

SECTION III: LITERARY CRITICISM

Chapter VIII

FUNDAMENTAL TENETS

The first section of this study discussed Gildon as a versatile, competent professional man of letters who wrote primarily for bread but aspired to creative work. The second section dealt with his undistinguished poetry, his fiction, and his promising dramatic efforts. But the work which he took most seriously was literary criticism, the subject of this third and most important section. Although in the first two sections Gildon's individual titles have been treated in full within the context of their form, Gildon's criticism cannot be so organized because it appeared in virtually everything he wrote. Hence this third section necessarily follows a topical organization in order to discuss within their most significant contexts Gildon's basic critical tenets, his opinions of the literary conditions and values of his age, his general attitudes on the current cruces of literary dispute and his particular judgments of specific men and works.

The primary sources of Gildon's critical tenets were Aristotle's Poetics and Horace's Ars Poetica. Probably he knew Aristotle through Dacier's French translation published in 1692 or the English translation of Dacier published in 1705, for both were then popular in England and Gildon frequently cited them. He also frequently quoted the Earl of Roscommon's popular

translation of Horace. But his convictions were solidified by such French neo-classicists as Rapin, Boileau, and Le Bossu, in whose works "the rules and theories of neo-classicism were collected into an organic unity and expounded with clarity and precision which attracted particular attention abroad."¹ He also drew upon such English criticism as Sidney's Defense of Poesy, Sir William Temple's Essay on Poetry, John Sheffield's Essay on Poetry, the Earl of Roscommon's Essay on Translated Verse, George Granville's Essay upon Unnatural Flights in Poetry, and much of John Dennis.

Having taken his tenets from these sources, Gildon throughout his life argued literature's high purpose. For him it is "the Daughter of Religion" and is properly employed only "in prompting Virtue and Sense and discouraging Vice and Folly."² Indeed, "Virtue is so far from not being the proper Subject of Poetry, that nothing else, indeed, is: for the aim and end of dramatic poesie is to reward virtue and punish vice; and the business of epic poesie is not only to draw its characters truly virtuous, but to make them successful," and the poet who writes otherwise, "perverts poetry's Social Laws."³ The business of the stage "is to recommend vertue, and Discountenance Vice, to shew the uncertainty of Human Greatness, the sudden Turns of Fate, and the unhappy Conclusions of Violence and Injustice, to expose the singularity of Pride and Fancy, to make Folly and Falsehood contemptible"⁴ For a

1. Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century, ed. J. E. Spingarn (Oxford, 1909), I, xciii.

2. Examen Miscellaneum, ed. Charles Gildon (London, 1702), dedication. Practically all of Gildon's dedications, introductions, prefaces, forewords, etc. are unnumbered. Hence the lack of page references here and in succeeding notes. Since these are all short, there is no problem in finding the passages cited.

3. Charles Gildon, The History of the Athenian Society (London, 1692), p. 24.

4. Charles Gildon, The Stage-Beaux toss'd in a Blanket (London, 1704), p. 49.

world badly in need of correction "The Poet . . . gives examples of Virtue to the world, Example produces Emulation, and Emulation produces action,"⁵ "for nothing begets Vertue, like such Examples, and the just Glory and Praise, that attend them."⁶ Therefore literature is a nation's best teacher because "those who are taught by a poet's Doctrines are averse to avarice, thinking no Wealth equal to noble Needs and a great name,"⁷ and poetry "enlarges the Soul and fills it with such great and noble Ideas as are fit to raise it to great actions."⁸

Gildon maintains that poetry most effectively serves this high purpose because it "employs the surest Means to obtain the noblest End. Majestic and delightful numbers, surprising and noble Thoughts, and Charming Expressions, awake all the Faculties of the Soul, to receive the mighty Lessons it imparts, which all terminate in the most Solid and Rational Pleasure."⁹ Hence moral lessons presented on the stage impress "because the Instruction is conveyed with Pleasure, and by the ministrations of the Passions, which always have a stronger Remembrance, than the calmer Precepts of Reason."¹⁰ Since poetry

