Lives of the English Poets: Prior, Congreve, Blackmore, Pope

By

Samuel Johnson

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Introduction

When, at the age of sixty-eight, Johnson was writing these "Lives of the English Poets," he had caused omissions to be made from the poems of Rochester, and was asked whether he would allow the printers to give all the verse of Prior. Boswell quoted a censure by Lord Hailes of "those impure tales which will be the eternal opprobrium of their ingenious author." Johnson replied, "Sir, Lord Hailes has forgot. There is nothing in Prior that will excite to lewdness;" and when Boswell further urged, he put his questionings aside, and added, "No, sir, Prior is a lady's book. No lady is ashamed to have it standing in her library." Johnson distinguished strongly, as every wise man does, between offence against convention, and offence against morality.

In Congreve's plays he recognised the wit but condemned the morals, and in the case of Blackmore the regard for the religious purpose of Blackmore's poem on "The Creation" gave to Johnson, as to Addison, an undue sense of its literary value.

With his "Life of Pope," which occupies more than two-thirds of this volume, Johnson took especial pains. "He wrote it," says Boswell, "'con amore,' both from the early possession which that writer had taken of his mind, and from the pleasure which he must have felt in for ever silencing all attempts to lessen his poetical fame. . . . I remember once to have heard Johnson say, 'Sir, a thousand years may elapse before there shall appear another man with a power of versification equal to that of Pope.'"

Pope's laurel, since Johnson's days, has flourished, without showing a dead bough, for all the frosts of hostile criticism.

H. M.

Prior

Matthew Prior is one of those that have burst out from an obscure original to great eminence. He was born July 21, 1664, according to some, at Wimborne, in Dorsetshire, of I know not what parents; others say that he was the son of a joiner of London: he was perhaps willing enough to leave his birth unsettled, in hope, like Don Quixote, that the historian of his actions might find him some illustrious alliance. He is supposed to have fallen, by his father's death, into the hands of his uncle, a vintner near Charing Cross, who sent him for some time to Dr. Busby, at Westminster; but, not intending to give him any education beyond that of the school, took him, when he was well advanced in literature, to his own house, where the Earl of Dorset, celebrated for patronage of genius, found him by chance, as Burnet relates, reading Horace, and was so well pleased with his proficiency, that he undertook the care and cost of his academical education. He entered his name in St. John's College, at Cambridge, in 1682, in his eighteenth year; and it may be reasonably supposed that he was distinguished among his contemporaries. He became a Bachelor, as is usual, in four years, and two years afterwards wrote the poem on the Deity, which stands first in his volume.

It is the established practice of that College to send every year to the Earl of Exeter some poems upon sacred subjects, in acknowledgment of a benefaction enjoyed by them from the bounty of his ancestor. On this occasion were those verses written, which, though nothing is said of their success, seem to have recommended him to some notice; for his praise of the countess's music, and his lines on the famous picture of Seneca, afford reason for imagining that he was more or less conversant with that family.

The same year he published "The City Mouse and Country Mouse," to ridicule Dryden's "Hind and Panther," in conjunction with Mr. Montague. There is a story of great pain suffered, and of tears shed, on this occasion by Dryden, who thought it hard that "an old man should be so treated by those to whom he had always been civil." By tales like these is the envy raised by superior abilities every day gratified. When they are attacked every one hopes to see them humbled; what is hoped is readily believed, and what is believed is confidently told. Dryden had been more accustomed to hostilities than that such enemies should break his quiet; and, if we can suppose him vexed, it would be hard to deny him sense enough to conceal his uneasiness.

"The City Mouse and Country Mouse" procured its authors more solid advantages than the pleasure of fretting Dryden, for they were both speedily preferred. Montague, indeed, obtained the first notice with some degree of discontent, as it seems, in Prior, who probably knew that his own part of the performance was the best. He had not, however, much reason to complain, for he came to London and obtained such notice that (in 1691) he was sent to the Congress at the Hague as secretary to the embassy. In this assembly of princes and nobles, to which Europe has perhaps scarcely seen anything equal, was formed the grand alliance against Louis, which at last did not produce effects proportionate so the magnificence of the transaction.

The conduct of Prior, in this splendid initiation into public business, was so pleasing to King William, that he made him one of the gentlemen of his bedchamber; and he is supposed to have passed some of the next years in the quiet cultivation of literature and poetry.

The death of Queen Mary (in 1695) produced a subject for all the writers--perhaps no funeral was ever so poetically attended. Dryden, indeed, as a man discountenanced and deprived, was silent; but scarcely any other maker of verses omitted to bring his tribute of tuneful sorrow. An emulation of elegy was universal. Mary's praise was not confined to the English language, but fills a great part of the Musae Anglicanae.

