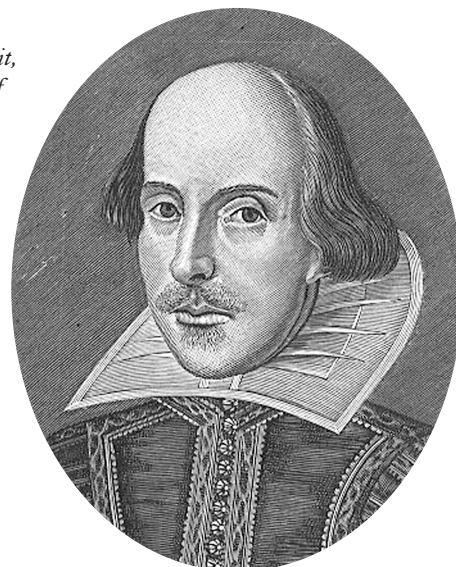


Right: William Shakespeare, from the title page portrait, *First Folio*, 1623. Below: John Dryden, *Poet Laureate of Great Britain*, 1663-1692.



# John Dryden's Attack On Shakespeare:

## The Origin of 'Sing-Song' Recitation in English Poetry

by Paul Gallagher



The Granger Collection, New York

Percy Bysshe Shelley, writing his great *Defence of Poetry* in 1821, expressed the idea of poetry shared by the greatest poets since at least the Classical Greece of Homer and Aeschylus. The poet, wrote Shelley,

not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things *ought* to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. . . . A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one . . . . Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar . . . .

Obviously *opposed* to this, was the dictum of the famous English writer of stage plays and poems, John Dryden (1630-1704):

The imitation of nature is therefore the general, and indeed the only, rule of pleasing, both in Poetry and Painting. . . . Imaging is, in itself, the very height and life of Poetry.<sup>1</sup>

Dryden's rule of poetry was derived from his contemporary, and fellow British Royal Society member, Thomas Hobbes' dogma that sense impressions rule over all knowledge. As Hobbes applied it to poetry: "Beyond the actual works of nature a poet may now go; but beyond the conceived probability of nature, never."<sup>2</sup>

John Dryden was the Poet Laureate of Great Britain throughout the Stuart Restoration and beyond (1663-1692), its most celebrated dramatist; he and Hobbes were founding members of the British Royal Society; Dryden's student Alexander Pope was the even more-celebrated, dominant poet of all Europe for the entire Eighteenth century. As for Shelley, he received no such honors, neither during his life nor for years afterward, for seeking through poetry, something higher than nature's sense images and "probabilities"; indeed, for seeking the Highest, which he called "Intellectual Beauty."

These two opposed ideas of what poetry seeks to express, are bound up with the way in which poetry is recited.

We want poetry to lift our minds above the false "reality" of sense images and sensual desires, to help us to participate in that higher emotion which is named, in the New Testament, *agapē*: Love of the Eternal, of humanity and its better future, of the beauty of wisdom. We want poetry to help us gain a share in the creative potential of the mind, and at least the moments of joy which creativity brings.

But most English speakers today, when they read aloud or recite poetry—trying to express the beauty and the truth which may have struck their minds when they read it to themselves—find, instead, that their voices have fallen into a strange, unnatural rhythm and intonation. They expect that a dramatic life and tension should inspire their speech when expressing "intense and impassioned conceptions respecting Man and Nature," as Shelley put it. But, instead, there is heard in their reciting voice, a kind of sluggish bobbing up and down, as of a dead leaf rising and falling on the ripples of a pool. It is as if, entering into a poem, the normally expressive voice is seized, a prisoner to what is called "sing-song." The listeners, rather than hearing the play of ideas of the poet, hear that sleepy, bobbing rhythm. It lulls the poet's thought, in their own minds, to some such sympathetic sentiment as, "How nice; how pretty."

## It's Not Poetry

It should be a relief, to discover that this "sing-song" incubus does not live in the metrical lines of verse themselves; does not, in fact, have anything to do with the expression of poetry's truth and beauty. Neither is it any disease of *English*-speaking poetry, in particular.

But paradoxically, English poetry of the past three-hundred-fifty years is so widely afflicted with "sing-song," that it has defeated the beauties of poetic recitation.

So that English poetry may "strengthen that faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner that exercise strengthens a limb,"<sup>3</sup> the defects imposed upon it by poor recitation should be traced to their source.

The chanting of "sing-song" first erupted into English poetry on the stage, and precisely with the famous Seventeenth-century reign of John Dryden. At first a "new poetic style"—promoted by the Stuart court, by Hobbes, and by the Royal Society *against the style of expression of Shakespeare*—the "sing-song" which Dryden and his imitators produced, then grew to envelop virtually all popular forms of English-language poetry.

John Dryden, his imitators, and his immediate competitors for the favor of "merry monarch" King Charles II and his court, set and prided themselves on a new rule for judging the composition of poetry. This was the "smoothness of its numbers" (i.e., the even rhythm of its verses), along with the "natural simplicity of its expression."

