

But how had “closed couplets” and “complete sentences” become requirements for writing poetry?

In the years after Shakespeare’s death, while some who collaborated in the great poetry and drama of the Elizabethan period were still alive, Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes launched a “new poetic criticism,” which buried that poetry, and substituted the bald and barren rhyming of Enlightenment poets. Bacon was the Chancellor and controller of James I’s court. Hobbes began as Bacon’s secretary, and was trained as an agent of Venice’s growing cultural control of England; he dominated British political-economic doctrine with works like *The Leviathan*—claiming that all knowledge is derived of the senses, and all human morality is nothing but the

pursuit of pleasure and fear of punishment.³

Hobbes, and his literary epigones, also dominated British Enlightenment literary criticism. His dogma was, that the effect of poetry upon the mind was *not* based upon the interplay of thoughts and new ideas whose discovery it evokes; not upon universal ideas of Beauty and the Good; but upon the *sense images*, and their evocation of “the passions.”

Hobbes’ ideas and Boileau’s “rules” dominated English poetry for two hundred years: the so-called “Augustan Age.” With tragic suddenness, the great poetic beauty and laughter of the era from Chaucer to Marlowe and Shakespeare, gave way to the sterile rhyming of, by, and for aristocrats around the Stuart, Orange, and

Hobbes vs. Shakespeare, on Love

Thomas Hobbes’ first poetic sycophant was Sir William Davenant, whose long-forgotten, 6,800-line unfinished epic *Gondibert*, was praised by Hobbes as *at least* the equal of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. According to Hobbes, Sir William’s ability to portray human love was such, that “there has nothing been said of that subject, neither by the ancient or modern poets, comparable to it.”

Let us put Hobbes’ judgment to the test, and compare a mere six-line song of William Shakespeare, with a song of Davenant, both being on the theme of the sorrow of betrayed love. Keep in mind that Davenant was born while Shakespeare still lived; witness what a falling off took place, in merely one generation, with the help of old Hobbes.

Shakespeare’s song is sung by a forlorn character in the play *Measure for Measure*. Although short, it joins in metaphor the distinct and bitter sadness of a lover’s betrayal, with the clear and true praise of the remembered beauty of the unfaithful one; hence, past and present are joined into a single idea.

Take, O take those lips away,
That so sweetly were forsworn;
And those eyes, the break of day,
Lights that do mislead the morn:
But my kisses, bring again, bring again;
Seals of love, but seal’d in vain, seal’d in vain.

The power of Metaphor is concentrated in the second couplet, wherein the painful beauty of this little song, the pain of constant remembrance of beauty which passes, is generated. This poem is definitely guilty of violating the Hobbesian standard, by

“expressing more than is perfectly conceived.”

Davenant’s song, which conforms perfectly to Hobbes’ rules against the use of Metaphor—a standard which continues to dominate poetry to this day—does, indeed, convey one and only one emotional image, one single, “true inner feeling.” It is the true feeling of maudlin self-pity:

Roses and pinks will be strewn where you go;
Whilst I walk in shades of willow, willow.
When I am dead let him that did slay me
Be but so good as kindly to lay me
There were neglected lovers mourn,
Where lamps and hallow’d tapers burn,
Where clerks in choirs sad dirges sing,
Where sweetly bells at burials ring.

My rose of youth is gone,
Withered as soon as blown.
Lovers, go ring my knell.
Beauty and love, farewell.
And lest virgins forsaken
Should perhaps be mistaken
In seeking my grave, alas! Let them know
I lie near a shade of willow, willow.

Put away your hankies, readers. The beginning “closed couplet,” shows that Sir William thought himself a poet worthy of Hobbes’ praise. The song as a whole, is the kind of “true passion” which the great Renaissance author Miguel Cervantes put into the mouth of his poor Don Quixote, in order to demonstrate, with great humor and compassion, that the poor Don had utterly lost his mind!

—PBG