of satire, not a simple lampoon.

While admitting Pope's pre-eminence as a satirist we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that Pope was primarily a personal satirist, actuated too often by a desire of satisfying his private grudge. His malice and vindictiveness are quite unmistakable. His chief aim was to damage the reputation of his foes. He is more personal than Dryden. Dryden always preserved a semblance of fairness whereas Pope is too often vituperative and savage. In his methods, Pope was unprincipled, never hesitating to make the vilest charges against his opponents. He had no scruples about making attacks on women, a practice not countenanced by Dryden. As a satirist, Pope's range is less wide than Dryden's and he could attain his large sweep and sinewy ease but along his own restricted lines Pope's wit is keener.

Pope's satires are of three classes. Under the first head we may note the brilliant mock-heroic "Rape of the Lock", a gay satire of the cavalier world. It arose out of a courtly scandal. Its wit is bright and sparkling and the artificial tone of the age and the frivolity of women are pictured in the poem. "It is an epic of triflings, a page torn fresh from the petty, pleasure-seeking life of the fashionable society." Under the second class comes the Dunciad which is incomparably the fiercest and most powerful of literary satire. This is a personal

satire in which the poet indulges in a personal abuse of Grub Street hacks and Theobald. The "Dunciad" is modelled upon Dryden's "Macflecknoe" in which Dryden celebrates the appointment of Shadwell to succeed Flecknoe as monarch of the realm of Dulness, and describes the coronation ceremonies. Pope imitates many passages of his master, and adopts the general design. The general idea of Pope's poem is that the throne of dulness is left vacant and that various aspirants engage in a series of trials to determine who shall inherit. At first the palm is given to Theobald but finally he is degraded from the throne and the crown is given to Colley Cibber. Most of the persons attacked in the poem are now so obscure that their names are only remembered because Pope has satirised them. The satire is cruel and unworthy of the writer's eminent position but it was exceedingly successful because the poetasters were almost crushed under the wheel of his satire. The perennial interest of "The Dunciad,"—its universal fame—lies in its general application to dulness under all its shapes and forms. The central figure of the satire is not any Cibber or Theobald of the moment, but the very deity of Dulness itself incarnate in all the bad writers of the age. When all the petty names are forgotten the type "dunce" shall remain eternal. Under the third class of Pope's satires come his most mature and most accomplished "Epistles", including the masterly one to Arbuthnot and the "Imitations of Horace". These are a mingled yarn of the best and worst in Pope; there is satire, judgment, fine irony, concern for literature, loyal friendship to Swift, Arbuthnot, Gay and the rest of the Scriblerus circle; but these are accompanied by personalities such as the malicious distortion of Addison and the venomous portrait of Hervey. (To be continued.)

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