5. Examen Miscellaneum, dedication.

6. The Works of Mr. William Shakespear, ed. Charles Gildon (London, 1710), VII, dedication.

7. Ovidius Brittanicus, ed. Charles Gildon (London, 1703), dedication.

8. Miscellanea Aurea, ed. Charles Gildon (London, 1720), pp. 214-15.

9. Miscellaneous Letters and Essays on Several Subjects, ed. Charles Gildon (London, 1694), dedication.

10. Charles Gildon, The Life of Mr. Thomas Betterton (London, 1710), p. 18.

"moves the Heart of Man towards virtue, . . . it must be allow'd to be the most excellent Instructor"¹¹ "to the advantage of Vertue and the Destruction of Vice; for the ameliorating our Manners, and the rooting out of evil Passions, and planting a happy Tranquility in their Room."¹² He follows Aristotle in urging the supremacy of poetry over philosophy and history and asserts poetry to be the sovereign of all knowledge and arts:

Since its Effects are so good, as not only to teach us Goodness, but to give us Delight in the Learning of it; since the Poet excels the Moral Philosopher and the Historian; since the Holy Scriptures have whole Parts of them Poetical; and since even our Saviour Christ himself Vouchsaf'd to use the Flowers, nay, the Soul and Life of Poetry; since 'tis not only in the General, but in all its Parts, commendable, admirable, certainly you must always allow me, that the Laurel Crown does of all Manner of learned Men, belong to the Poet.¹³

For these reasons poetry deserves "the consideration of men of the greatest Religion and Sense¹⁴ and the wisest statesmen and ripest civilizations have always encouraged it.

Witness the dramatic poets of Greece; witness Virgil and Horace among the Romans, both of whom found that esteem and encouragement from the wisest States, which have always thought it highly conducive to the End of Government to encourage poetry as . . . the Principal Instrument of Virtue . . . because by generous Instructions, convey'd with pleasure, it turns our Diversions from Folly, and makes them subservient to our Improvement."¹⁵

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11. Charles Gildon, The Complete Art of Poetry (London, 1718), p. 61.
 12. Complete Art, p. 29.
 13. Complete Art, p. 55.
 14. Complete Art, p. 55.
 15. Charles Gildon, The Patriot (London, 1703), dedication.

Hence the wise Athenian magistrates "laid out more money on the stage than in all their Persian wars;"¹⁶ but when statesmen and civilizations have not felt a responsibility for encouraging poetry "'tis observable from History, that the Decay and Neglect of that always was a fatal symptom of the loss of Antient Virtue, Power, and Glory."¹⁷

Because of this serious function Gildon sets high standards for the great poet. He must "know almost all things in Nature,"¹⁸ "have Genius extraordinary, great natural Gifts, a Wit just, fruitful, penetrating, solid, universal, an Understanding clean and distinct, an Imagination neat and pleasant, an Elevation of Soul that depends not on Art and Study, . . . a great Judgment to consider wisely of things, and a liveliness to express them with Grace,"¹⁹ "be of a Temperament of Fire and Fancy, of Strength and Sweetness, of Penetration and Decency as well as a sovereign Eloquence, and a Profound capacity,"²⁰ and "possess a capacious Soul, a fertile Fancy, replenished with numberless and wonderful images, . . . a perfect idea of nature, consummate knowledge of the passions, manners, and habits of the mind and a true and masterly judgment to manage all these with justness and beauty."²¹

Gildon also sets rigorous standards by which literature is to be judged.

16. Complete Art, p. 151.

17. Miscellaneous Letters, preface.

18. Complete Art, p. 71.

19. Complete Art, p. 71.

20. Complete Art, p. 47.

21. Charles Gildon, The Laws of Poetry (London, 1721), p. 216.

Dramatic poetry must be ranked above all other writing because it "is the most useful to virtue of any the Wit of Man can invent,"²² and of all dramatic poetry tragedy is "the most noble, the most useful, the most Innocent, and most worthy of Publick Encouragement."²³ Like Aristotle, Gildon maintains that tragedy must be "an Imitation of some one, serious, grave, and entire Action, of a just Length and contain'd within the Unities of time and Place; and which without narration by the means of Terror and compassion purges those Passions."²⁴ Also Aristotelian is his notion of imitation, which "must be general, and not particular"²⁵ because "it is not the Poet's Business to relate things just as they come to pass but as they might or ought necessarily or probably to happen."²⁶ Like Aristotle he insists that "the Fable, or Plot, is incomparably of the most importance . . . because the Fable . . . imitates the action, and the other . . . parts are admitted only to make the Imitation more lively and agreeable."²⁷ He defines two sorts of fables, but allows only the single, "in which the actions are united and continue to the End, without any change of Fortune or Discovery in the principal Persons, or a Discovery, or . . . both."²⁸ He also insists

