
THE STRUCTURE OF TO MY HONOUR'D
KINSMAN

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In a letter to his kinswoman Mrs. Stewart dated April 11, 1700, only twenty days before his death, John Dryden (1631-1700) tells her :

I always thought my verses to my cousin Driden⁽¹⁾ were the best of the whole, and to my comfort the Town thinks them so; and he which pleases me most, is of the same judgment as appears by a noble present he has sent me, which suprised me, because I did not in the least expect it⁽²⁾.

That these verses to his "dear" and "worthy" cousin, as he calls him, had a special place in Dryden's heart and mind is

craftsmanship . As D.R. Elloway says , "that Dryden was a craftsman is one of the platitudes of literary history"⁽⁶⁾ . Here, as he himself says , "I never writt better" , Dryden employs his finest powers "wihout straining , genially and surely"⁽⁷⁾ . This confident posture further enhances the sense of order the poem is trying to create.

To analyse *To My Honour'd Kinsman* as a structural whole we must consider a number of things : its verse-form ; its rhetorical quality , the arrangement of its ideas , its tone and finally its thematic development .

To start with , the verses are arranged in rhyming couplets : "Well-born , and wealthy, wanting no support, / You steer betwixt the country and the Court" (11.84-85) . For the sake of variety , the flow of these couplets is , occasionally , broken by triplets as in (frame, came , fame , 11.207-209) , (wise, overlays, relies, 11.147-149), and in these lines :

Not that my verse would blemish all the fair,
But yet if some be bad, it is wisdom to beware ;
And better Shun the bait than struggle in the snare .

(11.31-33)

They lab' ring the relief of humankind,

With sharpen'd sight some remedies may find;
Th' apothecary train is wholly blind.

(11.102-104)

Not only in this poem , but elsewhere in his later composition Dryden uses lines written in triple measure . As Emile Legiouis says, it is

as if the free instinct of the metrist in Dryden was yielding to the spell of a cadence at that time out of favour , but one that is so restful to the ear after the iambic rhythm and the short hammering of the couplet⁽⁸⁾ .

"Restful" is the keyword . Likewise , the flow is sometimes interrupted with not quite rhyming words , notwithstanding the fact that the pronunciation of some of these words was probably exact in Dryden's day . Here is an example .

Ungrateful tribe ! Who, like the viper's brood ;
From med'cine issuing suck their mother's blood .

(11.109-110)

Some everpose of sway by turns they share ;
In peace the people , and the prince in war .

(11.180-181)

The rhetorical quality is necessitated by the subject . "Dryden's ability to clothe his opinions with rhetorical flourishes" not only "pleased his contemporaries" ⁽⁹⁾ , but was also a means to emphasize the noble qualities of the character , i.e., John Driden . Dryden's subject is a serious and sincere one . He is praising the chivalric deeds of his cousin - as he is also directing the minds of his contemporaries to "those general matters of which he sincerely believed - to the faith in the value of good manners and of the ordered way of life"⁽¹⁰⁾ . Hence, he begins his poem with a rhetorical note :

How blest is he, who leads a country life,
Unvex'd with anxious cares , and void of strife,
Who, studying peace and shunning civil strife,
Enjoy'd his youth, and now enjoys his age;
All who deserves his love, he makes his own;
And to be lov'd himself, needs only to be known,
Just, good, and wise, contending neighbours come
From your award to wait their final doom .

(11.1-8)

and ends it with a rhetorical address :

O true descendent of a patriot line,

Who, while thou shar'st their luster, lead'st 'em thine,

(11.195-196)

Noble deeds add to the poem as a whole another quality, that of the heroic . John Driden is not a traditional hero but he bears heroic characteristics . We learn about him that he is "just" , "good" and "wise" ; that he is noble hearted , kind and generous ; "No porter guards the passage of your door/To admit the wealthy , and exclude the poor" (11.36-37) ; he is a philanthropist and a patriot :

You hoard not wealth for your own private use

But on the public spend the rich produce;

When often urged , unwilling to be great

Your country calls you from your lov'd retreat.

(11.117-120)

He is a peacemaker :

Contending neighbours come;

From your award to wait their final doom
And, foes before , return in friendship home.

(11.7-9)

Such are the virtues of John Dryden. Maintaining the heroic quality of the poem , therefore , are the heroic attributes paid to him . To sustain the heroic form, Dryden uses a dignified style and a high, "civilized and generous" ⁽¹¹⁾ tone , lowered in one occasion with contempt, in the passage on the physicians .

In the passage on the physicians which may strike the reader as a digression , we come to the arrangement of the ideas in the poem , mainly whether they follow in sense or not . As Edward Pechter asserts .