Prior, who was both a poet and a courtier, was too diligent to miss this opportunity of respect. He wrote a long ode, which was presented to the king, by whom it was not likely to be ever read. In two years he was secretary to another embassy at the Treaty of Ryswick (in 1697), and next year had the same office at the court of France, where he is said to have been considered with great distinction. As he was one day surveying the apartments at Versailles, being shown the "Victories of Louis," painted by Le Brun, and asked whether the King of England's palace had any such decorations: "The monuments of my master's actions," said he, "are to be seen everywhere but in his own house."

The pictures of Le Brun are not only in themselves sufficiently ostentatious, but were explained by inscriptions so arrogant, that Boileau and Racine thought it necessary to make them more simple. He was in the following year at Leo with the king, from whom, after a long audience, he carried orders to England, and upon his arrival became Under Secretary of State in the Earl of Jersey's office, a post which he did not retain long, because Jersey was removed, but he was soon made Commissioner of Trade.

This year (1700) produced one of his longest and most splendid compositions, the "Carmen Seculare," in which he exhausts all his powers of celebration. I mean not to accuse him of flattery; he probably thought all that he writ, and retained as much veracity as can be properly exacted from a poet professedly encomiastic. King William supplied copious materials for either verse or prose. His whole life had been action, and none ever denied him the resplendent qualities of steady resolution and personal courage. He was really in Prior's mind what he represents him in his verses; he considered him as a hero, and was accustomed to say that he praised others in compliance with the fashion, but that in celebrating King William he followed his inclination. To Prior, gratitude would dictate praise, which reason would not refuse.

Among the advantages to arise from the future years of William's reign, he mentions a Society for Useful Arts, and among them:-

"Some that with care true eloquence shall teach,
And to just idioms fix our doubtful speech;
That from our writers distant realms may know
  The thanks we to our monarchs owe,

And schools profess our tongue through every land
That has invoked his aid, or blessed his hand."

Tickell, in his "Prospect of Peace," has the same hope of a new academy:-

"In happy chains our daring language bound,
Shall sport no more in arbitrary sound."

Whether the similitude of those passages, which exhibit the same thought on the same occasion, proceeded from accident or imitation, is not easy to determine. Tickell might have been impressed with his expectation by Swift's "Proposal for Ascertaining the English Language," then lately published.

In the Parliament that met in 1701 he was chosen representative of East Grinstead. Perhaps it was about this time that he changed his party, for he voted for the impeachment of those lords who had persuaded the king to the Partition Treaty, a treaty in which he himself had been ministerially employed.

A great part of Queen Anne's reign was a time of war, in which there was little employment for negotiators, and Prior had, therefore, leisure to make or to polish verses. When the Battle of Blenheim called forth all the verse-men, Prior, among the rest, took care to show his delight in the increasing honour of his country by an epistle to Boileau. He published, soon afterwards, a volume of poems, with the encomiastic character of his deceased patron, the Earl of Dorset. It began with the College exercise, and ended with the "Nutbrown Maid."

The Battle of Ramillies soon afterwards (in 1706) excited him to another effort of poetry. On this occasion he had fewer or less formidable rivals, and it would be not easy to name any other composition produced by that event which is now remembered.

Everything has its day. Through the reigns of William and Anne no prosperous event passed undignified by poetry. In the last war, when France was disgraced and overpowered in every quarter of the globe, when Spain, coming to her assistance, only shared her calamities, and the name of an Englishman was reverenced through Europe, no poet was heard amidst the general acclamation; the fame of our counsellors and heroes was entrusted to the Gazetteer. The nation in time grew weary of the war, and the queen grew weary of her ministers. The war was burdensome, and the ministers were insolent. Harley and his friends began to hope that they might, by driving the Whigs from court and from power, gratify at once the queen and the people. There was now a call for writers, who might convey intelligence of past abuses, and show the waste of public money, the unreasonable conduct of the allies, the avarice of generals, the tyranny of minions, and the general danger of approaching ruin. For this purpose a paper called the Examiner was periodically published, written, as it happened, by any wit of the party, and sometimes, as is said, by Mrs. Manley. Some are owned by Swift; and one, in ridicule of Garth's verses to Godolphin upon the loss of his place, was written by Prior, and

answered by Addison, who appears to have known the author either by conjecture or intelligence.

The Tories, who were now in power, were in haste to end the war, and Prior, being recalled (1710) to his former employment of making treaties, was sent (July, 1711) privately to Paris with propositions of peace. He was remembered at the French court; and, returning in about a month, brought with him the Abbe Gaultier and M. Mesnager, a minister from France, invested with full powers. This transaction not being avowed, Mackay, the master of the Dover packet-boat, either zealously or officiously, seized Prior and his associates at Canterbury. It is easily supposed they were soon released.

