

## Chapter XI

### SUGGESTED REFORMS

Gildon saw no hope for improving this dark state of English letters until three profound changes should occur: the creation of a milieu more encouraging to learning and sense; the assumption of their responsibility by men of wealth and position to become discriminating, generous patrons of solid literature; and the setting up of an academy whose informed judgment could counteract the ignorant applause of the vulgar by encouraging merit with public and influential approbation. At each of these three points Gildon hammered throughout his career.

He insisted that the first improvement must be the creation of a more encouraging milieu for English writers, and at every opportunity he urged his favorite thesis that the great men of literature have always appeared in societies which honored their writers. "Athens gave Birth and Perfection to the Art [dramatic art] and seems, like the true Mother to have been most fond of it, and therefore gave its professors the greatest encouragement"<sup>1</sup> and "that which discover'd their Largeness of Soul, was their great value for poets, as the most useful Instructors of Mankind."<sup>2</sup>

---

1. Lives and Characters, dedication.

2. Les Soupirs, p. 65.

Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Virgil, and Horace, all flourished in nations and ages when learning and art everywhere prevail'd; and in this the Greek Poets had even the advantage of the Romans; for they writ to a people of the most refin'd taste and politeness that ever appear'd in the world, a people of that vivacity and judgment, that they knew how to relish and encourage excellence wherever it was found; and this judiciousness was not there confin'd to a few, but spread through the whole nation . . . .<sup>3</sup>

This more favorable milieu for literary men depended upon men of wealth and position assuming their responsibility for discriminating, generous patronage. But Gildon makes this responsibility difficult, for his proper patron is a virtual paragon who possesses "a Penetration above our common Scatterers in Wisdom and Politics . . . a judgment nice as that of the Founders of two of the greatest Monarchies of Europe . . . Maecenas and Richelieu"<sup>4</sup> and "more Ages have gone to the producing a Good Patron than a Good Poet."<sup>5</sup>

There goes more to the forming a Patron, than Nature or Application ever did afford him, there is requir'd a Greatness of Soul, a Largeness of Heart, . . .; a Patron ought to have a good Taste himself in all the politer Arts, that he may be able to distinguish an Artist from a Pretender, else a superficial Knowledge, a good Assurance, and a voluble Tongue will impose on his Understanding to reward the Imposter, and neglect the true Artist; for of these and a servile fawning flattering Temper the general Vanity, and Ignorance of the Wealthy and the Powerful are always fond.<sup>6</sup>

Since other countries had produced notable statesmen whose learning, taste, and official benevolence had done much to create an intellectual climate in which genius flourished, Gildon maintained that in England

---

3. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 23.

4. Examen Misc., dedication.

5. Histories and Novels . . . Mehn (1705), p. 3.

6. Les Soupirs, p. 38.

the just . . . Statesman . . . and Patriot will not neglect those Arts, that have been in all Nations, and all times (but those of Anarchy and Confusion) thought the ornament of the most Flourishing and pow'rful Empires and commonwealths. None but Empirics in Policy, indeed and little Intruders into State affairs, men of Soul too mechanic and narrow to be capable of this Care of the Politer arts from the Duty of a Statesman or Patriot, for it's a certain sign, that they know but little of the real Springs and causes of Action, and the secret Movements of People, and what Influence the Pen has on them.<sup>7</sup>

His favorite examples are Augustus, Maecenas, and Richelieu.

. . . Augustus was not only a Patron, but a Friend and Companion of Virgil and Horace, and other Poets of that Age. Nay, he was himself a Pretender to Performance in that Way, as far as his Genius, and his busy Scene of Life would allow. Maecenas, to whom perhaps Augustus ow'd so much of his Prosperity in establishing the Empire, was both Poet and Patron; and Richieu, the greatest Statesman since him, did not only declare openly for it, and dispensed his Favours in an eminent Degree, on the Sons of Art, but discovered his Ambition to be one of them himself.<sup>8</sup>

Gildon further pressed his point by urging various men of wealth or power to act the patron. In the dedication of his Miscellaneous Letters and Essays (1694) he wrote to a hoped-for patron that beneficence to literary men "will in time build up more Glorious Monuments, when you shall declare yourself, The Patron of the Poetic Glory of England, as you have been of her Int'rest." He repeated the idea in Canons: A Vision (1714):

Let then the Virtues, that the Muse Inspires,  
Obtain thy Smiles on her illustrious Fires.  
These flie to Thee in this degenerate Age,  
In this degenerate Age, when Art and Sense,  
Can find no Patron, meet with no Defence:  
When ev'ry Muse hangs down her drooping Head  
To see her Guardian, JUDGMENT from us fled:  
Peculiar Greatness 'tis to own their Cause,  
And as peculiar will be the Applause.