Dryden's characteristic structure is ... interesting in its looseness, in the way it can contain different ideas and values .. without either denying their differences or allowing them to realize their potential contradictoriness.⁽¹²⁾

Thus , the poem starts with one person, a country, many countries, and ends with one person only . As such , it is well-unified . However , the question forces itself ; if the poem is

about John Driden, what are such varied subjects as the hunt , the physicians, the nation and the nations doing there ? This argument leads us to the themes of the poem which it will be seen are exemplified in each of the aforementioned subjects .

Obviously the dominant theme is that of order - physical , mental and spiritual - and of peace (the word is repeated eight times in the poem) . This theme is introduced by such words as "studying peace" , "blest" , "friendship" , "serene" , "concerned" .. etc. In fact , it is revealed in the very life of John Driden , not only in its external circumstances , but also inwardly, in the soul : "Like your own soul, serene ; a pattern of your mind/Promoting concord, and composing strife" (11.16-17) . Driden stands as a symbol for peace and order. He is "unvex'd with anxious cares" , he is void of strife ; he is living a peaceful life , having enjoyed his youth , and now enjoys his age .. Equally important , he is living in the quietude and peacefulness of the country side . Both his life and the natural life serve as symbols for peace ; he , as a spiritual and mental symbol , nature , as a physical one. Nature blesses the individual with inner peace and sets his life in order by its vital air and healthy atmosphere . "He scapes the best , who , nature to repair , / Draws physic from the fields , in draughts of vital air" (11. 115-116) .

It follows that if order prevails in man himself , it expands to a group of men , to the whole society , a nation and then to the whole world . This is suggested by peace and order prevailing in England after its capture of Namur in Belgium by William III which led to the Peace of Ryswick two years later :

Namur subdued is England's palm alone ;
 The rest besieg'd, but we constrain'd the town;
 We saw th'event that follow'd our success ;
 France, tho' pretending arms , pursued the peace;
 Oblig'd, by one sole treaty, to restore
 What twenty years of war had won before .
 Enough for Europe has our Albion fought;
 Let us enjoy The peace our blood has bought

(11.152-159)

Apparently , England could have no success if it did not enjoy stability and order . From England we move to see other nations pursuing peace : "Our foes, compell'd by need, have peace embrac'd" (142) and France "tho' pretending arms pursued the peace" . And when peace is restored among individuals and nations , prosperity ensues , here , exemplified in trade : "Which if secure, securely we may trade" (1.144) and build new ships

and repair battered ones-ships that carry goods and exchange trade and not for war :

Safe in ourselves, while on ourselves we stand,
The sea is ours, and that defends the land;
Be, then, the naval shores the nation's care,
New ships to build, and batt'r'd to repair .

(11.146-149)

But together with this theme of order and peace we are constantly vexed by another one - that of disorder . Numerous words and images imply this state of disorder . "Strife" , "civil rage" , "war" , "contending neighbours" , "litigious laws" .. etc. The function of this contrasting theme is mainly to emphasize the first one , for only in its opposite an object is seen clearly , and also to remind the reader of the happy medium by showing two opposites . This poem, as A.W. Hoffman says , "is one of the finest examples of Dryden's mastery of a middle style"⁽¹³⁾ , an effective technique equally important in maintaining a sense of order .

To emphasize the theme of disorder , we are presented with a series of images and people who are responsible for

disorder . Woman seems to be the first of this group . Not only Eve but also all women are responsible for disrupting peace . If only Adam had not listened to Eve but he did and now "both are lost" . Dryden therefore commends his cousin for being "lord of himself" , "uncumber'd with a wife" and for being wise to have shunned the "bait" and the "married state" :

Lord of yourself , uncumber'd with a wife ;
 There , for a year , a month, perhaps a night;
 Long penitence succeeds a short delight;
 Minds are so hardly match'd , that ev'n the first;
 Tho' pair'd by Heav'n, in Paradise were curst,
 For man and woman, tho'in one they grow
 Yet, first or last, return again to two .

(11.18-24)

Dryden compares married life to "two wrestlers who help to pull each other down" causing chaos and disorder . However , it is not clear whether his view of marriage is based on personal experience or whether he speaks with tongue in cheek .

In the passage on the physicians we see another picture of disorder . Ignoring the fact that physicians are capable of restoring health , Dryden presents them as being mainly

responsible for the death of people . They interfere with the work of God and nature : "God never made his work for man to mend" . (1.95) . Moreover , they "search forbidden truths (a sin to know)" and defy the law of nature and God as Adam and Even have defied God and caused death and disorder , by tasting the tree of knowledge . If these two were responsible for causing spiritual disorder , the physicians are responsible for the physical kind :

So liv'd our sires, are doctors learn'd to kill,
And multiplied with theirs the weekly bill,
The first physicians by debauch were made;
Excess began, and sloth sustains the trade.
Pity the gen'rous kind their cares bestow
To search forbidden truths; (a sin to know),
To which if human science could attain,
The doom of death, pronounc'd by God were vain.