22. Works . . . Shakespear, VII, dedication.

23. The Patriot, dedication

24. Complete Art, p. 222.

25. Complete Art, p. 236.

26. Complete Art, p. 234.

27. Complete Art, p. 223.

28. Complete Art, p. 240.

upon unity of action: "the Subject or action of a Tragedy ought to be one, and not all the actions of a hero"²⁹ and events "ought to proceed from the very Constitution of the Subject, in such a Manner, as that what precedes them should produce them either necessarily or probably"³⁰ in such fashion that "taking away or changing one Part only . . . would dissolve the connection and break the continuity."³¹ Likewise he insists upon the unities of place and time "to avoid shocking the Reason . . . for if you once pass the bounds of Truth and Probability, I see not where you can stop, nor why you should stop anywhere,"³² "and certainly the Poet should never exceed in his action the Time of Representation."³³ Gildon rules that tragedy has the sole purpose of moving terror and compassion; the weaker passion of mere admiration he reserves for the epic because the only legitimate pleasure of tragedy is that arising from the purging of terror and compassion. For tragedy best to serve its high purposes the poet must "choose his Principal Person from among those who are of eminent Quality, and great Reputation, one who is become miserable by some involuntary Fault . . . which immediately proceeds from his yielding to a violent Passion."³⁴ The poet must not

29. Complete Art, p. 234.

30. Complete Art, p. 240.

31. Complete Art, p. 240.

32. Complete Art, p. 231.

33. Complete Art, p. 233.

"choose a character of a perfectly good man, to make him fall from Prosperity into Adversity, for by that we should give horror," nor should he "entertain us with the misfortunes of a very wicked Person . . . since the punishment of the wicked is neither terrible nor pitiful."³⁵ Because a tragic writer must "establish a just notion of Providence in its most important action, the Government of mankind, . . . no unfortunate character ought to be introduc'd on the Stage, without its human Vraillies to justify its Misfortune, for unfortunate Perfection would be the crime of Providence."³⁶ Gildon declares that "the Sentiments made the whole matter of the Discourse"³⁷ and that diction should be considered as the least important element in tragedy, a means rather than an end, a mere dress and ornament.³⁸ Violent action must take place off stage; "all cruel objects . . . and all miraculous events . . . ought to be hid; yet beautiful descriptions of these done with Force and Life will please the Ear and the Mind."³⁹ Scenery on stage is admissible because it "helps the Representation by assisting the pleasing Delusion of the Mind in regard of the place,"⁴⁰ but he condemns machines because they are "but Hatches, and very unartful, for they do not depend on the foregoing Incidents, nor are necessarily or probably produc'd by them."⁴¹

35. Complete Art, p. 243.

36. Charles Gildon, Phaeton (London, 1698), preface—hereafter cited as Phaeton.

37. Complete Art, pp. 260-61.

38. Miscellanea Aurea, pp. 19, 17. Charles Gildon, Love's Victim (London, 1701), p. 22. Complete Art, p. 261.

39. Complete Art, p. 255.

40. Life . . . Betterton, p. 6.

41. Complete Art, p. 253.

42. Miscellanea Aurea, p. 28.

Cildon cannot forget that Athens set comedy far below tragedy and looked on it as "a lower and less valuable Entertainment . . . adopted to the Gusto of ~~the Taste~~ of the Vulgar" and that the old comedy had originated as "a sort of publick Lampon . . . to set the very Mob against some of the most eminent Citizens, as Aristophanes first set up the cry against Socrates."⁴³ However, modern English comedy has become "the best of any either ancient and Modern"⁴⁴ because it has become an instrument of pleasant instruction finding its material in humours and affectation.⁴⁵ But he will have none of tragicomedy.

