

## Chapter X

### THE SAD STATE OF ENGLISH LETTERS

Since the previous chapter has shown Gildon opposing most popular notions, he was understandably scornful of the contemporary literary scene. His chief concern was for the stage, for he sincerely believed that "the Wit of Man cannot invent any thing more conducive to Virtue; and destructive of Vice, than the Drama . . .," which he hoped to see restored "to its ancient Dignity, . . . as it was at first design'd by its Founders, the School of Virute."<sup>1</sup> But measured by this standard "England at this time seems the Africa of Wit, where only Monsters thrive and domineer, both on the Theatre and in the Press."<sup>2</sup> Such perversion and neglect have forced dramatists "to make the most noble and useful School of Vertue, degenerate into a meer Diversion; that they might please an audience, whence they could only hope for their Support."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the English stage has sunk into "an extremely ignorant, . . . scandalous barbarousness . . . abounding in spectacles . . . full of absurdity and confusion, as well as immorality."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Complete Art, pp. 39-40.

2. Charles Gildon, The New Metamorphosis (London, 1709, 1709), preface.

3. The Lives and Characters of the English Dramatick Poets, ed. Charles Gildon (London, 1699), dedication.

4. Laws . . . Poetry, pp. 178-79.

Gildon's fears for current drama were chiefly for tragedy, which he regarded as potentially a powerful instrument for national morality and public guidance. But he held that modern English tragedy "has for the most part usurpt that name, boasted that Glory, to which . . . it has but very little pretence: I speak of that excellent and rational poem call'd Tragedy by Aristotle, and the ancient Athenians,"<sup>5</sup> which was "infinitely of greater use, benefit, and instruction than the English stage . . ., much more noble and great than any thing that can be deriv'd from our strange medley, and huddle of incoherent, not to say inconsistent accidents, and things to which we nowadays give the name of Tragedy."<sup>6</sup> Modern English tragedy, asserted Gildon, "is commonly a company of independent dialogues tack'd together, without any just coherence, and without being directed to any certain end, which makes it very often happen, that any part of it may be left out, and yet the entertainment remain as entire as if it had not been so."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, in A New Rehearsal Gildon made Bayes, the personification of the false judgment of the age, thus reveal his methods:

For you must know, Gentlemen, that I think of some fine scenes from the Beginning of Play to the End, and several fine descriptions, and then at last I make some taking Scenes, which finish my Play . . . . I never trouble my Head much about a Plot, for to tell you the Truth, the more I think of that, the worse I make it; and therefore I resolve to write my next without any Plot at all.<sup>8</sup>

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5. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 149.

6. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 165.

7. Laws . . . Poetry, pp. 153-54.

8. New Rehearsal, p. 83.

Aldon's second objection to contemporary tragedy was its excessive concern with character, whereas "the antients propos'd a Moral, and regarded the chief character or Hero, no farther than the giving such Qualities and Traits to him, as were necessary to produce that Moral."<sup>9</sup> His third objection was to the contemporary neglect of unified action for such "fine things" as "Pointed Wit, fine, round, well turn'd Periods, common Place Sentences, calm Philosophical reflections, and the like . . . ." In addition he complained that "an audience is never so well pleas'd as when an actor foams with some extravagant rant"<sup>11</sup> that "Soliloquies are indeed a fault peculiar to the Modern Plays, which proceeds from a perpetual Identify of Cadence,"<sup>13</sup> and that modern plays contained a "ridiculous Variety . . . by the change of Scenes."<sup>14</sup> Even though he believed that English comedy was "the best in our own Tongue of any either ancient or modern,"<sup>15</sup> he minimized the importance of comedy. Finally, so low was his opinion of contemporary achievement "in a Time, when the Town made the falsest Judgment in the World on Tragedy . . ."<sup>16</sup> that he seriously wondered if "the Dramatick genius of this nation is quite extinguished."<sup>17</sup>

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9. New Rehearsal, p. 50.
  10. Love's Victim, preface.
  11. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 350.
  12. Laws . . . Poetry, pp. 203-04.
  13. Phaeton, preface.
  14. Miscellanea Aurea, p. 94.
  15. Complete Art, p. 261.
  16. Scanen Miscellaneum, dedication.
  17. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 36.

