

THE
WORKS
OF
JOHN DRYDEN,

NOW FIRST COLLECTED
IN EIGHTEEN VOLUMES.

ILLUSTRATED
WITH NOTES,
HISTORICAL, CRITICAL, AND EXPLANATORY,
AND
A LIFE OF THE AUTHOR,
BY
WALTER SCOTT, Esq.

VOL. IV.

LONDON :
PRINTED FOR WILLIAM MILLER, ALBEMARLE STREET,
BY JAMES BALLANTYNE AND CO. EDINBURGH.

1808.

From:

The Works of John Dryden, 18 vols. (London: William Miller, 1808), vol. 4.

First printed with the first edition of *The Conquest of Granada* (1672).

OF
HEROIC PLAYS.

AN ESSAY.

WHETHER heroic verse ought to be admitted into serious plays, is not now to be disputed: it is already in possession of the stage, and I dare confidently affirm, that very few tragedies, in this age, shall be received without it. All the arguments which are formed against it, can amount to no more than this, that it is not so near conversation as prose, and therefore not so natural. But it is very clear to all who understand poetry, that serious plays ought not to imitate conversation too nearly. If nothing were to be raised above that level, the foundation of poetry would be destroyed. And if you once admit of a latitude, that thoughts may be exalted, and that images and actions may be raised above the life, and described in measure without rhyme, that leads you insensibly from your own principles to mine: you are already so far onward of your way, that you have forsaken the imitation of ordinary converse. You are gone beyond it; and to continue where you are, is to lodge in the open

fields, betwixt two inns. You have lost that which you call natural, and have not acquired the last perfection of art. But it was only custom which cozened us so long; we thought, because Shakespear and Fletcher went no farther, that there the pillars of poetry were to be erected; that, because they excellently described passion without rhyme, therefore rhyme was not capable of describing it. But time has now convinced most men of that error. It is indeed so difficult to write verse, that the adversaries of it have a good plea against many, who undertook that task, without being formed by art or nature for it. Yet, even they who have written worst in it, would have written worse without it: They have cozened many with their sound, who never took the pains to examine their sense. In fine, they have succeeded; though, it is true, they have more dishonoured rhyme by their good success, than they have done by their ill. But I am willing to let fall this argument: It is free for every man to write, or not to write, in verse, as he judges it to be, or not to be, his talent; or as he imagines the audience will receive it.

For heroic plays, in which only I have used it without the mixture of prose, the first light we had of them, on the English theatre, was from the late Sir William D'Avenant. It being forbidden him in the rebellious times to act tragedies and comedies, because they contained some matter of scandal to those good people, who could more easily dispossess their lawful sovereign, than endure a wanton jest, he was forced to turn his thoughts another way, and to introduce the examples of moral virtue, writ in verse, and performed in recitative music. The original of this music, and of the scenes which adorned his work, he had from the Italian operas; but he heightened his characters, as I may proba-

bly imagine, from the example of Corneille and some French poets. In this condition did this part of poetry remain at his majesty's return; when, growing bolder, as being now owned by a public authority, he reviewed his "Siege of Rhodes," and caused it be acted as a just drama. But as few men have the happiness to begin and finish any new project, so neither did he live to make his design perfect: There wanted the fulness of a plot, and the variety of characters to form it as it ought; and, perhaps, something might have been added to the beauty of the style. All which he would have performed with more exactness, had he pleased to have given us another work of the same nature. For myself and others, who come after him, we are bound, with all veneration to his memory, to acknowledge what advantage we received from that excellent groundwork which he laid: And, since it is an easy thing to add to what already is invented, we ought all of us, without envy to him, or partiality to ourselves, to yield him the precedence in it.