We shall see that this "smoothness of numbers" of Dryden and his caricature, Alexander Pope, was nothing but the endless repetition of "sing-song" rhythms; and that it was indeed simple, but not at all natural. That it was inspired also by the attack on Metaphor in poetry, then being conducted by Hobbes and the Royal Society, is clear from this literary pronouncement of the Society itself in 1667:

We glory in the plain Style, not in all these seeming Mysteries, upon which writers look so big . . . this vicious abundance of phrase, this trick of Metaphors, which makes so great a noise in the World. We would have Reason set out in plain undeceiving expressions.

At the beginning of the Nineteenth century, the very influential apostle of "chivalry," Sir Walter Scott, helped to perpetuate Dryden's and Pope's rule over poetry, by bringing out a complete works, plus full biography and "appreciation," of Dryden. (Scott was, at the very same time, coordinating influential critical attacks upon the poetry being written by Shelley and John Keats, for violating the Dryden-Pope style.) Scott declared Dryden "the father of English poetic harmony," who "restored the suavity of numbers to English poetry." Scott declared "completely vindicated," these lines of a contemporary Churchill, one of the Lords Marlborough, which might be called "a perfect sing-song to the triumph of Drydens' sing-song":

Here let me bend, great Dryden, at thy shrine,  
Thou dearest name to all the tuneful Nine!  
What if some dull lines in cold order creep,  
And with his theme the poet seems to sleep?  
Still, when his subject rises proud to view,  
With equal strength the poet rises too:  
With strong invention, noblest vigor fraught,  
Thought still springs up, and rises out of thought;  
Numbers ennobling numbers in the course,  
In steady sweetness flow, in steady force;  
The powers of genius and of judgement join,  
And the whole art of poetry is thine.

And Scott added:

With this power Dryden's poetry was gifted, in a degree surpassing in modulated harmony that of all who preceded him, and inferior to none that has since written English verse. He first showed that the English language was capable of uniting smoothness and strength. The hobbling verses of his predecessors were abandoned . . . and by the force of his example, the meanest lampooners of the year 1700 wrote smoother lines than [John] Donne.

Recall to mind, that Dryden became the dominant English poet and playwright, within fifty years of the deaths of Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spenser, and Ben Jonson; and, while John Milton and John Donne were still in their old age. These were the predecessors whose "hobbling verses were abandoned" under the star of Dryden, according to Sir Walter Scott!

Dryden himself, in the Prologue to his play *The Rival Ladies*, of 1667, wrote

That which the World called Wit in Shakespeare's age,  
Is laught at as improper for our stage.

These two lines are very "smooth in their numbers"; each with five poetic "feet" of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. The "sound" of such lines of verse, particularly in a "rhyming couplet" such as this, has become, over centuries, linked and bound in our minds with the notion of expressing logical constructs, pretty images, or pious sentiments in poetic form. But when Dryden wrote these lines, their style was "new," "modernist," and was praised and self-praised for its very newness and modernity, as Sir Walter Scott makes clear. Dryden, and his host of imitators, were quite conscious that Shakespeare and the great Elizabethan dramatic poets had not written in such "smooth num-

bers"; nor had the English balladeers of the Fifteenth century; nor had the Fourteenth-century creator of the poetic English language itself, Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1342-1400).

## Remade All in Their Image

Thus, with the height of arrogance, Dryden rewrote Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (giving it a new title, "The Fables"); John Milton's *Paradise Lost* ("The State of Innocence, or The Fall of Man"); and various of Shakespeare's plays; all in the perfectly rhythmical little rhyming couplets which put Lord Marlborough into such a pleasant (and doubtless, well-earned) sleep. Here is a sample of Dryden's deadening of Chaucer, his rendering of the opening lines of Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale (of the Cock and the Hen, Chanticleer and Pertelote)" (renamed "The Cock and the Fox")\*:

There lived, as authors tell, in days of yore,  
A widow somewhat old, and very poor:  
Deep in a dell her cottage lonely  
stood,  
Well thatched, and under  
covert of a wood.

\* Chaucer's passage from "The Nun's Priest's Tale," in its original Middle English, reads as follows. Readers unfamiliar with the Middle English of Chaucer's age, are encouraged to sound the lines out aloud. The relationship to modern English should become clear.

*Here bigynneth the Nonnes Preestes Tale of  
the Cok and Hen, Chauntecleer and Pertelote*

A povre wydwe, somdeel stape in age  
Was whilom dwellyng in a narwe cotage,  
Biside a grove, stondyng in a dale.  
This wydwe, of which I telle yow my tale,  
Syn thilke day that she was last a wyf,  
In pacience ladde a ful symple lyf,  
For litel was hir catel and hir rente.  
By housbondrie of swich as God hire sente  
She foond hirself and eek hir doghtren two. . . .