These views may seem severe, but towards current acting, actors, and actresses Gildon was even more contemptuous. He was disgusted because "our Stage at the best . . . is but a very cold Representation, supported by loud prompting, to the eternal Disgust of the Audience, and spoiling the Decorum of the Representation."<sup>18</sup> Worse still, the actors and actresses were profaning the stage

by their own loose Lives, by an open contempt of Religion, and making Blasphemy and Prophaneness the Works of their Wit and good Breeding; by an undisguised Debauchery and Drunkenness, coming on the very Stage, in Contempt of the audience, when they are scarce able to speak a word; by having little Regard to the Ties of Honour and Common Honesty; to say nothing of the Irregularities of the Ladies . . . .<sup>19</sup>

He was especially indignant that the moral import of serious tragedy could be nullified by the profligate reputation of the players, "For to hear Virtue, Religion, Honour recommended by a Prostitute, an Atheist, or a Fake, makes them a Jest to many People, who would hear the same done with awe by Persons of known Reputation in those Particulars."<sup>20</sup>

Gildon had even harsher words for the management and managers of the playhouses, whom he blamed for

the present State of that Hospital of Parnassus, the Play-House, which receives and takes care of all the Cripples and diseas'd of that Airy Region, . . . for a sound Mind in a sound Body, will never please the Headles and Masters of that Bedley of Bedlam and the Hospital, nor the Play-house; which, contrary to all other common-wealths, lets the able Starve, and takes care only of the Impotent, and Sick.<sup>21</sup>

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18. Life . . . Betterton, p. 38.

19. Life . . . Betterton, p. 38.

20. Life . . . Betterton, p. 19.

21. The Post-Boy Robb'd of his Mail (London, 1706), pp. 312-13.

He also blamed English leaders for their lack of concern and boldly reprimanded them:

It is, to our Shame be it spoken, very observable, that our British Statesmen are the only of any Nation that pretends to some Degree of Politeness, who never yet thought the Theatre worthy their care and Inspection, but who have too frequently left it in the abandoned Hands of Men as eminent for their Ignorance of Art, as for their Irreligion and Devotion to their immediate Interest alone.<sup>22</sup>

Through the Carelessness of the Government . . . the stage is given over to the Management of ignorant and abandoned Creatures, who have nothing in their Eyes, but the Money they can any way convey to their own Private Pockets, not minding nor caring whether they corrupt the audience; Religion and Morality being an equal Jest to these scandalous Managers of the Theatre.<sup>23</sup>

Nor did Gildon hesitate to name names in a direct attack upon Colley Cibber, a power in the management of Drury Lane.

The present Super-intendent Colly, keeps off all valuable Plays to make room for his own, or such as he introduces. No pains nor Cost is spar'd to force his notable Scriptures on the Town, Witness his Heroick Daughter and Cinna's Conspiracy, which he has try'd all Ways of imposing on the Town, but in Vain. Such Plays as are justly receiv'd, he gives out on an Opera Day, that the Smallness of the Audience may furnish a Pretence of laying them aside. I shall say nothing of his Morals or Religion, of his Blasphemy or Profaneness, nor of his turning out actresses because they refus'd to lye with him, those are . . . known even to the Basket Women and Porters.<sup>24</sup>

Gildon also pointedly reminded his generation that as a principle of enlightened policy "The wisest States have always had the public Diversions in the hands of publick Magistrates. Those in Athens were the Choragi, of which

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22. Complete Art, pp. 64-65.

23. Complete Art, p. 39.

24. Les Soupirs de la Grande Bretagne, pp. 72-73.

number the great Themistocles was, and in Rome there was a similar restraint.<sup>25</sup>

Thus Gildon boldly expressed his fundamental disagreement with current tragedy, his indignation against incompetent and infamous actors for cheapening an art form intended for public instruction, and his contempt for the management of the playhouses.

He also believed the non-dramatic literature of his age to be similarly degenerate in its lack of "design," its stress upon "fine things," and its general cheapening of what should be a noble art. He cried that his was "an age when ev'ry ignorant Scribbler sets up for a Man of Authority; and as many as can but tell their Syllables on their Fingers, without Genius, without Learning, or any Excuse for Writing, arrogate the Glorious Name of Poets. . . ."26 He insisted that "it is very difficult to find any of our most taking Things . . . which have any Design at all."<sup>27</sup> and that instead of striving for the great excellence of fable "a company of unconnected verses is all our Writers seem to aim at, which they adorn with Epigrammatic Points, or Satire, and flowing numbers . . . ."28 Hence Gildon spoke with disgust of "that abandon'd taste, which has generally prevail'd in this nation, where we have very falsely attributed the highest perfection of Poetry to this flash of fancy, to a sparkling point, an epigrammatick

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25. Complete Art, p. 84.