(11.71-78)

To show the physicans at their worst, Dryden dwells on their greed, comparing them to "vipers" sucking the blood of those who put their faith in them :

The apothecary train is wholly blind,

From files a random recipe they take,
 And many deaths of one prescription make .
 Garth, gen'rous as his Muse, prescribes and gives,
 The shopman sells, and by destruction lives;
 Ungrateful tribe ! Who, like the viper's brood
 From med'cine issuing , such their mother's blood.
 (11. 146-149)

Intertwined with this passage is the theme of order as represented by health , which is contrasted with the unhealthiness caused by the physicians : "better to hunt in fields for health unbought/ Than fee the doctor for a nauseous draught" , (11.92-93) . This is again to emphasize both states of health and unhealthiness by antithesis .

To gain peace and order and avoid disorder Dryden recommends moderation and warns against excess . Neither "ebb nor overflow". Apply the golden medium in whatever you do . Various lines in the poem expound this idea such as : "Betwixt the prince and parliament we stand" , "A patriot both the King and country serves" , "slights on foreign side , nor overbuys" ... etc. This idea of restraint and control which helps to bring peace and order is also presented in the passage on hunting . Hunters like physicians cause death, yet Dryden's attack on them is milder because they do not go to extremes : "This fiery game

your active youth maintain'd/Not yet by years extingui'd, tho'
restrain'd/ You season still with sports your serious hours"
(11.58-60).

After restoring peace in this world , we arrive to the spiritual peace attained in "The Paradise of God" . The theme of death is again brought in ; but this time it is a peaceful and natural death, because it is a peaceful and natural death, because it is God, and not the physicians , "Maurus" or Melbourne" who take our lives; "For ev'n when death dissolves our human frame . The soul returns to heav'n, from whence it came" (1.207) .

After playing these themes, Dryden returns to his first subject: John driden, immortalizing his "praiseworthy actions" which will remain as a symbol of a peaceful life and order, through the genius and pen of the poet : "And't is my praise, to make thy praises last" (1.208) :

A poet is not born in ev'ryrace,
Two of a house few ages can afford :
One of perform, another to record,
prasieworthy actions are by these embrac'd ;
And't is my praise, to make thy praise last
For ev'n when death dissolves our human frame
The soul returns to heav'n, from whence it came;

Earth keeps the body, verse preserves the fame .

(11.202-209)

Dryden concludes the poem with this peaceful note, praising not only his cousin Driden, but also the restoration of all kinds of order. This, he says, is "a memorial of my own principles to all posterity"⁽¹⁴⁾. By this act, the poem does not only make us see "the problem of order at a number of different levels" , as Hoffman says, "but also enacts for us the parallel problem of poetic order"⁽¹⁵⁾ .

NOTES

- * All quotations from *To My Honour'd Kinsman* are taken from *The Poetical Works of Dryden*, edited by George R. Noyes (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949), PP 784-787 .
- 1 . According to George Noyes "the spelling of the name Dryden, like many other names, varied in the Seventeenth century . Even Dryden himself was not rigorously consistent in his usage" . *The Poetical Works of Dryden*, p. XVII. "Introduction" .
 - 2 . Ibid, p. 737 .
 - 3 . Ibid,
 - 4 . Harold Love, ed. *Restoration Literature : Critical Approaches* (London : Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1972) , p. 297. Love says Dryden was "in his old age a gentle, kindly and warm friend to younger poets" .
 - 5 . Arthur W. Hoffman "Various John Dryden 'All, All of a Price Throughout " in *Dryden: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Bernard N. Schiling (New Jersey : Prentice Hall Inc..1965), P.167.

6. D.R. Elloway. Dryden's Satire (London Macmillan 1966) P.IX "Introduction".
7. Hoffman, in Dryden: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 167
8. Emile Legouis. A History of English Literature (London: J. M. Dent & Ent & Sons Ltd., 1947), P.616 .
9. George Noyes, P.XX. Seealso Ian Jack: Augustan Satire: I intention and Idiom in English Poetry : 1660-1750 . (London : Oxford Oxford University press, 1972) , pp.2-3.
10. E. M. Tillyard, " Ode on Anne Killigrew" in Dryden : Collection of Critical Essays, P.148.
11. K.M. Burton. Restoration Literature (London : Hutchinson University Library, 1965), P. 47.
12. Edward pechter. Dryden's Classical Theory of Literature (Great Britin : Cambridge University Press, 1975) , P.5
13. Hoffm, in Dryden : A Collection of Critical Essays,. P. 167
14. Quoted ub The Poetical Works of Dryden, p. 1030 .
15. Hoffman, Ibid, p. 179 .

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