

7. THE AUGUSTAN VERSE SATIRE

or

THE ENGLISH VERSE SATIRE IN THE 18th CENTURY

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The period between 1680 and 1750 is called the Augustan Age in English Literature, because frequent comparisons were made between the literary activities of the England of this period and that of the Rome of Emperor Augustus which produced such poetic geniuses as Vergil, Horace, Ovid and many others. Dr. Johnson in his characteristic way said that Dryden did for English poetry what Augustus had done for the city of Rome – “he found it brick and left it marble.” Dryden and Pope were the greatest poets of the Augustan age. They meticulously looked to the writers of Greek and Roman antiquity for guidance and inspiration. However, most of all they were influenced by the Roman poets of the age of Augustus. This habit is thoroughly noticeable during the time of Dryden and it deepened and hardened during the succeeding Age of Pope (1700-1750). Alexander Pope thus set the motto for the final test of excellence –

*“Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem
To copy nature is to copy them.”*

The eighteenth century is remarkable as a period in which the satiric spirit reigned supreme. The names of all the important writers are associated with satire; in fact, their very greatness is due mainly to their greatness as satirists. The three most important writers of the age were Pope, Swift, and Dr. Johnson.-Whereas Pope and Dr. Johnson gave the English language some of its best verse satires, the second named gave it its best prose satires. But apart from this redoubtable triumvirate¹, the names of a hundred other lesser satirists can be mentioned. In addition to the regular satires, the satiric spirit peeps through other modes of writing, too. The novel and the periodical -paper were the two important gifts of the eighteenth century to English literature. These new genres, too, are exhibitivie of the impact of the satiric spirit which was ubiquitous in the age. Some of the most delightful satire of the age is provided by the periodical papers of Steele, Addison, and their followers and the novels of Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne. As a genre, satire ruled the roost till roughly the third quarter of the century, when new tendencies appeared, to the detriment of the satiric spirit. The precursors of Romanticism found satire incompatible with their new sensibility. Satire naturally declined and since then up to the present day very few satires have appeared which can show the same brilliance as characterised eighteenth-century satires.

Reasons for Dominance:All satires arise from the sense of dissatisfaction, despair, amusement, anger, or disgust at the departure of things from their ideals. Satire aims at pointing out and chastising the falling short of things from their well-accepted standards of excellence. It is only when standards get fixed that any departure from them can be measured or appreciated. In the eighteenth century-particularly its first half the standards of human conduct were more or less well fixed. -This century has been variously called "the age of good sense," "the age of good taste," "the age of reason", etc. Almost all the writers of the age harped upon common sense, good taste, and what they called "right reason." Any departure from them, real or imaginary, put the whip of the satirist into action. Further the accentuation of the political division of Englishmen into Whigs and Tories also nurtured and provided much material for the satiric spirit. Nearly every important writer of the first half of the

eighteenth century was "employed" by either the Tory or the Whig party to further its cause and to down its opponents. Pope, Swift, Arbuthnot, Prior, Addison, Steele—all were actively aligned with one party or the other, even though they did not write many political satires of the nature of Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* and *The Medal*. Thirdly, we have to take into account the fierce personal animosities of the writers of the age. It was in the eighteenth century that, for the first time in the history of English literature, the vocation of a man of letters, like other professions, became a lucrative job. With the unprecedented increase in the number of readers (consequent mainly upon the expansion of trade and commerce and the resulting richness) the printed word could sell. Pope and some others depended for their livelihood entirely upon the patronage of their readers. With the phenomenal rise in the number of readers there was an equally phenomenal rise in the number of writers many of whom decorated the garrets of Grub Street. Each of them was necessarily jealous of all the rest as it involved his very livelihood. The whole air was thick with mutual animosities among writers and the personal satires which they gave rise to. Even Pope's *Dunciad* - the most powerful and the best satire of the eighteenth century was expressly written to lash his literary rivals and critics. His translation of Homer and edition of Shakespeare had proved for him the most lucrative assets and when they were attacked, partly justly and partly unjustly, by critics like Bentley and Theobald it was reason enough for him to try to satirise them into silence.

Formative and Guiding Influences: There were three formative and guiding influences on satire in the eighteenth century. They were: the tradition of the Roman Augustan satire of Horace, Juvenal, and Persius; the tradition of the French satire of the neo-classic school; and the neo-classical native tradition of Dryden. The French satirists like Boileau were themselves influenced by the Roman satirists and Dryden was influenced by both the Roman and the French. Let us now consider these three influences one by one.

- (i) As regards the influence of the Roman satirists, it is quite apparent in the work of Pope, Dr. Johnson, and others. Horace and Juvenal -the two greatest Roman satirists—did not write the same kind of satire. Horatian satire is, generally speaking, of the comic, and Juvenalian satire, of the tragic, kind. Horace is polished, good-honoured, precise but sly, pretty tolerant and somewhat lenient, and always indirect. Juvenal, on the other hand, is mordant, direct, intolerant, stately, intense, and disdainful. Whereas Pope came mostly under Horace's influence, Dr. Johnson was evidently influenced by Juvenal.
- (ii) Boileau was the most important of the neo-classical French satirists. Dryden himself came under his influence. Boileau's *Le Lutrin* was presumably the first example of a mock-heroic poem in world literature. Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* was also a mock epic. In the eighteenth century we find Pope giving a mock-heroic framework to his famous satires—*The Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad*. Swift, likewise, followed the lead of Boileau in *The Battle of the Books*. Scarron, the French poet who parodied Virgil, had also some followers in eighteenth-century England.
- (iii) Last but not least is the bracing influence of Dryden who breaking away from the native satiric tradition of Hall, Marston, Donne, Cleveland, and Butler, had looked for guidance to the Roman satirists and their followers in France. Pope has well been designated "Dryden's poetical son." His satires provided so many models for numerous eighteenth-century satirists. *The Dunciad* followed *Mac Flecknoe* in being a satire on dunces. But what is more, Dryden's popularisation and effective handling of the heroic couplet for the purpose of satire had a powerful effect on the eighteenth century. Almost all the good satires of this century were written in heroic couplets. Pope regularised the couplet and made it more precise, balanced, and artistic and, as such, provided a model for his successors. But Dryden's

freer use of the couplet had also its admirers and imitators among whom may be mentioned the name of Churchill.

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1. (in ancient Rome) a group of three men holding power, in particular (*the First Triumvirate*) the unofficial coalition of Julius Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus in 60 BC and (*the Second Triumvirate*) a coalition formed by Antony, Lepidus, and Octavian in 43 BC.