The negotiation was begun at Prior's house, where the queen's ministers met Mesnager (September 20, 1711), and entered privately upon the great business. The importance of Prior appears from the mention made of him by St. John in his letter to the queen:-

"My Lord Treasurer moved, and all my Lords were of the same opinion, that Mr. Prior should be added to those who are empowered to sign; the reason for which is because he, having personally treated with Monsieur de Torcy, is the best witness we can produce of the sense in which the general preliminary engagements are entered into; besides which, as he is the best versed in matters of trade of all your Majesty's servants who have been trusted in this secret, if you shall think fit to employ him in the future treaty of commerce, it will be of consequence that he has been a party concerned in concluding that convention, which must be the rule of this treaty."

The assembly of this important night was in some degree clandestine, the design of treaty not being yet openly declared and when the Whigs returned to power was aggravated to a charge of high treason; though, as Prior remarks in his imperfect answer to the Report of the Committee of Secrecy, no treaty ever was made without private interviews and preliminary discussions.

My business is not the history of the peace, but the life of Prior. The conferences began at Utrecht on the 1st of January (1711-12), and the English plenipotentiaries arrived on the 15th. The ministers of the different potentates conferred and conferred; but the peace advanced so slowly that speedier methods were found necessary, and Bolingbroke was sent to Paris to adjust differences with less formality. Prior either accompanied him or followed him, and after his departure had the appointments and authority of an ambassador, though no public character. By some mistake of the queen's orders the court of France had been disgusted, and Bolingbroke says in his letter, "Dear Mat,--Hide the nakedness of thy country, and give the best turn thy fertile brain will furnish thee with to the blunders of thy countrymen, who are not much better politicians than the French are poets."

Soon after, the Duke of Shrewsbury went on a formal embassy to Paris. It is related by Boyer that the intention was to have joined Prior in the commission, but that Shrewsbury refused to be associated with a man so meanly born. Prior therefore continued to act without a title till the duke returned next year to England, and then he assumed the style

and dignity of ambassador. But while he continued in appearance a private man, he was treated with confidence by Louis, who sent him with a letter to the queen, written in favour of the Elector of Bavaria. "I shall expect," says he, "with impatience, the return of Mr. Prior, whose conduct is very agreeable to me." And while the Duke of Shrewsbury was still at Paris, Bolingbroke wrote to Prior thus:- "Monsieur de Torcy has a confidence in you; make use of it, once for all, upon this occasion, and convince him thoroughly that we must give a different turn to our Parliament and our people according to their resolution at this crisis."

Prior's public dignity and splendour commenced in August, 1713, and continued till the August following; but I am afraid that, according to the usual fate of greatness, it was attended with some perplexities and mortifications. He had not all that is customarily given to ambassadors: he hints to the queen in an imperfect poem that he had no service of plate; and it appeared by the debts which he contracted that his remittances were not punctually made.

On the 1st of August, 1714, ensued the downfall of the Tories and the degradation of Prior. He was recalled, but was not able to return, being detained by the debts which he had found it necessary to contract, and which were not discharged before March, though his old friend Montague was now at the head of the Treasury. He returned, then, as soon as he could, and was welcomed on the 25th of March by a warrant, but was, however, suffered to live in his own house, under the custody of the messenger, till he was examined before a committee of the Privy Council, of which Mr. Walpole was chairman, and Lord Coningsby, Mr. Stanhope, and Mr. Lechmere were the principal interrogators, who, in this examination, of which there is printed an account not unentertaining, behaved with the boisterousness of men elated by recent authority. They are represented as asking questions sometimes vague, sometimes insidious, and writing answers different from those which they received. Prior, however, seems to have been overpowered by their turbulence; for he confesses that he signed what, if he had ever come before a legal judicature, he should have contradicted or explained away. The oath was administered by Boscawen, a Middlesex justice, who at last was going to write his attestation on the wrong side of the paper. They were very industrious to find some charge against Oxford, and asked Prior, with great earnestness, who was present when the preliminary articles were talked of or signed at his house? He told them that either the Earl of Oxford or the Duke of Shrewsbury was absent, but he could not remember which, an answer which perplexed them, because it supplied no accusation against either. "Could anything be more absurd," says he, "or more inhuman, than to propose to me a question, by the answering of which I might, according to them, prove myself a traitor? And notwithstanding their solemn promise that nothing which I should say should hurt myself, I had no reason to trust them, for they violated that promise about five hours after. However, I owned I was there present. Whether this was wisely done or no I leave to my friends to determine." When he had signed the paper, he was told by Walpole that the committee were not satisfied with his behaviour, nor could give such an account of it to the Commons as might merit favour; and that they now thought a stricter confinement necessary than to his own house. "Here," says he, "Boscawen played the moralist, and Coningsby the Christian, but both very awkwardly." The messenger, in whose custody he

was to be placed, was then called, and very indecently asked by Coningsby "if his house was secured by bars and bolts." The messenger answered, "No," with astonishment. At which Coningsby very angrily said, "Sir, you must secure this prisoner; it is for the safety of the nation: if he escape, you shall answer for it."