26. Miscellaneous Essays, preface.

27. Canons, preface.

28. Canons, preface.

brilliant, when all the greater qualities of a just Poet are wanting."<sup>29</sup>

Gildon was especially incensed at the public's association of poetry with merriment, ridicule, and lewd wit. With considerable rancor he spoke of "a great enemy to the prevailing art and a fine taste in this nation, and that is, a strange fondness we have for the ridicule, or any thing that will make us laugh."<sup>30</sup> and especially condemned these lovers of ridicule for citing Horace as their model; for in so doing they have

been content to see only his outside; and 'tis a strange thing that Satires, which have been read so long, have been little understood . . . . Horace would teach us to conquer vices, to rule our passions, to follow nature, to limit our desires to distinguish true from false, and ideas from things; to forsake prejudice, to know thoroughly the principles and motives of all our actions, and to shun that folly which is in all men who are bigoted to the opinions . . . which they keep obstinately, without examining whether they are well grounded.<sup>31</sup>

This true value of Horace, Gildon argued, was being ignored in favor of ridicule stripped of the corrective purpose of Roman satire. As for the slighter sorts of fashionable poetry, "the subject of our common songs is generally either gallantry or drinking . . . but these are trifles not worth outside consideration."<sup>32</sup> Even worse, "Some of the English song writers have been guilty of obscenity . . . a fault so gross, and yet so common . . . ."<sup>33</sup> that "It is indeed a scandal to poetry, to see so many lewdnesses adorn'd with the ornaments of verse . . . ."<sup>34</sup>

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29. Laws . . . . Poetry, pp. 19-20.

30. Laws . . . . Poetry, pp. 277-78.

31. Laws . . . . Poetry, p. 139.

32. Laws . . . . Poetry, p. 69.

33. Laws . . . . Poetry, p. 89.

34. Laws . . . . Poetry, p. 300.

Translation in Gildon's day was considered a form of literary art, and he was distressed that it had fallen into low hands because "The Booksellers are here the undertakers, and . . . are oblig'd to employ those to translate who will do it for the least money."<sup>35</sup> He decried the too-common practice of booksellers' hacks who "made English" second-hand versions of Greek and Latin authors by working from French translations rather than the originals and questioned the taste of "those gentlemen, who have attempted any part of the old Testament in rhyme, because they have either by the natural effeminacy of those identical sounds which we call rhyme, or by a pursuit of smooth and flowing versification, or by expressing paraphrastically what is said simply in the original, lost the force and energy of the divine song, in the weak ornaments of modern poetry."<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, Gildon was convinced that contemporary English literature was indeed but a poor mockery, and like most disappointed men, he blamed his times. Specifically, he attributed the low state of English literature to lack of encouragement, the ignorance of the audience, and a lack of discriminating patrons.

Probably the greatest deterrent to poetry, thought Gildon, was the factious and mean private spirit of avarice pervading his age. In 1702 he wrote, "When true Poetry has more Esteem, and false controversies and pernicious principles less Pow'r . . . when those that set up for Reforming our Manners have morality themselves, and act not for money, but the Love of the Public, Virtue and Poetry will flourish . . ."<sup>37</sup> In 1703 he dedicated

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35. Works of Lucian, II, preface.

36. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 120.

37. Examen Misc., preface.



manifested itself in private control of the stage as well as in the methods by which plays succeeded there, and for over twenty years he lamented the sad effects of private control of the stage. In 1699 he wrote that the government's neglect forced the poets "to make the most Noble and useful School of Vertue, degenerats into a meer Diversion . . . . and this has laid the Stage open to the weak assaults of those whom either Bigotry, Interest, or Hypocrisy have made its enemies."<sup>41</sup> In 1710 he saw no hope for correcting English drama "while private Interest has the Direction of a publick Diversion; for that has no Regard to anything but itself."<sup>42</sup> In 1718 he complained that "our British Statesmen are the only of any Nation that pretends to some degree of Politeness, who never yet thought the Theatre worthy their care and Inspection, but have too frequently left it in the abandon'd Hands of Men as eminent for their Ignorance of Art, as for their Irreligion and Devotion to their Immediate Interest alone."<sup>43</sup> And in 1719 he vented his full spleen in a bitter letter addressed to an imaginary young man who aspired to success as a playwright.