Having done him this justice, as my guide, I may do myself so much, as to give an account of what I have performed after him. I observed then, as I said, what was wanting to the perfection of his "Siege of Rhodes;" which was design, and variety of characters. And in the midst of this consideration, by mere accident, I opened the next book that lay by me, which was "Ariosto," in Italian; and the very first two lines of that poem gave me light to all I could desire;

*Le donne, i cavalier, l'arme, gli amori,
Le cortesie, l'audaci imprese io canto, &c.*

For the very next reflection which I made was this, that an heroic play ought to be an imitation, in

little, of an heroic poem; and, consequently, that love and valour ought to be the subject of it. Both these Sir William D'Avenant had begun to shadow; but it was so, as first discoverers draw their maps, with headlands, and promontories, and some few outlines of somewhat taken at a distance, and which the designer saw not clearly. The common drama obliged him to a plot well formed and pleasant, or, as the ancients call it, one entire and great action. But this he afforded not himself in a story, which he neither filled with persons, nor beautified with characters, nor varied with accidents. The laws of an heroic poem did not dispense with those of the other, but raised them to a greater height, and indulged him a farther liberty of fancy, and of drawing all things as far above the ordinary proportion of the stage, as that is beyond the common words and actions of human life; and, therefore, in the scanting of his images and design, he complied not enough with the greatness and majesty of an heroic poem.

I am sorry I cannot discover my opinion of this kind of writing, without dissenting much from his, whose memory I love and honour. But I will do it with the same respect to him, as if he were now alive, and overlooking my paper while I write. His judgment of an heroic poem was this: "That it ought to be dressed in a more familiar and easy shape; more fitted to the common actions and passions of human life; and, in short, more like a glass of nature, shewing us ourselves in our ordinary habits, and figuring a more practicable virtue to us, than was done by the ancients or moderns." Thus he takes the image of an heroic poem from the drama, or stage poetry; and accordingly intended to divide it into five books, representing the same

number of acts; and every book into several cantos, imitating the scenes which compose our acts.

But this, I think, is rather a play in narration, as I may call it, than an heroic poem. If at least you will not prefer the opinion of a single man to the practice of the most excellent authors, both of ancient and latter ages. I am no admirer of quotations; but you shall hear, if you please, one of the ancients delivering his judgment on this question; it is Petronius Arbitrator, the most elegant, and one of the most judicious authors of the Latin tongue; who, after he had given many admirable rules for the structure and beauties of an epic poem, concludes all in these following words:—

“ *Non enim res gestæ versibus comprehendendæ sunt, quod longe melius historici faciunt: sed, per ambages, deorumque ministeria, præcipitaneus est liber spiritus, ut potius furentis animi vaticinatio appareat, quam religiosæ orationis, sub testibus, fides.*”

In which sentence, and his own essay of a poem, which immediately he gives you, it is thought he taxes Lucan, who followed too much the truth of history, crowded sentences together, was too full of points, and too often offered at somewhat which had more of the sting of an epigram, than of the dignity and state of an heroic poem. Lucan used not much the help of his heathen deities: There was neither the ministry of the gods, nor the precipitation of the soul, nor the fury of a prophet (of which my author speaks), in his *Pharsalia*; he treats you more like a philosopher than a poet, and instructs you in verse, with what he had been taught by his uncle Seneca in prose. In one word, he walks soberly afoot, when he might fly. Yet Lucan is not always this religious historian. The oracle of Apollonius, and the witchcraft of Erictho, will somewhat atone for him, who was, indeed, bound up by an ill-

chosen and known argument, to follow truth with great exactness. For my part, I am of opinion, that neither Homer, Virgil, Statius, Ariosto, Tasso, nor our English Spencer, could have formed their poems half so beautiful, without those gods and spirits, and those enthusiastic parts of poetry, which compose the most noble parts of all their writings. And I will ask any man who loves heroic poetry (for I will not dispute their tastes who do not), if the ghost of Polydorus in Virgil, the Enchanted Wood in Tasso, and the Bower of Bliss in Spencer (which he borrows from that admirable Italian) could have been omitted, without taking from their works some of the greatest beauties in them. And if any man object the improbabilities of a spirit appearing, or of a palace raised by magic; I boldly answer him, that an heroic poet is not tied to a bare representation of what is true, or exceeding probable; but that he may let himself loose to visionary objects, and to the representation of such things, as, depending not on sense, and therefore not to be comprehended by knowledge, may give him a freer scope for imagination. It is enough that, in all ages and religions, the greatest part of mankind have believed the power of magic, and that there are spirits or spectres which have appeared. This, I say, is foundation enough for poetry; and I dare farther affirm, that the whole doctrine of separated beings, whether those spirits are incorporeal substances, (which Mr Hobbes, with some reason, thinks to imply a contradiction) or that they are a thinner and more aërial sort of bodies, (as some of the fathers have conjectured) may better be explicated by poets than by philosophers or divines. For their speculations on this subject are wholly poetical; they have only their fancy for their guide; and that, being sharper in an excellent poet, than it is likely it

should in a phlegmatic, heavy gownman, will see farther in its own empire, and produce more satisfactory notions on those dark and doubtful problems.