*Two of Chaucer's  
Canterbury pilgrims  
recount their Tales:  
The Prioress, and the  
Wife of Bath.*



Corbis-Bettmann

This dowager, on whom my tale I found,  
 Since last she laid her husband in the ground,  
 A simple sober life in patience led,  
 And had but just enough to buy her bread:  
 But huswifing the little Heav'n had lent,  
 She duly paid a groat for quarter rent;  
 And pinched her belly, with her daughters two,  
 To bring the year about with much ado.  
 &c.

(So Dryden found his tale upon a dowager, but showed no embarrassment!)

More important than the ear, the mind of the listener was also being rocked to sleep by this “new style”: whatever little thought is being expressed by each line, comes to an end with the line, with the rhyme acting as a reminder to “stop, and start over,” as in counting sheep. The little thought never disturbs Lord Marlborough’s dozing, by ending in mid-line, nor continuing past a line-ending; after a while, the listener is thinking in ten-syllable, rhyming sound-bites. In every rhyming couplet, the image of the first line, plus that of the second, equals that of the couplet. Here not poetic, but logical thinking, combined with a certain sonorous drowsiness, is supposed to “express and excite all the passions,” as Hobbes and his followers insisted of poetry. They could only be the various kinds of erotic passions; never the “intense and impassioned conceptions respecting Man and Nature,” which arouse the emotion of *agapē*. And all of this doctrine relating logic, sensual images, and “passions,” was laid out at length by Hobbes, Dryden, and their followers, in their various “Essays” on poetry.

In 1660, to put down the great power and beauty of Shakespeare’s dramatic poetry, was both the purpose and the requirement of the “new style” for which Dryden was the standard-bearer. During the ascendancy of Puritanism and Cromwell, all plays had been banned in England. When the Stuart Restoration (1660) began the “Enlightenment” in Great Britain, the theaters reopened with Shakespeare’s plays virtually absent, except in the many “rewrites” by Dryden and such as Sir William Davenant, Thomas Shadwell, and Nahum Tate. The situation brings to mind today’s modernist productions of Shakespeare, in which time, scene, and characterization are changed according to the passing whims and fads of chic directors; only, Dryden’s friends went much further, completely rewriting the poetry of the plays. As one scholar writes of Dryden’s theater, with brutal frankness:

Restoration drama lacked, above all, any higher moral quality. It presented either abstract and heroic chivalry, or lewd comedy. From both points of view, Shakespeare’s dramas were unacceptable to people of this time, who felt, as well, that he could not write decent English.<sup>4</sup>

## ‘Rhyming Plays’

John Dryden’s and Thomas Hobbes’ essays on dramatic and heroic poetry were crucial in defining, for the English public, the “new style” of English which Shakespeare “could not write.” Dryden’s *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* was very famous for its attack upon the blank verse—that is, metrical, but unrhymed verse—in which all of Shakespeare’s plays are written. We shall see shortly, how crucial that was to the creation of “sing-song” in English poetry.

Dryden established the dominance of what he called “the Rhyming Play,” written entirely in closed, rhyming couplets; Sir Walter Scott called it “a metrical romance of chivalry in the form of a drama.” Dryden wrote:

Tragedy, we know, is wont to image to us the minds and fortunes of noble persons, and to portray these exactly; heroic *rhyme* is nearest nature, as being the noblest kind of modern verse. . . . Blank verse is acknowledged to be too low for a poem, nay more, for a paper of verses; how much more so for tragedy.

Dryden claimed that Shakespeare had been the first to write tragedy in blank verse; an assertion which was untrue, but showed Dryden’s eagerness to attack Shakespeare on this question.

In his Epilogue to *The Conquest of Grenada* (1669), he bragged, in closed couplets, that the critics of his day would have destroyed Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Ben Jonson; meanwhile flattering the worst side of the “gentle” Restoration spectators:

But were they now to write, when critics weigh,  
 And count each word and line throughout a play,  
 None of ’em, no, not Jonson in his height,  
 Could pass, without allowing grains for weight.  
 Think it not envy, that these truths are told;  
 Our poet’s not malicious, tho’ he’s bold. . . .  
 If love and honor now are higher raised,  
 ’Tis not the poet, but the age is praised.  
 Wit’s now arrived to a more high degree;  
 Our native language more refined and free.  
 Our ladies and our men now speak more wit,  
 Than all the former age of poets writ.

Dryden, Davenant, Shadwell, *et al.* hammered away at this theme in the Prologues and Prefaces to their plays, conspiring thus with arrogant “modernist” critics sitting out front, and progressively brainwashing their culturally reduced audiences into contempt for the “coarse and rustic” Shakespeare. In his essay, “The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy,” of 1678, Dryden targetted Shakespeare directly and personally:

I will not say of so great a poet, that he distinguished not the blown, puffy style, from true sublimity; but I may venture to maintain, that the fury of his fancy often transported him beyond the bounds of judgment, either in coining new words or phrases, or racking words which were in use to the violence of a catachresis [a pun–PG]. I would not explode the use of metaphors from passion, but to use them at every word, to say nothing without a metaphor . . . is, I doubt, to smell a little too strongly of the buskin.