If you design any thing for the Stage, you must remember to prepare its Reception by all the modern Arts which the Authors have found out would be successful. You must make a Confidant or two of some leading Wits; you must make your court to the young Gentlemen of the Town, shew 'em a Description, applaud their Judgment, and pay your Devoirs to the Ladies, especially such of them as have great Visiting Days, and frequent all the Assemblies of the rest of their Sex: If you can insinuate the Merit of your Performance by any publick Papers, it is of great use; then when by your Obsequiousness to the Players, both Men and Women, it comes on, you must place Parties of your Friends in the Pit and first Gallery, who will be sure to begin Claps enough; and this artfully manag'd, may do your

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41. Lives . . . Characters, dedication.

42. Works . . . Shakespear, VII, 124.

43. Complete Art, pp. 64-65.

Business, and establish you for a Dramatic Poet for the future. Yet you must not grow above using the Means that rais'd you, which must in some degree be repeated every time you think fit to appear on the Stage with any thing new.<sup>44</sup>

Gildon believed that a third deterrent to the quality of English literature was war, which always introduces "a sort of Libertinism in our Diversions, contrary to Decorum and Regularity; without which no Pleasure can be truly noble. Another ill effect of Warlike Times, is a neglect of the politer Sciences of Peace, and a sort of Barbarism in our Taste of all the fine Arts."<sup>45</sup> Hence the dominant notes of the age—avarice, private spirit, and war—augured only poverty and contempt for men of solid learning and merit, "For no arts are encouraged, that are not immediately employ'd in the Service, Ornament, or Pleasure of the Body; and those that adorn the Mind thrown aside as superfluous."<sup>46</sup>

But even more discouraging than the adverse spirit of the times was the general neglect suffered by literary men of sense and merit. Early (1692) and late (1721) Gildon complained that his age squandered its means upon bagatelles or rewarded only the pushing and pretending little wits of fortune or faction. He early (1692) appraised the discouraging lot of the young unknown: "I find that all of a man's study at School, and at the university, and all the Gifts of Nature besides, only qualifies him for a slave to the Booksellers, if Fortune be wanting."<sup>47</sup> In 1701 he reproached the players because

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44. The Post-Man Robb'd of his Mail (1719), pp. 146-49.

45. Life . . . Betterton, p. 13.

46. All the Histories and Novels of Mrs. Behm, ed. Charles Gildon (London, 1705), dedication.

47. The Post-Boy Robb'd (1706), I, 168.

With them the Impudent alone succeed;  
 The forward pushing Spark in Plenty lives,  
 By Force he fattens, and by Nonsense Thrives  
 While those whom Faction nor Cabal support  
 May starve by Sense, and thank their  
 Judgment for't.<sup>48</sup>

In the same year he complained of the frivolous and misguided generosity of men of place and means who were deaf to appeals from solid writers at the same time they were generously encouraging fiddlers and dancers and betraying "their gross affectation by squandering their random favours, on the vilest of poetasters."<sup>49</sup> In 1706 he again bemoaned that it was his lot "to be an author in an age, when Learning and Sense have so very little Interest in the World, that they are sure to be a clogg on the courtship of Fortune . . . whose smiles were never more lavish on Fools and pert Pretenders . . . ."<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately for men of wit, "Silly Women, and as silly Beaux will decide on the Merit of a Poet as arbitrarily as if they understood the Art. So Ignorance sits Judge of Knowledge, and Folly of Wit."<sup>51</sup> Since England's great "censure by Fancy and Humour . . . he that can fawn on the Great, and so secure a Patron or Party, has no need of Art, Nature, or Study to recommend him."<sup>52</sup> Public taste ignores the solid to praise the clever.

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48. Love's Victim, prologue.