Some men think they have raised a great argument against the use of spectres and magic in heroic poetry, by saying they are unnatural; but whether they or I believe there are such things, is not material; it is enough that, for aught we know, they may be in nature; and whatever is, or may be, is not properly unnatural. Neither am I much concerned at Mr Cowley's verses before "Gondibert," though his authority is almost sacred to me: It is true, he has resembled the old epic poetry to a fantastic fairy-land; but he has contradicted himself by his own example: For he has himself made use of angels and visions in his "Davideis," as well as Tasso in his "Godfrey."

What I have written on this subject will not be thought a digression by the reader, if he please to remember what I said in the beginning of this essay, that I have modelled my heroic plays by the rules of an heroic poem. And if that be the most noble, the most pleasant, and the most instructive way of writing in verse, and withal the highest pattern of human life, as all poets have agreed, I shall need no other argument to justify my choice in this imitation. One advantage the drama has above the other, namely, that it represents to view what the poem only does relate; and, *Segnius irritant animum demissa per aures, quam quæ sunt oculis subjecta fidelibus*, as Horace tells us.

To those who object my frequent use of drums and trumpets, and my representations of battles, I answer, I introduced them not on the English stage: Shakespeare used them frequently; and though Jonson shews no battle in his "Catiline," yet you hear

from behind the scenes the sounding of trumpets, and the shouts of fighting armies. But, I add farther, that these warlike instruments, and even their presentations of fighting on the stage, are no more than necessary to produce the effects of an heroic play; that is, to raise the imagination of the audience, and to persuade them, for the time, that what they behold on the theatre is really performed. The poet is then to endeavour an absolute dominion over the minds of the spectators; for, though our fancy will contribute to its own deceit, yet a writer ought to help its operation: And that the Red Bull has formerly done the same, is no more an argument against our practice, than it would be for a physician to forbear an approved medicine, because a mountebank has used it with success.

Thus I have given a short account of heroic plays. I might now, with the usual eagerness of an author, make a particular defence of this. But the common opinion (how unjust soever) has been so much to my advantage, that I have reason to be satisfied, and to suffer with patience all that can be urged against it.

For, otherwise, what can be more easy for me, than to defend the character of Almanzor, which is one great exception that is made against the play? 'Tis said, that Almanzor is no perfect pattern of heroic virtue, that he is a contemner of kings, and that he is made to perform impossibilities.

I must therefore avow, in the first place, from whence I took the character. The first image I had of him, was from the Achilles of Homer; the next from Tasso's Rinaldo, (who was a copy of the former) and the third from the Artaban of Monsieur Calpranede, who has imitated both. The original of these, Achilles, is taken by Homer for his hero; and is described by him as one, who in strength

and courage surpassed the rest of the Grecian army ; but, withal, of so fiery a temper, so impatient of an injury, even from his king and general, that when his mistress was to be forced from him by the command of Agamemnon, he not only disobeyed it, but returned him an answer full of contumely, and in the most opprobrious terms he could imagine ; they are Homer's words which follow, and I have cited but some few amongst a multitude.

Οἰνοβαρῆς, κυνὸς ἄμματ' ἔχων, κραδίην δ' ἰλάφοιο.—Il. α. v. 225.
 Δημοβόρος βασιλεύς, &c.—Il. α. v. 231.

Nay, he proceeded so far in his insolence, as to draw out his sword, with intention to kill him ;

Ἐλκετο δ' ἐκ κολεοῦ μέγα ξίφος.—Il. α. v. 194.

and, if Minerva had not appeared, and held his hand, he had executed his design ; and it was all she could do to dissuade him from it. The event was, that he left the army, and would fight no more. Agamemnon gives his character thus to Nestor ;

Ἄλλ' ὄδ' ἀνὴρ ἐθέλει περὶ πάντων ἔμμεναι ἄλλων,
 Πάντων μὲν κρατέειν ἐθέλει, πάντισσι δ' ἀνάσσειν.
 Il. α. v. 287, 288.

and Horace gives the same description of him in his Art of Poetry.