Dryden rewrote *Troilus and Cressida*, complete with a Prologue spoken by a “ghost of Shakespeare,” whom he made to damn himself with faint praise:

Untaught, unpractised, in a barbarous age,  
I found not, but created first the stage.  
And if I drained no Greek or Latin store,  
'Twas, that my own abundance gave me more.

And in the above cited essay, Dryden wrote:

For the lively imitation of Nature being in the definition of a play, those which best fulfill that law ought to be superior to the others. . . . But the chronicles of Shakespeare look upon Nature through the wrong end of a perspective, and thus do not delight.

Shakespeare’s interweaving of comic and tragic elements in his plays was also denounced, Dryden claiming that they would “cancel and destroy each other.” But Dryden does allow one way in which the dramatic poet may—indeed, must—“heighten the imitation of Nature.” And that is—Rhyme! Thus Dryden’s formula: Images of Nature + Rhyme = Tragedy.

The hand of Hobbes and the Royal Society behind these attacks upon the greatest of English poets, shows clearest in Dryden’s attack upon Metaphor (under its old name, “Trope”):

I have never heard of any other foundation of Dramatic Poesy than the imitation of Nature; neither was there ever pretended any other by the Ancients or Moderns, or me. . . . The words describing Nature must not admit too curious an election, too many tropes, or anything in the writing which carries the public away from the object, to the poet’s own mind.

## Agapē vs. Eros, Poetry vs. Sing-Song

Let us now illustrate that true dramatic speaking of classical poetry, is generated by *agapē*; and “sing-song” in poetry, by sensually-bound *eros*. We will compare a dramatic scene of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, with a scene from *The Indian Emperor*, one of Dryden’s most cel-

ebrated tragedies of chivalric love.

Both scenes portray the secret meeting, and “impassioned speech,” of star-crossed lovers who are under compulsion never again to see each other.

Act III, Scene V of *Romeo and Juliet* seems to present the young lovers’ last meeting. As of the dawn which they await, Romeo is banished from Verona to Mantua, on pain of death, for killing Juliet’s arrogant cousin Tybalt, in a street swordfight started by that aristocratic-erotic fool, Mercutio. The hopes of Romeo and Juliet, of Friar Lawrence, and of the spectators, that their love might end the deadly civil war between their families, seem blasted. The idea, the “Metaphor of Metaphors” of the tragedy—that the teenaged lovers must be truly willing to die, to win for others the triumph of love—which idea first appeared in the Prologue to Act I, is now dramatically presented on the stage.

Friar Lawrence, the lovers’ protector, is a Franciscan. In that historical Italy where Shakespeare set his play—Italy before the Fifteenth-century Golden Renaissance—it was the Friars Minor, the Franciscan preachers, who alone were able to pacify the brutal feuds of aristocratic families which tore Italian cities apart. *Romeo and Juliet* could be called Shakespeare’s “Franciscan tragedy,” for the famous prayer of St. Francis began, “Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace; Where there is hatred, let me sow love.” And, this higher idea is already suspended above the scene, in the minds of the audience.

In this scene, the whole dialogue is a *single classical poem*, written in Shakespeare’s beautiful unrhymed (blank) verse, within which are five rhymed couplets, very deliberately placed.

### Scene V.—An open Gallery to Juliet’s Chamber, overlooking the Garden.

[Enter Romeo and Juliet]

JULIET. Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day:

It is the nightingale, and not the lark,  
That pierc’d the fearful hollow of thine ear;  
Nightly she sings on yon pomegranate tree:  
Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.

ROMEO. It was the lark, the herald of the morn,  
No nightingale: look, love, what envious streaks  
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east:  
Night’s candles are burnt out, and jocund day  
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.  
I must be gone and live, or stay and die.

JULIET. Yon light is not daylight, I know it, I:  
It is some meteor that the sun exhales,  
To be to thee this night a torch-bearer,  
And light thee on thy way to Mantua:  
Therefore, stay yet; thou need’st not be gone.

ROMEO. Let me be ta’en; let me be put to death;

I am content, so thou wilt have it so.  
 I'll say yon grey is not the morning's eye,  
 'Tis but the pale reflex of Cynthia's brow;  
 Nor that is not the lark whose notes do beat  
 The vaulty heaven so high above our heads:  
 I have more care to stay, than will to go.—  
 Come, death, and welcome! Juliet wills it so.—  
 How is't my soul? let's talk,—it is not day.

JULIET. It is, it is,—hie hence, be gone, away!  
 It is the lark that sings so out of tune,  
 Straining harsh discords and unpleasing sharps.  
 Some say the lark makes sweet division;  
 This doth not so, for she divideth us:  
 Some say the lark and loathed toad change eyes;  
 O, now I would they had chang'd voices too!  
 Since arm from arm, that voice doth us affray,  
 Hunting thee hence, with hunts-up to the day.  
 O, now be gone; more light and light it grows.  
 ROMEO. More light and light,—more dark and dark our  
 woes!