Cildon devines the epic as "Heroic Poesy, the Imitation or Picture of an Heroic Action"⁴⁶ and values it next to tragedy because "it teaches and moves us to the most high and excellent Truth; that makes magnanimity and justice shine through the mists of our Fear, and the clouds of our Desires."⁴⁷ "For it is not only directed to praise and Thanksgiving, to the celebration of great men, and great virtues . . . but to the polishing mankind, refining and moderating their passions, and bringing them into perfect subjection to reason."⁴⁸ In distinguishing the heroic . . . "The Passions reign in

43. Miscellanea Aurea, pp. 27-28.

44. Complete Art, p. 261.

45. Complete Art, p. 265. Laws of Poetry, pp. 251-52.

46. Complete Art, p. 272.

47. Complete Art, p. 66.

48. Laws of Poetry, p. 15.

Tragedy, so that Poem ought to be always short . . . but manners and customs . . . belong to the Heroic Poem, and by Consequence its action ought to have a larger extent than that of Tragedy."⁴⁹ Since "The Heroic Poem has all the Parts of Tragedy . . . the Fable, Manners, Sentiments, and Diction . . . changes of Fortune, . . . Discoveries, and . . . Passions, . . . the Rules that Direct us in the forming a Dramatic Fable, will hold good in the forming that of an Heroic Poem."⁵⁰ Just as he insisted upon unity of action in tragedy, so he declares that "the Imitation of an Heroic Poem is that of one action only, and not of a great Many; for should it imitate many actions it would be a History, and not a Poem."⁵¹ However, the poet "is always oblig'd to put an entire action into his Poem, and not a part,"⁵² and this action "must have a just Greatness, and be within the natural proportion of an Heroic Action such as . . . the Return of Ulysses . . . and the Settlement of Aeneas with his Goods in Italy."⁵³ Yet this careful unity "is no Enemy to those Delights, which naturally arise from Variety, when it is attended with that order, or that proportion which makes uniformity."⁵⁴ Hence for Gildon "the sovereign Perfection of an Heroic Poem . . . consists in the just Proportion of all its parts . . . that perfect Connection, that just agreement, and the admirable Relation that the parts of this great Work have to each other . . . this Symmetry which Horace so much recommends . . ."⁵⁵ The Poet's style must impart a

49. Complete Art, p. 280.

50. Complete Art, pp. 285, 281.

51. Complete Art, p. 281.

52. Complete Art, p. 283.

53. Complete Art, p. 273.

54. Complete Art, p. 273.

55. Complete Art, p. 278.

certain elevation by which "the most common things take a character of Greatness and Sublimity which renders them extraordinary and admirable,"⁵⁶ and the narration "must be short and succinct, that nothing may be idle, flat, or tedious; it must be lively, quick, spirituous, and delightfully simple and natural."⁵⁷

During Gildon's lifetime such authoritarian principles as these were becoming somewhat suspect, but he continued to oppose current taste, popular success, and all critical relativism by vigorously arguing the case for fixed principles by which the qualified few could judge. Therefore he fought for the rules, "for whilst there is no Standard of Excellence, there can be no such thing as excellence,"⁵⁸ and "where there is a Right and a Wrong there must be some art or Rules to avoid the one, and arrive at the other."⁵⁹ These rules are "in Aristotle, Horace, and their best Commentators. And till some new Discoverer shall arise, who shall shew us from a farther Penetration into Nature . . . we ought to be directed by them."⁶⁰ Without these rules, "all must be governed by unruly Fancy, and Poetry become the Land of Confusion, which is, in Reality, the Kingdom of Beauty, Order, and Harmony."⁶¹ So firmly did he believe in the rules that he wrote his major critical work, The Complete Art of Poetry, "to remove . . . this Ignorance of our Writers

56. Complete Art, p. 276.

57. Complete Art, pp. 275-76.

58. Works . . . Shakespear, VII, 425.

59. Works . . . Shakespear, VII, xvi.

60. Complete Art, p. 140.

61. Complete Art, p. 91.

and Readers of Poesy . . . by giving our English World those Rules, by the observation of which Homer, Virgil, and the rest of the Antients gain'd immortal Reputation."⁶² He believed that only they could establish general good taste.