49. David Crawford, Civilius Britannicus, ed. Charles Gildon (London, 1703), dedication.

50. Post-Boy Robb'd. (1706), dedication.

51. Les Soupirs, p. 71.

52. Les Soupirs, p. 72.

For it has been observ'd by the Book-sellers, that Books of Banter, and meer amusement, go off much better, than Books of Reason or True Art. The Tale of a Tub run off I know not how many Thousands on its first appearance; whereas the Divine Milton lay as Was to paper for many Years, nor did ever yet come up to the Sale of the Spectators . . . . A Young Fellow shall give Charles Buble-Boy Fifty Guineas for a Trifle, when he shall scruple to give Jacob Tenson Twenty Shillings for Milton.<sup>53</sup>

In 1719 Gildon thus recorded his entire disillusionment: "Never think of growing popular by Wit, good Sense, or solid Reason; there is a Burlesque Spirit that rules the Age, and a merry Buffoon is sure to carry the Prize; a Tale of a Tub spreads immediately into every Corner of the Nation, and the Wicked and the Godly join to propagate its Sale."<sup>54</sup> Gildon also cited two other discouragements to the dramatic writer. Since the players "often reject, and generally very supinely perform the best piece of the greatest master, who does not industriously pre-engage the leading men and women of quality in his cause . . . ,"<sup>55</sup> he despaired of the English Stage until "the writer has some more certain encouragement than the bare profits of a third day: for, those who write to live, will be always under a necessity to comply in some measure with the generality, by whose approbation they subsist."<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps equally responsible for the low state of English literature was the ignorance of the audience to which it was addressed; the great vulgar, the vulgar great, the rapidly growing number of women readers, the unlearned beaux who flocked to the playhouse, the Dick Minims of criticism, the superficial education of the age comprised a general ignorance to which the

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53. Les Soupirs, pp. 68-70.

54. Post-Man robb'd (1719), pp. 146-49.

55. Laws . . . Poetry, pp. 38-39.

56. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 350.

litterateur must pander or perish. So thought Gildon, and like most men of literature who look their world in the eye he found much to document his opinion.

Gildon argued that

The present low state of Poetry is owing to the want of taste and judgment of the general readers and hearers of poetic performances more than to the real want of genius . . . for to the Perfection of Poetry, and its esteem in the world not only a great genius and judgment is absolutely necessary in the Poet, but a fine taste and judgment also in the people, which . . . at this time is worse than ever; the cause of this certainly is ignorance, which seems now to be almost universal.<sup>57</sup>

This ignorance impeded the stage because of "an abundance of odd Spectators, whom the chance of War have enabled to crowd the Pit and Stage-Boxes, and sway too much by their Thoughtless and arbitrary Censure . . ." These Gildon called the great vulgar,

all such who are ignorant in the fine arts, and have not true Taste of them, let their Fortune, their Birth, and their Quality be what it will . . . this brings in much the greater Part of those who decide the Fate of authors; this takes in . . . almost the whole Body of Womankind, at least in our Nation, where the Ladies have more engaging Enjoyments to pass their Time in, than in informing their Understandings.<sup>59</sup>

In discouraged tones he spoke of "delivering Poetry from its most dangerous Enemies, the Friends of the Poetasters now in Vogue, the Ladies, who are generally too indulgent in their applause of Scribblers . . .,"<sup>60</sup> to whom he added "the Beaux and the rest . . . who make a Figure in the Visiting Days and assemblies of the Fair and the Gay."<sup>61</sup>

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57. Laws . . . Poetry, pp. 39-40.

58. Life . . . Betterton, p. 12.

59. Miscellanea Aurea, p. 292.

60. Complete Art, p. 171.

61. Canons, V.

In a better ordered nation informed criticism might be expected to enlighten the ignorant, judge aright for the great vulgar, and prevail over the superficiality of ladies and beaux. But not so in Gildon's England, where "the general Judgment of the Town is . . . made the form'd on . . . their Know-not-whats, their Beautiful Extravagancies, and many such empty Sounds which have no manner of Idea fixt to them."<sup>62</sup> Unlike their French counterparts, "our English Men of Learning, have so far lost themselves in verbal Criticisms, or in mere collections of opinions"<sup>63</sup> that they are at best only "pedants who are so lost in the chace of Words and Expressions that they never will understand Art or know Mankind."<sup>64</sup> Therefore, if criticism is to rise to its real function, its only salvation must be "books of criticism, which may, at least in time, touch the minds of men of the finer sense and reason, and bring them over to the side of art and science, whose influence by degrees would bring in all the young wou'd be wits, and so the general readers and hearers of poetry."<sup>65</sup> These, he fondly hoped, would "cure our abandon'd Taste of Poetry; and remove that Ignorance of the Art, which is the cause of that bad Taste."<sup>66</sup>

Much of this alleged widespread ignorance Gildon blamed upon English education. "The ground and cause of this ignorance is owing to that very faulty and defective education which has always prevailed in this nation."<sup>67</sup>

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62. Complete Art, iii.