———*Honoratum si fortè reponis Achillem,
 Impiger, iracundus, inexorabilis, acer,
 Jura neget sibi nata, nihil non arroget armis.*

Tasso's chief character, Rinaldo, was a man of the same temper ; for, when he had slain Gernando in his heat of passion, he not only refused to be judged by Godfrey, his general, but threatened that if he came to seize him, he would right himself by arms upon him ; witness these following lines of Tasso :

*Venga egli, o mandi, io terrò fermo il piede :
Giudici fian tra noi la sorte, e l'arme ;
Fera tragedia vuol che s'appresenti,
Per lor diporto, alle nemiche genti.*

You see how little these great authors did esteem the point of honour, so much magnified by the French, and so ridiculously aped by us. They made their heroes men of honour; but so, as not to divest them quite of human passions and frailties: they content themselves to shew you, what men of great spirits would certainly do when they were provoked, not what they were obliged to do by the strict rules of moral virtue. For my own part, I declare myself for Homer and Tasso, and am more in love with Achilles and Rinaldo, than with Cyrus and Oroondates. I shall never subject my characters to the French standard, where love and honour are to be weighed by drams and scruples: Yet, where I have designed the patterns of exact virtues, such as in this play are the parts of Almahide, of Ozmyn, and Benzayda, I may safely challenge the best of theirs.

But Almanzor is taxed with changing sides: and what tie has he on him to the contrary? He is not born their subject whom he serves, and he is injured by them to a very high degree. He threatens them, and speaks insolently of sovereign power; but so do Achilles and Rinaldo, who were subjects and soldiers to Agamemnon and Godfrey of Bulloigne. He talks extravagantly in his passion; but, if I would take the pains to quote an hundred passages of Ben Jonson's Cethegus, I could easily shew you, that the rhodomontades of Almanzor are neither so irrational as his, nor so impossible to be put in execution; for Cethegus threatens to destroy nature, and to raise a new one out of it; to kill all the senate for his part of the action; to look Cato

dead ; and a thousand other things as extravagant he says, but performs not one action in the play.

But none of the former calumnies will stick ; and, therefore, it is at last charged upon me, that Almanzor does all things ; or if you will have an absurd accusation, in their nonsense who make it, that he performs impossibilities : they say, that being a stranger, he appeases two fighting factions, when the authority of their lawful sovereign could not. This is indeed the most improbable of all his actions, but it is far from being impossible. Their king had made himself contemptible to his people, as the history of Granada tells us ; and Almanzor, though a stranger, yet was already known to them by his gallantry in the Juego de torros, his engagement on the weaker side, and more especially by the character of his person and brave actions, given by Abdalla just before ; and, after all, the greatness of the enterprise consisted only in the daring, for he had the king's guards to second him : But we have read both of Cæsar, and many other generals, who have not only calmed a mutiny with a word, but have presented themselves single before an army of their enemies ; which upon sight of them has revolted from their own leaders, and come over to their trenches. In the rest of Almanzor's actions you see him for the most part victorious ; but the same fortune has constantly attended many heroes, who were not imaginary. Yet, you see it no inheritance to him ; for, in the first place, he is made a prisoner ; and, in the last, defeated, and not able to preserve the city from being taken. If the history of the late Duke of Guise be true, he hazarded more, and performed not less in Naples, than Almanzor is feigned to have done in Granada.

I have been too tedious in this apology ; but to make some satisfaction, I will leave the rest of my play exposed to the criticks, without defence.

The concernment of it is wholly passed from me, and ought to be in them who have been favourable to it, and are somewhat obliged to defend their opinions. That there are errors in it, I deny not;

Ast opere in tanto fas est obrepere somnum.

But I have already swept the stakes: and, with the common good fortune of prosperous gamesters, can be content to sit quietly; to hear my fortune cursed by some, and my faults arraigned by others; and to suffer both without reply.