Athens itself follow'd the Compositions of Thespis and others near as irregular as our Plays; and yet when Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Magistrate, to a more rational and useful Diversion, the Athenians soon acknowledged the Excellence. The French Stage was, before the time of Corneille and the Care and Influence of that great Statesman Cardinal Richlieu, as absurd as those of Spain and England, but soon took the Advantage of Improvements, introduc'd by so just a Regularity as now reigns on it."⁶³

But contemporary criticism often challenged the supremacy of Gildon's beloved rules. Nature, reason, and genius were frequently preferred; and various direct attacks argued that the rules unduly restricted a writer, that they were outmoded, that they interfered with bringing pleasure to the reader or audience, or that they needed additions. Gildon did his best to answer each of these arguments.

In answer to those who wished to "follow nature" Gildon insisted that the rules are not only consistent with nature but also state nature's precepts in the clearest terms. Although his youthful "Some Reflections on Mr. Rymer's Short View of Tragedy, and an attempt at a Vindication of Shakespeare"⁶⁴ was an uncharacteristic attack on the rules which caused many scholars to describe him as a "modern" and an opponent of the rules, after

62. Complete Art, preface.

63. Complete Art, p. 231.

64. Miscellaneous Letters.

1694 Gildon became a staunch and lifelong defender of the ancients and their rules. In the preface to The Patriot, eight years before Pope's Essay on Criticism, he asserted that "the Rules are only Nature Methodiz'd."⁶⁵ In 1709 he was well aware that "Nature is an equivocal Word, whose Sense is too various and extensive ever to be able to appeal to; since it leaves it to the Fancy and Capacity of everyone, to decide what is according to Nature, and what not . . . It is therefore necessary, there should be Rules to let the Poet know not only what is natural, but when it is proper to be introduc'd, and when not."⁶⁶ In 1718 he wrote, "I find them so evident, and so conformable to Nature, that I cannot but be sensible, they are true and all that Aristotle advances is confirmed by reasons drawn from the common Sentiments of Mankind, so that Men themselves became the Rule and Measure of what he lays down . . . and whose Certainty I discover by Reason, and Experience."⁶⁷ Thus for Gildon the rules define and strengthen "the Laws of Nature, which renews them incessantly, and gives them a perpetuate existence."⁶⁸

Closely allied to "nature" as a criterion for Criticism was another

65. J. R. Spingarn in his Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century (I, ixviii) gives Rapin as the original source of Pope's "nature still, but nature methodiz'd" comment on the rules. However, widespread reference to Gildon's short piece suggests the strong possibility that Pope had read Gildon's phrase.

66. Works . . . Shakespear, VII, vi.

67. Complete Art, p. 134.

68. Complete Art, p. 135.

popular loose term, "reason," and Gildon answered its proponents with much the same arguments he had used against "nature." In 1694 he wrote, "As far as the ancients and the Rules Aristotle draws from them, agree with the character you John Dennis give these, of being nothing but good sense and nature reduc'd to method, I shall close with them; but when they either deviate from this, or reach not up to what may be done, I must think it best just to withdraw myself from the subjection of the Stagyrice"69

But the older he grew the more convinced he became that Aristotle's rules were founded upon reason and that the "Aimez donc la raison" principle urged by Boileau, Racier, Rapin, and Le Bossu presented only "the solid Doctrine they have drawn from the rules, and the insuperable Reasons on which they are founded."⁷⁰ Thus his continued conviction became, "the Rules . . . advance nothing but what is accompanied with Reason, and drawn from the common sentiments of mankind"⁷¹ and he insisted that Aristotle's rules rest upon "the evidence of the truth and reason that was found in those works of Aristotle, that have met with that universal approbation which his poetica, his rhetorics, his politics, and his ethics have found."⁷²

Although he cannot dispute the necessity of genius, Gildon argues the complementary nature of genius and the rules.