63. Complete Art, p. 115.

64. Complete Art, p. 259.

65. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 61.

66. Complete Art, p. 303.

67. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 40.

He observed that education was, at best, haphazard, and shrewdly put his finger upon the chief reasons, the fact that "every little smatterer in Latin, that can but just construe a common classic, is permitted to undertake the instruction of youth."<sup>68</sup> and the practice whereby "if a Student come to any considerable School, or to the Universities, who has the expectation of a good Fortune or Estate, there is little Care taken in his Instruction; he is indulg'd to his own Inclinations, and gains only a Vanity of having been at the University."<sup>69</sup> But perhaps even worse than these two evils were the prevailing content and approach of most English education. A defender of classical literature, Gildon nevertheless followed Milton in challenging the current emphasis upon Greek and Latin and praised Athenian education because it had not been "attended with the incumbrance, nor dog'd with the forbidding fatigue of the study of strange languages, that takes up so much time in our approaches to learning; but all fine literature was taught in their own mother-tongue . . . ."<sup>70</sup> He objected that the English system forced a youth to "waste seven, eight, nine, or ten years, to make but a very indifferent progress in the knowledge of Greek and Latin, in which in other countries, the Mastery is obtain'd in four years at most, by the advantage of skilful masters and a happy method."<sup>71</sup> But even if English students could thus gain a tolerable mastery, Gildon urged that "they are oblig'd to spend so many years only to attain the knowledge of two dead languages without the least improvement in any art or science."<sup>72</sup> But his

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68. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 56.

69. Complete Art, p. 163.

70. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 28.

71. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 56.

72. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 57.

greatest ire was against teaching the ancients as mere models of style, diction, figures, and poetic flights of fancy, an approach he attributed to ignorant pedants, "meer Grammarians," "instead of letting their Pupils into the great Excellencies of the Authors they read, . . . lay out all their Time in explaining of them, and pointing out some beautiful expressions."<sup>73</sup> When such a false emphasis is in vogue, "how shou'd the Pupil have any Notions of the admirable Designs of Homer, Virgil, Sophocles, and Euripides, when the Instructor himself pretends not to go beyond the Beauties of the Diction?"<sup>74</sup> Equally misleading was the taste by which "Martial is the darling of our common schools, and what is yet worse, Owen's epigrams are, if not taught, particularly recommended or read, whose trifling points, and worthless jingle, insinuate themselves so far into the injudicious fancy of boys, that they scarce afterwards relish anything truly valuable."<sup>75</sup> This false taste extended even to the study of rhetoric, for English textbooks "regard nothing of rhetorick but the meer diction, they take little or no notice of the forming an oration in general, or its several parts, and their beauties and excellence."<sup>76</sup> Therefore students can never have a good taste, and education, which might have produced a discriminating audience for literature, has instead "been the Source and Generation of all those Versifyers, which have pestered the Press and the Stage."<sup>77</sup>

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73. Complete Art, p. 163.

74. Canons, iv.

75. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 60.

76. Laws . . . Poetry, pp. 57-58.

77. Complete Art, p. 163.

In addition to lack of encouragement and an ignorant audience Gildon found another important reason for the lamentably low state of English letters: a shocking lack of qualified patrons. Throughout his career he belabored the idea that powerful and wealthy Englishmen were too selfish, too ignorant, or too shortsighted for the patriotic role of patron. In 1699 he wailed that despite a marked genius for poetry England "has never yet been so happy as Athens, Rome, or France as to find in the administration any Man with Soul enough, to think the Care of the Muses worth their Thoughts . . . ."78 In 1703 he condemned "the Folly and Ignorance (to give it no worse a name) of our Shadows of Statesmen, who neglect them the poets ."79 Again in 1709 he lamented that "our Statesmen have never yet thought it worth their while to rescue the Drama from the Hands of the Ignorant and the Benefit of Private Persons."80 And in 1718 Gildon bitterly observed that "It is no uncommon thing to find Men of Quality and Fortune, who value not their Money, but will throw it away with all the Prodigality in the World on Whimsies and Frolicks; but it is observable, that this Nation has never produc'd one Person of Distinction that deserv'd the name of a Patron of the Muses."81 Gildon became even more outspokenly bitter in accusing England's wealthy and great of ignoring or abusing their responsibilities toward literature:

If poetry came short of . . . perfections in our Time, and . . . its Professors are in mean and unhappy circumstances; it is the Fault of our

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78. Lives and Characters, dedication.

