

CHARLES GILSON
A STUDY OF HIS WORK AS
PROFESSIONAL MAN OF LETTERS, CREATIVE WRITER, AND CRITIC

By

Fred Henry MacIntosh

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PREFACE

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F. M.

INTRODUCTION

Pope's highly evocative "at every word a reputation dies" was also an acutely accurate forecast of his own distinct talent for character assassination and reputational murder. For over two centuries his memorable couplets have destroyed his detractors, and only recently has scholarship revived such victims as John Dennis, Lewis Theobald, and Elkanah Settle. Thus when Pope sneered at "meaner Gildon's venal quill" and with feigned magnanimity "wished the man a dinner and sat still," he created for Charles Gildon a reputation as hireling hack which succeeding centuries have accepted as truth. And when Matthew Green dismissed Gildon's criticism as "Poetic buckets for dry wells," he implied a critical vacuity which also has been generally accepted without question until later nineteenth century and early twentieth century scholars studying the ancients-moderns controversy began to run into three or four Gildon titles. Those they used for snippet quotation, frequently out of the real context, and with dangerously little knowledge they glibly generalized upon Gildon's abilities and ideas; in so doing they seemed unaware that they were quoting either the early or late extremities of Gildon's criticisms, which were poles apart, and appeared completely unaware that they were generalizing upon almost fifty works from only three or four titles. Hence Gildon has been smoothly quoted to clinch

the case for both moderns and ancients, for Shakespeare and against him. Histories of literature, period studies, form studies, biographical studies, and critical studies abound in brief passing reference to Gildon's works—but the titles mentioned are always the same three or four and the comments usually repeat one another.

In this fashion Gildon's garbled reputation reached early twentieth century readers. Since then it has begun to fare better. W. H. Durham in his Critical Essays of the Eighteenth Century allotted approximately a fifth of his book to Gildon's The Complete Art of Poetry because he considered it "a valuable document . . . indispensable to a real perception of critical conditions" (xix). F. C. Green in Minuet: A Critical Survey of French and English Literary Ideas in the Eighteenth Century made forty-six substantial references to Gildon and treated him as considerable force in literary criticism. In The Theory of the Epic in England H. W. Swedenberg favorably quoted Gildon eighteen times. In Granville The Polite Miss Elizabeth Handasyde credited Gildon with "the fullest expression of the admiration roused by Granville's varied talents and brilliant reputation," which she quoted in full. W. E. Irving in John Gay, Favorite of the Wits maintained that "Gildon was far from stupid." In an article on the ancients-modern controversy Baldwin Maxwell declared that "Gildon was certainly an accurate mirror of the intellectual fashions of the moment." E. N. Hooker in The Critical Works of John Dennis makes no less than 75 references to Gildon, of which many are extensive, most are complimentary, and all show that he regarded Gildon as a critic of repute and consequence. And recently R. J. Bate in From Classic to Romantic had 10 quotations from Gildon as compared with 12 from Pope, 9 from Dennis, 5 from Addison, 1 from Collier, and 16 from Dryden; furthermore, he used many of the Gildon passages as clear state-

ments of a central premise or as concise summaries of considerable sections.

However, all this comment has been incidental. Although A New Rehearsal has been ably edited by George Anderson (Ph. D. thesis, Pennsylvania) and Staring Wells has successfully disproved Gildon's authorship of A Comparison between The Two Stages, other scholarship is sparse, generally bibliographical, or limited to one or two Gildon works. Only Paul Dottin has attempted even a survey of Gildon's entire works. In 1923 he published as a Paris doctoral thesis A New Edition of Charles Gildon's Famous Pamphlet, Robinson Crusoe Examined and Criticized, with an introduction, notes, and a fifty-six page "Essay on Gildon's Life." This essay is still the best biographical account of Gildon, for little else is obtainable. (Wherever possible the present study adds new biographical information as background to the works themselves.) But this essay is badly incomplete, often uninformed as to the real circumstances surrounding Gildon's works, frequently confused about their contents, and sometimes incredibly naive as to their importance. Furthermore, H. Dottin knew of only some thirty titles. Nevertheless, his biographical sketch has value as a compilation of otherwise scattered fact, just as Mr. Briscoe's list in the Cambridge Bibliography also greatly aids anyone studying Gildon's works. But there has been no serious study of the full body of Gildon's works.

Yet Gildon was certainly not inconsequential. Very early in his career Aphra Behn entrusted him with many of her papers and some unpublished works. He corresponded with Dryden and perhaps traveled on the continent with publisher Jacob Tonson and William Congreve, some of whose odes first appeared in Gildon's miscellanies, where several of the Earl of Dorset's also were first published by permission of their author. Richard Steele not only exerted his influence to get Gildon released from prison (where he had

been confined because of an unwisely conceived political letter), but also contributed a signed complimentary preface to Gildon's grammar. Robert Harley saw to it that Gildon's prison sentence was commuted. Wycherley befriended him, Betterton and Thomas Cheek advised him during the composition of two of his plays, and Lord Halifax gave him presents in return for a dedication. The Duke of Buckingham was his patron for a time, King George once granted him a pension, and perhaps Addison encouraged him to write against Pope. Thomas Tickell, the highly regarded classical don, valued Gildon's opinion and support; John Dennis was his literary ally; Aaron Hill dedicated a play to them jointly; Matthew Prior was early his friend; and when Gildon died, both Abel Boyer's Political State of Great Britain and The Universal Journal printed eulogies.

Furthermore, Gildon's works are in themselves an excellent cross-section of the literary scene. They include successful miscellanies, popular collections of epistolary tales, some unimportant poetry, six acted and published plays (one of which was very successful and in two of which Betterton acted), several biographical "memoirs"—one of which remained for two centuries the chief reference for the life of Mrs. Behn and is still a starting point for scholarship on that fascinating lady, a grammar which went through several printings during the eighteenth century, and three popular volumes dealing with the question of deism. As critic he wrote upon the chief questions of his day: ancients vs. moderns, fable vs. "fine things," epic and tragedy vs. satire, Shakespeare's genius, the decline of the English stage and the rise of opera, and the question of an English academy. He very early answered Collier, was the first to attack Pope's The Rape of the Lock after the machinery had been added, and the first to point out the errors, inconsistencies, and absurdities in Defoe's phenomenally popular Robinson Crusoe. Clearly, as man and writer, he was far

from negligible. Certainly he did not deserve Pope's epithets of "mean" and "silly." Rather, the facts just reviewed suggest that these particular epithets better suit their source.

In studying the work of a minor figure in eighteenth century English letters one encounters the major problem of avoiding the falsehood of extremes. One such extreme is to argue that a minor figure deserves major status, and the other is to degrade the writer to a mere hack by ignoring all solid achievement. This study aspires to avoid both errors by following the harder path of fact and restraint: it attempts to describe Gildon's work virtually in its entirety, to place each work and each grouping of works in its proper circumstances, and to offer whatever appraisal the facts and the milieu seem to warrant. In order to do so it presents Gildon's works within the context of the three chief phases of his career: the professional man of letters who wrote for bread yet rose from cheap journalism to praiseworthy translation and compilation; the would-be creative writer who attempted fiction, poetry, and drama with some success; and the critic, which role Gildon took most seriously. This organization is generally true to the order of Gildon's development, although the divisions inevitably overlap in many places; but within these groupings the order of presentation is strictly chronological.