## 'Lark or Nightingale?'

The first line, in Juliet's voice—

Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day:

echoes the final couplet in both voices—

O, now be gone; more light and light it grows.  
 More light and light,—more dark and dark our  
 woes!

which concentrates all the tense, dramatic *change*, which has taken place in this scene-poem of a mere few moments. It is this ending couplet by which the scene remains in the spectators' memory, as the play moves on.

Take the opening line, and then place the rhyming couplets in succession, and you see, condensed and dramatized, the rapid change which takes place in the lovers' commitments and emotions.

JULIET. Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day.  
 ROMEO. I must be gone and live, or stay and die.  
 JULIET. Yon light is not daylight, I know it, I.

ROMEO. I have more care to stay, than will to go.  
 Come, death, and welcome! Juliet wills it so.—  
 How is't, my soul? let's talk,—it is not day.  
 JULIET. It is, it is,—hie hence, be gone, away!

JULIET. O, now be gone; more light and light it grows.  
 ROMEO. More light and light,—more dark and dark our woes!

There are, in Romeo's and Juliet's minds in this poem, two hypotheses—to fly, or to stand and die—linked in

Metaphor to the continuous questioning, "lark or nightingale?" To stand and die for love, is nobler in their minds and in the development of the play as a whole, especially as seen from its conclusion. Thus, there is created an emotional "longing" for the higher, nobler idea, and this longing is *agapē*: love for their families, for peace and for humanity around them, fused with love for each other. But, although they glimpse it, and each of them in turn expresses a deep desire to be careless of their lives for something higher, the scene turns and rushes them away from it *for now*, and thus down to tragic "woe." And this rapid change of ideas and emotions, is what is concentrated in the rhymed couplets, in changing images of "night to morn-



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ing.” To flee to Mantua means, deceptively, “life”—which “lights” him on his way—but it means a retreat from love; it recalls Romeo’s sin in killing Tybalt; it is, they feel deeply, worse than death.

The subject of this dramatic poetry is not sensual attraction or romantic love; and, although it is full of images of nature, it is not evoking the sensuous appreciation of natural beauties, either. There is no erotic painting of images or passions here. All these images, in the expression of Percy B. Shelley, are employed to “draw the operations of the human mind, or those external actions by which they are expressed.”

Those who love Shakespeare, know that he uses rhymed couplets in this way throughout his plays. They have the power to move our mind and memory, because they mark the new or unusual idea, the ambiguity, the turning point of the dramatic action; they are *singularities*. They mark the appearance of a new and different “musical theme” entering within the blank verse. We see that these rhymed couplets, here, mark the turning points of what is, otherwise, beautiful *unrhymed* verse. All of the play of the “lark or nightingale” images, is set forth in this open blank verse, which is itself full of dramatic pauses, brief rests or silences, and other smaller singularities. This is poetry which can be spoken in a fully natural manner of address, between the characters and toward the spectators, and with all of the drama of accompanying gesture, breath, pause, silent rest, action, even confrontation—and still retain its beauty.

## Enter Dryden

What is meant by the “openness” of this blank verse, becomes clear if we let John Dryden attempt to rewrite and “close it,” as was his habit. Dryden arrogantly rewrote six of Shakespeare’s plays, sometimes changing their names, and set on his fellow Enlightenment playwrights to rewrite many more. When he rewrote John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* entirely in rhyming couplets, retitling it “State of Innocence, or, The Fall of Man,” Milton, who was still alive (1674), but a political and literary outcast unable to stop this indignity, wrote that Dryden was “an excel-

lent rhymer, but no poet at all.”

Take these lines of Shakespeare’s blank verse:

ROMEO. It was the lark, the herald of the morn,  
No nightingale: look, love, what envious streaks  
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east:  
Night’s candles are burnt out, and jocund day  
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.  
I must be gone and live, or stay and die.

JULIET. Yon light is not daylight, I know it, I:

By the example of Dryden’s work, as shown below, we can be sure that if Dryden had chosen *Romeo and Juliet* to rewrite, he would have rendered these lines as follows:

ROMEO. No nightingale, it was the lark of morn;  
See, love, the eastern clouds with light are torn:  
Night’s candles are burnt out by coming day,  
Which walks the misty mounts as if in play.  
I must be gone and live, or stay and die.

JULIET. ’Tis no daylight that glints upon my eye.

And the later, most dramatic lines of Romeo, in Dryden’s hands, would have become:

ROMEO. ’Tis not the lark that now with notes so sweet,  
The vaulty heav’n above our heads does beat:  
I have more care to stay than will to go.—  
I welcome death if Juliet wills it so.—  
Let me sound out my soul, for ’tis not day.

JULIET. It is, and so you must be gone away!

This is “excellent rhyming, but no poetry at all,” to paraphrase Milton. These are closed couplets, as John Dryden perfected their manufacture as Great Britain’s Poet Laureate. There are no singularities in these lines; never is their smooth flow of iambic rhythm interrupted, except by the pause that goes with the rhyme at the end of each line; and whatever meaning the line expresses, is supposed to end there, also. Dryden’s pride was his “smooth numbers,” referring to the perfect rhythmical construction of his closed, five-measure couplets.