79. Gvidius Britannicus, dedication.

80. Works . . . Shakespear, VII, xlvi.

81. Memoirs of the Life of William Wycherley, Esq., p. 10.

Governors, our Men of Power, who either do not know, or will not give themselves the Pains to distinguish between a Poetaster, and a Poet, a meer Trifler in Verisification, and great Genius . . . . Nay, Experience has too scandalously shewn us, that they always, or generally favour the Poetaster, for the Reference he pays them, rather than the Poet, whose Soul can not submit to such servile offices, as they require for their Smiles.<sup>82</sup>

In 1722 his final words on the subject plainly and scornfully characterized "most of our great men in Power, who, in the choice of their favourites, consult not the merit of the person, but their own blind ignorant fancy and inclination."<sup>83</sup> The repetition, the tone, and the language of these statements illustrate Gildon's deep-rooted conviction that much of the blame for the low state of English letters must be laid at the doors of the very men who should have been encouraging and improving literature.

But even worse than their ignorance and neglect was their widespread practice of rewarding poetasters while starving men of merit, and Gildon constantly shouted these unpleasant facts of literary life. In 1701 he wrote that "'tis this false applause that has for a time supported some wretched authors in the World, has Crowded the Pit at their plays and engag'd an audience as often as they desir'd it . . . ."<sup>84</sup> In 1703 he protested that patriotism "will not make me so blind, as not to see and mourn the scandalous neglect of useful and polite arts, in those who only can promote their encouragement."<sup>85</sup> In 1713 Gildon wrote, "In our Times, the Gentry

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82. Complete Art, pp. 32-32.

83. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 99.

84. A New Miscellany of Original Poems, dedication.

85. Ovidius Brittanicus, dedication.

and Quality, who shou'd in Reason have been the supporters of the Noblest Diversion, that the Wit of Man can invent . . . were the first that conspired its Ruine."<sup>86</sup> and in 1711: he repeated the theme:

the People of Figure, who in Reason might have been expected to be the Guardians and Supporters of the Noblest and most rational Diversion that the Wit of Man can invent . . . were the first, nay I may say, the only People, who conspir'd its ruin, by prodigal Subscriptions for Squeaking Italians, and cap'ring Monsieurs."<sup>87</sup>

In 1718 he flatly fixed the blame for the demise of drama: "none have contributed more largely to the corruption, and indeed Destruction of it than the People of Quality."<sup>88</sup> Thus Gildon not only asserted the ignorance and neglect of those responsible for encouraging solid literature but also charged them with the worse sin of actively using their power to discourage learning and genius.

Clearly, to Gildon the English literary world seemed badly out of joint. Its stage was controlled by ignoramuses who ran it for the interests of their own mean private spirit. Its tragedy disavowed the ancients, loudly boasted of its flashy modernity, lacked fable, aggrandized characters at the expense of the moral, displayed undue concern for "fine things", and in general deserved the worst he could say of it. The acting was execrable; ~~the players were personally so debauched that the stage lost its moral and~~ the players were personally so debauched that the stage lost its moral and patriotic function; and inevitably it had degenerated to a mere spectacle and show which painfully symbolized England's intellectual and moral vacuity.

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86. Les Soupirs, p. 75.

87. Life . . . Betterton, p. 143.

88. Complete Art, p. 203.

Non-dramatic literature was equally poor. Without design and a proper apprehension of classical imitation, it too was concerned primarily with surface show as it ran awhoring after epigram, point, rhyme, smoothness, and sonority while it over-valued newness, satire, and a ridicule which all too frequently stooped to mere clever lewdness and obscenity. Finally, literature's audience ignorantly applauded the fashionable trifle but neglected learning and genius; and criticism, a possible remedy, degenerated to an uninformed echo of the latest bagatelle.