---

7. Love's Victim, dedication.

8. Complete Art, p. 44.

While meaner Souls ignobler Joy allures  
 The Pleasure of Protecting ARTS be yours.  
 A Royal Care, and Worthy of your Name,  
 The justest and most glorious Road to Fame.  
 Why do no VIRGIL'S now adorn the Age  
 But that no Patrons in their Cause engage?  
 Be thou Mecaenas, and thou'lt soon inspire  
 The British Bards with more than Mantuan Fire. (pp. 2-3)

Again in the same year Gildon wrote in the dedication of his Trojan Tales:

Give me leave . . . to say that all your fine parts, all the Benefits of a large Fortune, can no ways give you so distinguishing a character, as declaring yourself a Patron of the Politer Letters. You will always find great Rivals in all other Qualities, which you may court; nor is there any Pleasure you can enjoy, in which you will not have a thousand Sharers, who will be likewise happy, and in as exquisite a degree. But, my Lord, if you once assume the Patron, you will shine almost alone in that high Station: (p. vii)

Finally, in dedicating The Complete Art of Poetry to King George in 1718

Gildon claimed the monarch's protection for his work because

these Institutions bring a Claim of their own, which is, that as they teach the most noble, most antient, and most useful of all Arts concern'd in the forming the Manners, and refining the Spirit of your People, the Father of his People cannot refuse his Smiles, and such Marks of his Favour, as may encourage great Genius's to apply themselves to it, and rival Antiquity; to do which, a Royal Patron is only wanting. (pp. 2-3)

The substance of these many quotations is indeed repetitious—and only a few of the typical ones are here quoted—but it is sufficiently plain. Gildon's ideal patron is the great man of high position endowed with breadth, learning, and taste enough to encourage literature as part of wise, long-range statecraft, and also generous enough in spirit to distinguish men of literary merit from party regulars or fawning sycophants who dance perpetual attendance. The great civilizations which have produced great literature have also been remarkable for great patrons; and since with the possible exception of Sir Philip Sidney England can boast not a single great patron,

English literature therefore owes much of its present pitiable condition to the mean, private spirit of England's ignorant great who patronize the wrong men for the wrong reasons.

Thus two of Gildon's three necessities for the improvement of English literature are clear: (1) England must create a milieu more favorable to the encouragement of learning and genius; and (2) the great men of England must accept and exercise their responsibilities as patrons of the ancient stamp. Yet a third remains, the establishment of an academy to promulgate the best judgment and genius of the wisest and most learned of the realm. This third necessity was among Gildon's most cherished dreams and he urged it wherever possible, sometimes with shrewd sense but often with incredible naivete.

To make specific reference to all of his passing pleas for an English academy would be impossible here, for it was a theme he long pursued, but the following typical passages accurately state the substance of his ideas. In a preface to a translation of Lucian's works published in 1711 but probably written much earlier Gildon attacked the low state of translation in England "which can only be remedy'd by the Establishment of an Academy of Sciences upon such a Fund, that all Valuable Books may be made to Speak English with the utmost accuracy, by Men, who may apply their whole Study to render their authors, having a comfortable Support while they are labouring for the Publick Service."<sup>9</sup> Time and time again he cited the corrective influence of the French academy in establishing and maintaining

