

CONCLUSIONS

This study has presented Gildon as professional man of letters, as creative writer, and as critic in order to discuss the body of his work and to evaluate his achievement. As hack journalist working with Tom Brown and Dunton he engaged in a variety of chores, some of which were sub-literary but a few of which had some pretensions to literary merit of a minor sort, for among the early journals Dunton's Athenian Mercury was reputable. As editor of several miscellanies he assembled some rather good cross-sections of contemporary literary taste, introduced a few good pieces to the world, and used his miscellanies to introduce his own poetry and criticism; and in an age when even Dryden brought out a miscellany, Gildon's were favorably regarded. Although his biographical memoirs were cheap, shoddy jobs done quickly to capture a passing opportunity, they have minor historical value. At least one of his works on deism deserves praise for its thorough, thoughtful attempt to reach the popular audience with a refutation of deistic principles, and his compilation, though hasty, was so wide-ranging and informative that it is still consulted and cited. His translation was more than competent, and his textbook measured up to the standards of his age well enough to be reprinted late into the century. Thus as professional man of letters he was skilled, versatile, often admirable, sometimes merely facile, and occasionally unscrupulous.

As creative writer Gildon deserved more respect. As poet he was undistinguished and frequently ponderous in his attempts at lyrics, gauche in his stiff occasional poetry, but almost convincing in his carefully reasoned, cogently presented, excessively hortatory didactic poetry. As dramatist he practiced tragedy but temporized with the passing taste for extraneous musical show; nevertheless, by dwelling upon the passions he sometimes attained and sustained the intensity of Greek tragedy, and a few of his blank verse speeches reach genuine elevation; but these achievements are all exceptions rather than the rule, for Gildon as dramatist aspired more often than he performed. But his best creative work was in fiction. There he developed a simple, direct, quick-moving popular narrative style; he recognized and developed many of the possibilities of the club device to unify collections of epistolary fiction; he contributed to the happy marriage of epistolary fiction and gentle instruction which Addison later performed; he demonstrated remarkable control over simple and fairly complex plotting; and he early recognized and effectively used the satiric possibilities of allegorical narrative thinly disguised by transparent irony.

But Gildon took himself most seriously as critic. As a defender of the ancients, as a proponent of the rules, as a firm advocate of the Aristotelian analytic tradition who conceived of epic and tragic poetry as the supreme instrument for forming and maintaining a noble public morality, he unflinchingly championed the stage and vehemently insisted that it present and reward only what would please the qualified few, who should have official direction of it. Therefore he placed Shakespeare lower than the great Greek tragedians, Milton second to Homer, epic and tragic poetry above Roman satire, and that in turn above English satire; his other wide-ranging specific judgment of men and works are similarly logical applications of these clear principles. No

servile echoer of anyone, he supported or differed from the great names of his day as they accepted or rejected these principles. Thus as critic he was rational, systematic, consistent, and rigid; although he lacked sensitiveness, perception, and flexibility, he possessed perspective, logic, and judgment. And although his convictions increasingly opposed popular taste, he nevertheless left several opinions on major matters which the judgment of time has confirmed.