What do you do with your voice, as you recite such couplets? You walk your voice, rhythmically, to the end of each line, and there you let it stop, and—jingle, with a rhyme. Then, pressing your vocal carriage—return, you repeat this again, and again, and again. If the sentiment you are expressing is thought to be deeply passionate, you can let your voice swagger, or rhumba down that fixed line, or let it die away to a faint, mournful tiptoeing, but you must keep in smooth time. You, or at least your voice, become a cross between a metronome and an automaton, trying to make itself express an erotic emotion—since never could such swishy waltzing express an

*“Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day:  
It is the nightingale and not the lark,  
That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear.”*

idea. And this, you are taught to think of, as “reciting poetry.”

There is no exaggeration in this. Let us examine the actual dramatic poetry of “the great” John Dryden, along with his protégé Alexander Pope, who were the towering fountains of English poetry for two hundred years after they and their Enlightenment backers had driven Shakespeare’s plays from the stage.

First, from Dryden’s rewriting of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, a bit of the debate of the fallen angels, thrust into Hell\*:

MOLOCH: Changed as we are, we’re yet from homage free;  
We have, by hell, at least gained liberty:  
That’s worth our fall; thus low though we are driven,  
Better to rule in hell, than serve in heaven.

LUCIFER: There spoke the better half of Lucifer!  
ASMODAY: ’Tis fit in frequent senate we confer,  
And then determine how to steer our course;  
To wage new war by fraud, or open force.  
The doom’s now past, submission were in vain.

MOLOCH: And were it not, such baseness I disdain;  
I would not stoop, to purchase all above,  
And should contemn a power, whom prayer  
could move,

As one unworthy to have conquered me.

BEELZEBUB: Moloch, in that all are resolved,  
like thee.

The means are unproposed; but ’tis not fit  
Our dark divan in public view should sit;  
Or what we plot against the Thunderer,  
The ignoble crowd of vulgar devils hear.

LUCIFER: A golden palace let be raised on  
high;

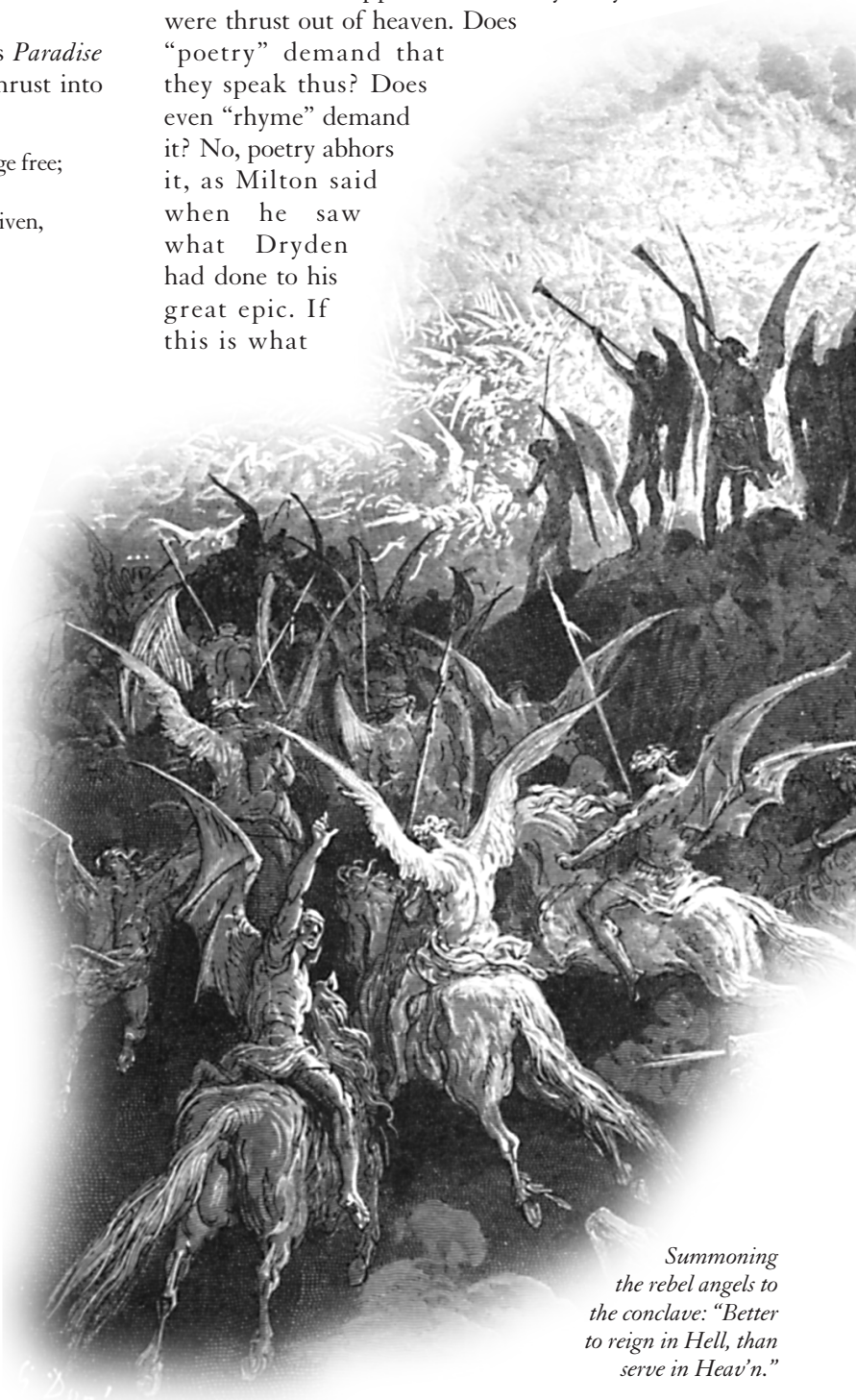
\* A sample of the original passage, from *Paradise Lost*, Book I, in Milton’s original spelling:

The mind is its own place, and in it self  
Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n.  
What matter where, if I be still the same,  
And what I should be, all but less than hee  
Whom Thunder hath made greater? Here at least  
We shall be free; th’ Almighty hath not built  
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:  
Here we may reign secure, and in my choice  
To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:  
Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n.  
But wherefore let we then our faithful friends,  
Th’ associats and copartners of our loss  
Lye thus astonisht on th’ oblivious Pool,  
And call them not to share with us their part  
In this unhappy Mansion; or once more  
With rallied Arms to try what may be yet  
Regained in heav’n, or what more lost in Hell?

So Satan spake, and him *Bēēlzēbub*  
Thus answered, . . .

To imitate? No, to outshine the sky!  
All mines are ours, and gold above the rest,  
Let this be done; and quick as ’twas expressed.

A most prissy set of devils, and they even express their rage and rebellion in precise bits of logic, smoothly spoken in time. It appears clear why they were thrust out of heaven. Does “poetry” demand that they speak thus? Does even “rhyme” demand it? No, poetry abhors it, as Milton said when he saw what Dryden had done to his great epic. If this is what



*Summoning the rebel angels to the conclave: “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n.”*



poetry must sound like, as English-speaking children and adult citizens have been taught for centuries, then Shakespeare's scene above, cannot have been poetry, because it impresses us powerfully as expressing the minds, voices, ideas, and dialogue of real human beings.

## Worse and Worse

In this fragment of Dryden, his pure sing-song was improved somewhat by the fact that he was rewriting a great classical poem. If we look closely at Beelzebub's second and third lines, we even find that that old devil has gotten away with a couplet which is not closed; with an expression which ends in mid-line, and a line which ends without the end of an expression.

In Dryden's many "original" tragedies and comedies, the romantic sing-singing is far worse. Here is the promised scene from *The Indian Emperor*, one of Dryden's most successful and famous plays. In it, the hero Almanzor, having just slain thousands single-handedly in battle, seeks out his lady Almahide in her private walk, for a final attempt at wooing. Since this is a chivalric drama, the lady is, of course, married (or enslaved) to a nobleman, and must rebuke him.

SHE. My light will sure discover those who talk.—

Who dares to interrupt my private walk?

HE. He who dares love, and for that love must die.

And knowing this, yet dares love on, am I.

SHE. That love which you can hope, and I can pay,

May be received and given in open day;

My praise and my esteem you had before;

And you have bound yourself to ask no more.

HE. Yes, I have bound myself; but will you take

The forfeit of that bond, which force did make?

SHE. You know you are from recompense debarred;

But purest love can live without reward.

HE. Pure love had need be to itself a feast;

For like pure elements, twill nourish least.

SHE. It therefore yields the only pure content;

For it, like angels, needs no nourishment.

To eat and drink can no perfection be;

All appetite implies necessity.

HE. 'Twere well, if I could like a spirit live;

But do not angels food to mortals give?

What if some demon should my death forshow,

Or bid me change, and to the Christians go;

Will you not think I merit some reward,

When I my love above my life regard?

SHE. In such a case your change must be allowed;

I would myself dispense with what you vowed.

HE. I to die that hour when I possess,

This minute shall begin my happiness.

SHE. The thoughts of death your passion would remove;

Death is a cold encouragement to love.

HE. No; from my joys I to my death would run,

And think the business of my life well done:

But I should walk a discontented ghost,

If flesh and blood were to no purpose lost.

&c.

This repartee could continue on indefinitely, expressing fixed, personal ("my own inner") passions, in clipped, syllogistic identities, its unchanging boundaries always marked by the iron necessity of rhyming. If this is speaking "poetry," then Percy Shelley was completely wrong when he wrote, in *A Defence of Poetry*,

Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination, by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices, whose void forever craves fresh food.