---

9. Works . . . Lucian, v. 2, preface.

a correct classical taste in French readers. But Gildon went further than merely urging the general desirability of an academy; he actually outlined extensive and detailed plans for an English academy. In a series of seven letters within The Post-man Rob'd of his Mail (1719) he described in extreme detail his version of an English academy "to refine the Degeneracy of a once noble People, from that antient Virtue, which once made so considerable a figure in the World, nay, lift it up, in all Probability, not only above that, but to a Worth above the noblest Nations of Antiquity." (p. 301-2) This academy would remove avarice "and with it all its fatal Consequences; . . . plant in its Room the Love of Praise, (the Source of all the greatest and bravest Actions) the love of our Country, and of one another, and so putting an End to our Divisions and Factions at Home, secure a perpetual Happiness to ourselves, and unspeakable Glory to the English name . . . ." (p. 305) Unlike that of France, Gildon's academy would deal with much more than language and would be of more value than the Royal Society because it would be "conversant about our actions, prevalent in our Passions, and directive of our Conduct in all the Stations of Life, and must make us useful as well as good." (p. 306)

Gildon worked out the organization and membership for this ambitious project in minute detail. He proposed

To establish an Academy of sixty Honorary Fellowships, consisting of Nobility, Commons, and University-Men of the most Interest, Judgment and Learning. And forty Beneficiary, ten of which to be Dramatic Poets, and ten Historians; the rest Mathematicians, Lyric, Heroic and Satyric Poets, Philosophers, Physicians, Lawyers, Musicians, and that these Members be all Natives of England. (p. 310)

There would be the following membership and obligations:

a Chancellor of the first and most worthy of the Nobility, . . . to be chose by the Academy. A Vice Chancellor, Secretary, Register, and Library-keeper, chose out of the Beneficiary Fellows . . . . Those three officers chose by

Plurality of Voices, or by balloting, our of the Beneficiary Fellows; and that on their Election, addition be made to their Salaries, 11 l per annum to the Vice-Chancellor, who is to be chose once a Year, and 50 l. per annum apiece to the other two. (pp. 311-12)

The Beneficiary Fellows are to be chosen from such candidates as shall appear in the several arts to be encourag'd by this academy; but then no members can be admitted without the approbation of thirty Fellows; and after the Number is complete, any new Fellow that is admitted on a Vacancy, must come in by the Vote of the Beneficiary, as well as Honorary Members. That there be five Clergyman Beneficiary Fellows, that they be eminent for Mathematics or some of the politer Literature. (p. 313) That no Candidate shall stand for a Beneficiary, that has not done, or does not then produce before the members of the academy, some valuable Book, or made some Improvement in the Art or Science he pretends to. That no poetical Member be admitted for what he has already written, except that will stand the Test of a just Examination according to Art. (pp. 313-14) That the Library-Keeper be oblig'd constantly to attend the Library himself at Certain Hours, and to have a Deputy there at all seasonable hours . . . . and that he be Superintendent of the Press over the Overseer of the Press. (p. 314) there were to be an Overseer of the Press, a Printer by Education . . . that there be three or four travelling Fellows at 300 l. per annum each, to examine the Vatican, the French King's Library, the Emperor's recover'd at Buda, the Duke of Courland's, etc., and to transcribe any valuable Manuscript, Record, Inscription, and . . . these Fellows be countenanced and recommended by the ambassadors of England in the several Courts of their Residence . . . . and that the two Universities be exhorted to depute some of their Members, with a just allowance, for the same End, into the several Parts of the World. (p. 315) . . . That all the Fellows in general be oblig'd to submit their Works to the Censure of the Academy; who, in their Examination, shall allow the Member, whose Works they are considering, the Liberty of answering Objections from the Rules of Art, which are to be the Standard of each art; but if in the naming of those rules they differ, the Particular must give way to the General . . . (p. 315)

That the Poetical Members of the academy be oblig'd to publish once a Year, at least, a greater or smaller Volume of Hymns, Anthems, etc. in the Praise of God, and that by noble Translations of the Poetic Parts of the Bible, as Psalms, which lose half their Force from their Enervate Translations . . . (p. 316)

That there be Satyrs once a Week, or Fortnight, on the prevailing Follies and Vices of the Town: as well as Songs, Odes, and Panegyricall Verses on those that have serv'd their Country freely, bravely. (p. 317)