69. Miscellaneous Letters, p. 126.

70. W. J. Bate, From Classic to Romantic (Cambridge, Mass., 1916), p. 32.

71. Works . . . Shakespear, VII, xiv.

72. Laws of Poetry, pp. 263-64.

Nature may inform some great Genius to give us some fine Things, as she may inspire some few men to follow her Laws, in their wild, uncultivated Way of Living, like some of the West Indians; but then even that one great Genius will be apt to abound in Monstrous absurdities, and incongruous Extravagancies, which can only be avoided by the constant and unalterable Rules⁷³

Still another popular contention against the rules was the notion that they unduly restricted genius and art. Very early in his career Gildon himself stated this objection: "A nice observation of Rules is a confinement a great Genius cannot bear, which naturally covets Liberty All that is great of Humane things, makes us nearer approach to the Eternal Perfection of Greatness, and extends as much as possible its limits towards being boundless."⁷⁴ But on the same page he qualified his comments: "but as I do not think that to be a Great Man, one must necessarily be wholly exempted from Rules, so I must grant, that Vergil, Sphocles, and your Self Dryden are very Great tho' generally very Regular."⁷⁵ But by 1718 he had concluded that "a strict attendance to the Rules . . . can never embarrass or clogg an author's Fancy, but rather enlarge and extend it. They [opponents of the rules] might as well urge, that good and wholesome Laws that enjoin nothing but what a rational Nature would otherwise oblige us to, take away the Liberty of Mankind, whereas they are the very Life and Security of it."⁷⁶ Finally, really great poets have not been impeded by

73. Complete Art, p. 125.

74. Miscellaneous Letters, p. 91.

75. Miscellaneous Letters, p. 91.

76. Complete Art, p. 124.

the rules, because "in Greece, Rome, and France, the poets have never wanted subjects."⁷⁷

Still another current cry was that strict adherence to the rules prevents pleasing variety. Gildon is not "for excluding a just variety from tragedy . . . a variety of the passions, and a variety of the incidents, as far as it is agreeable to, and consistent with the unities . . ."⁷⁸ But he cannot condone

a medly collection of several different actions, that is as destructive of our pleasure as it is opposite to our reason, and the art of the stage. The scatter'd beams of the sun may afford a sort of warmth; but when they are collected by a glass into one point, they set fire to the object on which they are directed; so pleasure when dissipated, and spread among various objects, is but weak; but collected by art, and directed by the unities to one action, is strong, great, and often transporting.⁷⁹

Nor may any exceptions be allowed to this unity of action, because "where they exceed the Unities I see no Reason why they may not as well and with as good Reason stretch the Time to 5000 Years, and the actions to all the Nations and People of the Universe."⁸⁰ As for the unity of time, "to persuade people that they sit in the theatre from one to forty, nay fifty years, at the same time that they know that they have been there but three or four hours is an absurdity that cannot be swallow'd by any man of tolerable understanding . . ."⁸¹

77. Laws of Poetry, p. 176.

78. Laws of Poetry, p. 167.

79. Laws of Poetry, pp. 182-83.

80. Works . . . Shakespear, VII, 357.

81. Laws of Poetry, pp. 173-74.

But even more important is the unity of place because "the breach of the unity of time is only discover'd by reflection, but that of place by the senses, being a direct contradiction to the evidence of the sight, the most faithful and severe representer of its objects . . . and if you go beyond the very numerical place where the scene first opens, I see no manner of reason why you should admit any bounds at all."⁸² Therefore, if the unities did not cramp the genius of Sophocles, Euripides, and the regular French dramatists, "it is plain that it is so far from being true, that Tragedy cannot be gracefully written under the restraint of the rules, that it cannot be done without that restraint."⁸³ Thus the unities "are bounded in nature as well as art, and to sin against them is to sin against reason itself."⁸⁴

Yet another objection to the unities was that they limited pleasure, and that contention Gildon also firmly denied. Perhaps he was answering Dennis when he wrote,

There can be no great pleasure without strong emotions of the passions, and the stronger those are, the more lively and vigorous is the pleasure; but there can be no strong emotions of the passions, where they are not prepar'd and rais'd by degrees, which cannot be done without a just observation of the unities, and a total rejection of that insipid variety, which does not at all contribute to, but obstruct it."⁸⁵

82. Laws . . . Poetry, pp. 174-76.

83. Laws . . . Poetry, pp. 180-181.

84. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 176.

85. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 187.

And if he was combating Dennis's occasional willingness to bend the rules in order to achieve instructive pleasure, Gildon drew the issue clearly: "The certain consequence of this is, that the Rules and what Pleasures are never contrary to each other, and that you can never obtain the latter without the former."⁸⁶

The last objection to the rules was that they were intended for another age, a different stage, and were thus false criteria for English drama. Again Gildon emphatically answers the challenge. "Men are the same now that they were then; they have the same Passions, and run with the same Earnestness after Pleasures."⁸⁷ Therefore, just as the rules "made the Beauty of the Poems of Homer, Sophocles, and Euripides in Greece, from which they were drawn, so four or five Hundred Years after, they adorn'd the Poems of Virgil, and other famous Latin Poets; now after two Thousand Years, they make the best Tragedies, we have, in which all that pleases only does so as it is conformable to these Rules."⁸⁸

Gildon insisted that for the well being of English literature informed criticism must judge by the rules, even harshly if necessary. As early as 1709 he wrote that "if Truth and Reason may be of any account, to point out the real Errors of any man, must be thought a good-natur'd office; since it is to bring men to a just Sense of things, and a true knowledge and Taste of Nature and Art because by the Correction many are inform'd

86. Works . . . Shakespear, VII, xv

87. Complete Art, p. 139.

88. Complete Art, pp. 134-135.

how to direct themselves justly . . ."89 In 1714 he again argued the necessity of criticism: "if the Critics or Judges let every ignorant Pretender to Scribbling pass on the World for a Man of Genius, and Art, there would be an end of all Excellence, and Art wou'd be no more heard of in the Kingdom of the Muses, whilst Ignorance and Impudence assume the Seats of Learning and Modest Merit."90 And in 1718 he rather bitterly observed "that the general run of noisy Party, was against all Instructions in this Kind, which they branded with the unpopular name of criticism, which by the Ignorant writers in Vogue, has been misrepresented as an ill-natur'd Thing . . ."91 Gildon held that this charge of ill nature—as well as most of the other objections to the rules—stemmed from ignorance or misunderstanding of them. "The common clamour of ill nature, which the children of confusion make against the precepts of harmony and order . . ."92 is frequently heard because "there are none sooner alarm'd with the appearance of a new critical discourse, or more violent declaimers against it, than the ignorant scribblers of all times . . ."93 But if these really understood the rules, "they wou'd plainly see, that they do, in Reality, add to them the greatest Distinction and Honour they can hope for, by setting up a true Standard, by which, the due Glory of Wit and Poetry may be paid to Merit, without so wretched a fate, as to be oblig'd to share with Poetasters, Versifiers, and

89. Works . . . Shakespear, VII, viii.

90. Charles Gildon, A New Rehearsal (London, 1714), preface.

91. Complete Art, preface.

92. Laws of Poetry, preface.

93. Laws of Poetry, p. 80.

and worthless Pretenders."⁹⁴ Thus Gildon stands staunchly by the rules, facing and answering to the best of his ability the chief current objections to them.⁹⁵

Not content with defending the rules, he attacked competing criteria. First, he effectively ridiculed popular success and current fashion as valid judgments of art.

In all the fine Arts indeed, there has a Grotesque and Gothic Taste prevail'd, which relishes every thing that is not natural. Thus, in general, we prefer the Japan Pictures for the Furniture of our Rooms, to the fine Prints of the Audrands, Simoneans, Edlinabs, and the rest of the great Masters; and by the same abandon'd Gusto, we encourage Operas and Farces, before Comedies and Tragedies.⁹⁶

A Piece of a mere Sign-Dauber is as valuable in the one Eye of a gross and common understanding, as one of Raphael's or Thornhill's. And so in Music, a Taber and Pipe, a Cymbal or Horn-pipe, will ravish the Mob, more than the admirable Mr. Shoar with his incomparable Lute; and the Ballad Tune Lilly Bullero more than a fine Sonata of Corelli. And thus in Poetry, the Million will prefer Bunyan and Quarles to Milton and Dryden.⁹⁷