## Re-Enter Shakespeare

To recite Classical poetry, beautifully, we must face the fact that over the past three hundred fifty years, *all popular poetry* has come to be dominated by the erotic sing-singing invented by Dryden. Let it be the love-poem, the popular satire, the "Amazing Grace," the Sunday school moral rhyme, the Limerick (which Dryden may have invented as well), or the Hallmark Greeting Card ("Now that Christmas time is here, / Have days of joy and nights of cheer"). All follow the erotic, yet logical formula of those Seventeenth-century forces of Venetian cultural domination of Britain, and their heirs. They celebrated first Dryden, then the even more pervasive, cynical Alexander Pope (who was, incidentally, not fit even to unlace Dryden's poetic shoes), then Sir Walter Scott; and they brutally attacked the poetry of Keats and Shelley as "formless and incomprehensible," because it broke completely from the formula.

*Never*, before the time of Dryden, was English poetry written, or recited in this sing-song manner. Nowhere in the plays, sonnets, or other stanzas of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Spenser, and their contemporaries, nor the earlier poetry of such as Geoffrey Chaucer, does any such formula-chanting as we now call “poetry recitation” appear.

Look back, afresh, at the blank verse lines of *Romeo and Juliet*. Here is a complex thought of Romeo, expressed in a four-line unit of poetry; acceptance of Juliet’s “image” that “it is the nightingale, it is still night”; but the idea underlying that image, emerging unexpected, for the first time—death for Love:

Nor that is not the lark whose notes do beat  
The vaulty Heaven so high above our heads.  
I have more care to stay, than will to go.—  
Come, death, and welcome! Juliet wills it so.—

The four lines are organized with a harmonic distribution of pauses and rhymes. The first two present an image (although paradoxically: “I hear a lark, and describe a non-lark”), and those two lines flow together as a single expression, with no shade of pause at the first line. The third line is a new idea: Romeo’s “care” and his “will” are opposed. Why? But then the fourth line, the dramatic eruption of the idea “to stand and die,” is punctuated with three pauses, each more emphatic than the last. The third pause completely ends an expressed idea; then packs in another one, a bombshell: “Juliet wills it so”! So the clear singularities, pauses of increasing importance, in this four-line unit-idea, become rapidly more dense: the end of the second line, the end of the third, and then three times in the fourth. The unusual appearance of rhyme at the end, has a dramatic purpose. It makes the listener hear the third line again at the end of the fourth: Romeo’s conflicting “care” and “will” have a new meaning after hearing “Juliet wills it so.”

Following this four-line unit-idea, is the most powerful of the rhyming couplets, the dialogue-couplet in which, first, Romeo looks into his soul and expresses three separate, emerging ideas in a single verse—

How is’t, my soul? Let’s talk,—it is not day.

and Juliet then dramatically contradicts them all, in a verse involving five separate pauses—

It is, it is. Hie hence, be gone, away!

Here, the repetitive sound of the rhyme emphasizes the complete overturning of Romeo’s thoughts by Juliet’s change of mind; from here, the lovers sink deep into

“woe.” These lines are extremely dense in dramatic singularities. They would fill Dryden with awe and terror. When Keats and Shelley wrote poetry this way from 1810 to 1822, both Tory and Whig literary establishment reviews crashed down upon their heads, and attempted to extirpate them from English literature entirely. Shelley, for example, was accused by the *British Monthly Review* of employing, in his *Prometheus Unbound*, “a licentiousness of rhythm, and rhyme which is truly contemptible.” But, this is common enough for Shakespeare; it is appropriate to expressing the struggles of *agapē* to overcome fixed circumstances and fixed, erotic ideas of happiness.

Listening to these lines, we hear exactly what Shelley evoked above: that poetry attracts to the imagination ever new thoughts, “which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void forever craves fresh food.” These “intervals and interstices,” the openings for new thoughts, are to be heard in all dramatic poetry that is modelled on the Classical ideal of agapic creativity.

#### NOTES

1. John Dryden, *The Parallel of Poetry and Painting*, 1680.
2. Thomas Hobbes, *The Answer to the Preface of Gondibert*, 1650.
3. Percy B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 1821.
4. Allardyce Nicoll, *Dryden as an Adapter of Shakespeare* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922).

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#### FOR FURTHER READING

*Previous issues of Fidelio have featured the following studies on the poetic principle: Paul B. Gallagher, “John Keats vs. The Enlightenment,” Fall 1996 (Vol. V, No. 3); Dan Leach, “Percy Bysshe Shelley and the Motivführung Principle in English Poetry,” Fall 1996 (Vol. V, No. 3); Helga Zepp LaRouche, “The Question of Motivic Thorough-Composition in Schiller’s Poetry,” Winter 1995 (Vol. IV, No. 4); “Symposium: The Creative Principle in Art and Science,” includes “Some Simple Examples of Poetic Metaphor” (Kenneth Kronberg), “Beauty as a Necessary Condition of Humanity” (Helga Zepp LaRouche), “African-American Spirituals and the Classical Setting of Strophic Poetry” (Dennis Speed), Winter 1994 (Vol. III, No. 4); Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., “On the Subject of Metaphor,” Fall 1992 (Vol. I, No. 3); Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., “Behind the Notes,” Summer 1997 (Vol. VI, No. 2).*