That there be some inferior Writer maintain'd by the academy to write the Penny-Books, etc. that spread among the Vulgar: in which by Stories, adapted to their capacity, and Reasons proportioned to their understandings, Virtue, the Love of their country, and attempting great actions, be recommended. (p. 317)

That the Admission-Oath oblige the members to endeavour by their Pens . . . to take away all Factionous Names, and live amicably together, whatever their Party Principles may be. (p. 319)

Gildon proposed several projects whereby this academy could assert informed judgment in authoritative fashion. In the order of necessity he suggested:

that the first general Work of the Academy be the forming an exact English Grammar, and Dictionary, for the Restraining and licentiousness of writing, fixing a Standard of our language, settling the Orthography, Syntax, Etymology, etc. according to our best Authors, old and modern . . . To which may be added, a History of the several alterations it has undergone from its first original. That in composing this Dictionary the several Fellows contribute the particular Terms of their several Arts, in all their Extent of Propriety, Etymology, etc. But to make this Dictionary the more complete all the other learned men of the Nation to be invited to contribute their Pains to the compiling it with this assurance, that what they contribute shall be publicly acknowledged. (p. 319)

That either an entire Poetick Dictionary, or the Poetick Part of the Grand Dictionary be compil'd by the Poets. (p. 320) and then that they proceed to a Prosodia and Rhetorick. In the Rhetorick, besides the Tropes and Figures, the Propriety of Stile, and the true Beauties of Eloquence in the English Tongue, with an Enquiry which is most just and natural, ours or the ancients. That here the Characteristick of the Sublime, the mean and the low stiles be fix'd; and in this they must divide the Language into its proper Distinctions, answering in Propriety to those three Stiles; they having by some authors of Note been all promiscuously confounded together. To the forming the Prosodia, the Poets must contribute their Discoveries; and they must consider Elegancies, and uses of Words in a poetical Sense; examine the Position of Words and their transpositions, according to the Use of the best of our Authors, and to consider how far they are Beautiful, that is, how far they contribute to Variety and Harmony. That here the whole Art of Poetry be discuss'd, and a true Standard of Criticism in the several kinds of Poetry fixt, which must be drawn from the Design of the Art, the Nature and Reason of the Thing, and the Genius of the People, that is, from Aristotle, Horace, and the Essay on Poetry . . . . To take away this false and uncertain applause, that has discourag'd, and always must deter men of Sense and Judgment from meddling with the Stage, is one of the aims of this Academy, and particularly of this Prosodia, and Art of Poetry . . . . For this reason it will be necessary, before the choice of the Dramatick Members, that there be a Standard Fix'd, as a Test of their Performances, and that drawn from Aristotle's Rhetorick, Poetics, etc. in which I'm sure Dacier's Notes ought to be consulted (p. 322)

That the Fellows by degrees translate, each in his way, all valuable Books out of other Languages. (p. 323)

He also propos'd several ways by which this academy could improve English learning. One would be "to establish publick Schools for all useful Arts and Sciences in the English Tongue." A second was



that six fellows he employed in seeking, abridging, and transcribing Records of the Tower, Journals of Parliament, Inscriptions, Medals, Manuscripts of the Universities, Cottonian Library, collecting from Historians of all Nations that relate to our History, so to frame a nobler System of it, than any we now have. That in their abridgments, they refer in all Particulars to the Records, Journals, Inscriptions, in so plain a manner, that Recourse may be easily had to the originals. (pp. 323-24)

The other four are to teach. In reading History the student is to be put in mind of the brave actions that he hears, and exhorted to imitate them; that he be remember'd of the Fame and Reputation that is due to them, and the Infamy of a slothful, unactive Life; and that to give Nobility its Ancient Lustre, he must show these public Virtues in the Service of his Country. (p. 325) Third, the various fellows were to raise the general level of knowledge by series of lectures. The mathematical fellows should "have publick lectures of all useful Parts of the Mathematicks, in the English Language, as Arithmetick, Algebra, Geometry, Astronomy, Mechanicks, Fortification, Navigation, and free Dissertations and Experiments" (p. 325); the physicians were "to have a public Lecture of Anatomy, Plants, Herbs, and communicate the History of their Practice" (p. 325); and the lawyer, "being chosen more for his Parts than Practice, have either a Lecture of the English Laws, or contribute his Part of the Law towards the Historical Lecture before mention'd." (p. 325) Gildon also of course stipulated "that there be publick Lectures of Musick and Painting" (p. 325) and "That there be an . . . English Grammatical, Poetical and Rhetorical Lecture . . . which will in Time spread a juster Notion of, and wear out that false judgment that has too long reigned in England, and so make way for Merit only to be encourag'd, by suffering it no longer to be judg'd by Ignorance and Fools. (p. 326)

Even more important would be another function of the academy, "yet of a higher Nature, as promoting more immediately, and more diffusively the Moral and Political Virtues of the Nation," (p. 326) A system of "publick Rewards,

and public Orations to rouse us up to a vigorous Defence of ourselves, against the common Enemy; and to nobler acts and ambition, than usually we have known of late." (p. 329) Therefore he recommended weekly moral lectures delivered in systematic sequence by both beneficed and honorary fellows in order to

recommend the Moral and Political Virtues; to show their Excellence and Necessity to the Subsistence, Well-being and Happiness of humane Society . . . exposing the Folly of the Vices destructive of Morality, and to show them punish'd in Examples drawn from History social and profane . . . directed to instill a Love of Glory from the Service of our Country, a Thirst of Fame by doing actions serviceable to our Prince. (p. 330)

To promote this purpose "part of each oration must celebrate the deeds of a virtuous Englishman." These were to be printed by the academy, and dedicated "to some Man of Merit among the Nobility, dignified clergy, etc."

If any fellow be guilty of flattery, "he will be fined half a year's salary, and if repeated, expelled the academy, none of whose Fellows are to be guilty of avarice, being dedicated to the publick Service, and handsomely maintained from Want by the publick authority." (p. 332)

The last section of Gildon's proposal, the longest letter of all, concerned the poetic fellows.

The Lyric Poets, and those who write the lesser Poetry, are at least, every week, or Fortnight, to produce either some Hymn in the Praise of God, his wonderful Works . . ., on the sufferings of Martyrs for Religion, or for their Country; with Satyrs on Vice and Folly; Praise of Virtue, and Noble deeds, in odes . . . the Subjects generally Englishmen (p. 334)

Next for the Dramatick Poets—No play to be acted whose Author is known before, because Party and Interest else may give a Run to a bad play, or stifle a good one. They are to be divided into Tragic and Comic, neither of which to be admitted, as Fellows, Till two Plays of theirs have been acted with the approbation of the academy, and the applause of the Town, for though the latter is very fallacious, yet are they not incompatible . . . that after admission every Dramatic Poet be oblig'd to write a Play, at least once in two years, till superannuated; for this is not design'd to be a Nive of Bones. That the Dramatic Poets, both before and after admission, have the 3d and 6th Pay free, without any charges, half the Profits of the 8th, and the 8th part of the Profits above the charges every

time 'tis acted forever, or rather during their lives, after which the academy to have the whole. (p. 335)

That the Dramatick Poets shall not take only Foreign Story to write on, that the virtue of the English Nation lose not the Glory of the English Wit, and Poetry to celebrate it. The Saxon Story being obscure enough to give the Poet as much room for Invention, as the fabulous Part of the Greek History did those Poets . . . tho now and then a shining character of Greek or Roman Virtue may be wrote on. The most regular of Shakespeare's are excepted out of this Rule. But the comic Poet must never on any Pretence whatever, lay his Scene out of England, lest the Follies and Vices represented may not seem to relate to us. (pp. 335, 336, 337)

These detailed, repetitive proposals for an English academy are frequently incredibly naive, and Gildon's insistence upon generous subsistence bespeaks the pathetic poverty of the blind old man still drudging out the unquiet years of unsuccessful old age. But the letters have value for the student of criticism because they present the body of Gildon's literary tenets in clear and brief form. And their painfully obvious wishful thinking may be admitted without lessening the sound sense of such proposals as those for the dictionary, a complete and reliable body of historical basic documents, the grammar, and the assumption of the responsibility for public education by an official learned body.