Besides, if you allow the Applause of the Town to be the Test of what is Good, you must allow its Neglect or Exploding to be the Mark of the Bad; and the same Men in the same Poem the most excellent, and the most execrable of Poets.⁹⁸

94. Complete Art, p. 95.

95. W. J. Bate in From Classic to Romantic seems to be one of the best informed commentators upon Gildon as critic. But he errs in believing that "one may suspect his own admiration for the rules was hardly as ingrained as he would have liked, and that he protested too much even for himself; for though in calmer moods he sternly censured the 'irregularity' of Shakespeare's plays, he always found to his dismay that, in reading Shakespeare, the witchery in him 'caused all remembrance of rules to vanish away . . . as if I had never known anything of the matter.'" (p. 15) This comment came relatively early in Gildon's career and contradicts both the bulk of his remarks upon Shakespeare and also his final judgment on Shakespeare and the rules. One could counter this quotation with many contrary ones. See the discussion of Gildon's opinions on Shakespeare in a later chapter.

96. Complete Art, p. 122.

97. Life . . . Betterton, p. 171.

98. Complete Art, pp. 108-9.

Second, Gildon also reminded his opponents that even on their own standard of popular approval they are still in the minority.

If numbers are to be insisted upon as the test of excellence, the followers of the ancient manner of writing have a hundred to one the advantage. For fifteen hundred years; add to these the whole Greek nations, from Thrace to Egypt, for more than civiliz'd nations of those ages. But on the other side stand only a few English audiences and readers, a company of tasteless, injudicious northern people, and so far short even in number, that they will not bear the least comparison. Millions of people of the finest taste, and politest literature standing on one side, and only a few country esquires, town wits, overgrown schoolboys, trading citys, with a thoughtless train of females, without taste, and without literature, on the other.⁹⁹

His third attack was upon "a sort of men who would have poetry, like beauty, the creature of fancy only, and that of every particular man's fancy, which destroys all manner of certainty of what is beauty, and what is not,"¹⁰⁰ because if "unruly Fancy" were to prevail poetry would become "the Land of confusion, which is, in Reality, the Kingdom of Beauty, Order, and Harmony."¹⁰¹ Fourth, Gildon challenged the stale argument that only authors are fit critics: "The Rules of Criticism are known, and fixt by Aristotle, Horace, Macier, Bossu, and others; and tho' a Man may not have perform'd himself, yet by them he may be a very good Judge of another's Performance . . . So that I would never reject a piece of Criticism for the Name of the Author, but for the Defect of what he advances."¹⁰²

In all these opinions Gildon stands firmly on the rules as formulated by Aristotle and Horace and brought to England by the works and translations

99. Laws . . . Poetry, pp. 224-25.

100. Laws . . . Poetry, p. 275.

101. Complete Art, p. 91.

102. Complete Art, p. 126.

of the French. He stoutly asserts and defends them on the grounds that poetry is an art and that all art sets standards and prescribes rules whereby its practitioners may reach those standards. He maintains that following these rules has improved literature and has established good taste. He boldly disputes current objections to rules by arguing that: the rules and nature agree; their precepts conform to reason; genius is not restricted by the rules but aided by them; the rules do not preclude legitimate variety; they cannot be outmoded because humankind has not changed; they lead to pleasure rather than prevent it; criticism according to the rules is not ill-natured but seeks truth; and objections to the rules come chiefly from the ignorant or those whose works cannot stand judgment by them. Therefore he attacks other possible criteria—current fashion, popular success, fancy, and taste—and declares that the only valid standards are those of the informed few, who although they may not be successful authors themselves nevertheless know and apply with wisdom the rules of Aristotle, Horace, LeBossu, and Racier. Thus Gildon's fundamental tenets are firmly and clearly authoritarian. Succeeding chapters will show how consistently he applied them to current cruxes of criticism, the analysis of the state of English letters, and specific judgments of particular men and works.