They had already printed their report; and in this examination were endeavouring to find proofs.

He continued thus confined for some time; and Mr. Walpole (June 10, 1715) moved for an impeachment against him. What made him so acrimonious does not appear; he was by nature no thirster for blood. Prior was a week after committed to close custody, with orders that "no person should be admitted to see him without leave from the Speaker." When, two years after, an Act of Grace was passed, he was excepted, and continued still in custody, which he had made less tedious by writing his "Alma." He was, however, soon after discharged. He had now his liberty, but he had nothing else. Whatever the profit of his employments might have been, he had always spent it; and at the age of fifty-three was, with all his abilities, in danger of penury, having yet no solid revenue but from the fellowship of his college, which, when in his exaltation he was censured for retaining it, he said he could live upon at last. Being, however, generally known and esteemed, he was encouraged to add other poems to those which he had printed, and to publish them by subscription. The expedient succeeded by the industry of many friends, who circulated the proposals, and the care of some who, it is said, withheld the money from him lest he should squander it. The price of the volume was two guineas; the whole collection was four thousand; to which Lord Harley, the son of the Earl of Oxford, to whom he had invariably adhered, added an equal sum for the purchase of Down Hall, which Prior was to enjoy during life, and Harley after his decease. He had now, what wits and philosophers have often wished, the power of passing the day in contemplative tranquillity. But it seems that busy men seldom live long in a state of quiet. It is not unlikely that his health declined, he complains of deafness; "for," says he, "I took little care of my ears while I was not sure if my head was my own."

Of any occurrences of his remaining life I have found no account. In a letter to Swift, "I have," says he, "treated Lady Harriet, at Cambridge (a Fellow of a College treat!) and spoke verses to her in a gown and cap! What, the plenipotentiary, so far concerned in the damned peace at Utrecht; the man that makes up half the volume of terse prose, that makes up the report of the committee, speaking verses! Sic est, homo sum."

He died at Wimpole, a seat of the Earl of Oxford, on the 18th of September, 1721, and was buried in Westminster; where on a monument, for which, as the "last piece of human vanity," he left five hundred pounds, is engraven this epitaph:-

Sui Temporis Historiam meditanti,
Paulatim obrepens Febris
Operi simul et Vitae filum abrupit,
Sept. 18. An. Dom. 1721. AEtat. 57.
H.S.E.

Vir Eximius Serenissimis
Regi GULIELMO Reginaeque MARIAE
In Congressione Foederatorum
Hagae anno 1690 celebrata,
Deinde Magnae Britanniae Legatis
Tum iis,
Qui anno 1697 Pacem RYSWICKI confecerunt,
Tum iis,
Qui apud Gallos annie proximis Legationem obierunt
Eodem etiani anno 1657 in Hibernia
SECRETARIUS;
Necnon in utroque Honorabili consessu
Eorum,
Qui anno 1700 ordinandis Commercii negotiis,
Quique anno 1711 dirigendis Portorii rebus,
Praeidebant,
COMMISSIONARIUS;
Postremo ab ANNA,
Felicissimae memoriae Regina,
Ad LUDOVICUM XIV. Galliae Regem
Missus anno 1711
De Pace stabilienda
(Pace etiam num durante
Diuque ut boni jam omnes sperant duratura),
Cum sunma potestate Legatus;
MATTHAES PRIOR Armiger
Qui
Hos omnes, quibus cumulates est, Titulos
Humanitatis, Ingenii, Ereditionis laude
Superavit;
Cui enim nascenti faciles arriserant Mesae.
Hunc Puerum Schola hic Regia perpolivit;
Jevenem in Collegio S'ti Johannis
Cantabrigia optimis Scientiis instruxit;
Virum denique auxit, et perfecit,
Multa cum viris Principibus censuetudo;
Ita natus, ita institutus,
A Vatam Choro avelli numquam potuit,
Sed solebat saepe rerum civilium gravitatem
Amoeniorum Literarum Studiis condire:
Et cum omne adeo Poetices genus
Haud infeliciter tentaret,
Tum in Fabellis concinne lepideque texendis
Mirus Artifex
Neminem habuit parem.
Haec liberalis animi oblectamenta: