

## A CRITIQUE OF DR. JOHNSON'S ESSAY ON ADDISON

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### ABSTRACT

*The significance of such an essay as Dr. Johnson's on Addison in his Lives of the Poets seems to be three-fold: (i) it throws light on certain biographical details which might have gone unnoticed (ii) it presents a chronological account of his works, both important and unimportant (iii) through it we can get some help to gauge the temper of the times. Our difficulty with Dr. Johnson is, of course, his strong likes and dislikes and also his moralist posture. Luckily for us, however, the great Doctor appears to be reasonably sympathetic to Addison, but since habits die hard, we may have to make some allowance for his predilections and prejudices in our analysis of the essay in hand.*

**Keywords:** Critique, Chronological Account, Prejudices, Spectator.

### Introduction

Dr. Johnson rightly grasps Addison's role as an observer or spectator of life. He furnishes an elaborate account of his parentage, birth, school and University education, his knowledge of both classical and current learning and above all, his travels on the continent. There is particular reference to his journey through Italy which he "surveyed with the eyes of a poet." On return, he published his Travels containing comparisons of the present face of the country with the descriptions left us by the Roman poets. The main merit of the composition, however, is its "elegance of language and variegation of prose and verse. It was during this period. Dr. Johnson guesses that Addison either composed the first four Acts of his *Caro* or at least, formed his plan to write it.

Of the memorable friendship between Steele and Addison, Dr. Johnson gives greater praise to the former. Steele, he observes, lived under "a habitual subjection to the predominating genius of Addison whom he always mentioned with reverence and treated with obsequiousness." It was possibly due to this submissiveness of Steele that the friendship endured for a long time, although unfortunately, the two friends fell apart towards the end. Of the public offices held by Addison, Dr. Johnson makes special mention of his gaining the position of the Commissioner of Appeals through the good offices of Lord Godolphin and Lord Halifax who had somewhat felt concerned about the practice (rather the malpractice) of the times when "worthless men were unprofitably enriched with public money." Addison's other public appointments have also been noted by Dr. Johnson. The most interesting episode is, however, related to his highest elevation as the Secretary of State. Dr. Johnson remarks that Addison proved "unequal to the duties of his place." "In the house of commons he could not speak, and therefore, was useless to the defence of the government." Pope attributed this failure to Addison's fastidious concern for fine expressions, which obviously resulted in extreme hesitation. Soon Addison himself solicited his 'dismissal,' which was readily granted along with a liberal pension under the cover of his declining health and necessity for recess and rest.

Dr. Johnson dwells a good deal on Addison's habitual taciturnity but finally, he notes that Addison was a very pleasant and enlightened talker-he was so, of course, only with those to whom he was familiar, to strangers he rarely opened up.

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In this essay, Dr. Johnson gives a fascinating account of Addison's marriage with a rich dowager (in 1716). He had been introduced into her family as a tutor to her son. At the beginning, his advances were timorous but "grew bolder as his reputation and influence increased." The marriage, however, "neither found them nor made them equal." The lady remained acutely conscious of her former higher social status and continued to think "herself entitled to treat with very little ceremony the tutor of her son." Dr. Johnson sees in this a parallel between Sir Roger de Coverley's unhappy courtships to the "disdainful widow" towards whom he retained a singular infatuation till the end.

Dr. Johnson's observations on Sir Roger de Coverley are brief but pertinent. He admires Addison's intense attachment to the singular but lovable old Tory. It was for this reason that Addison forbade Steele to fill in any further colour or line in the portraiture of the Knight—he was afraid that his friend's indiscretion might produce some inconsistency in the total effect. Dr. Johnson, however, points out that Addison himself does not adhere to his "original delineation." At the beginning, he presents Sir Roger "as having his imagination somewhat warped" but makes little use of his "perversion." He observes:

The irregularities in Sir Roger's conduct seem not so much the effects of a mind deviating from the beaten track of life, by the perpetual pressure of some overwhelming idea, as of habitual rusticity, and that negligence which solitary grandeur naturally generates.

The "perpetual pressure of some overwhelming idea" in Sir Roger's case was his "far-off" disappointment in love at the hands of a rich widow to whom the old Knight continued a sort of doting fascination until his death. Dr. Johnson is, therefore, not hundred percent correct in his diagnosis of the oddities in Sir Roger's character.

As for other characters 11 in the Coverley Papers, Dr. Johnson - pays no attention to them. He, however, makes only a cursory reference to Sir Andrew Freeport whom he calls a wealthy merchant, zealous for the moneyed interest and a Whig." This is, to my mind, a somewhat misconceived profile of the good old merchant, as will be obvious from a perusal of the papers in which he figures.

Dr. Johnson records that Addison's Rosamond composed to imitate the "prevalent taste" for Italian operas, proved a failure on the stage. His Roman tragedy Cato, however, had better luck. Dr. Johnson attributes a part of its success to Steele who "undertook to pack an audience" for the first show at Drury Lane. The play was liked both by the Whigs and the Tories. "The Whigs applauded every line in which liberty was mentioned, as a satire on the Tories: and the Tories echoed every clap, to show that the satire was unfelt."

Dr. Johnson's estimate is that Cato is rather a poem in dialogue than a drama, rather a succession of just sentiments in elegant language, than a representation of natural affections.... Nothing here excites or assuages emotion; here is no magical power of raising terror. This is, one would be disposed to think not a very unjust piece of criticism.

In this connection, it cannot be surmised as to why Dr. Johnson chooses to supply very long extracts from the adverse commentary of John Dennis who seems to have approached the work in anger and produced his criticism with full acrimony. All the same, two major points, emerge even out of this and they are worthy of our consideration. The first is related to the classical Unity of place. The complaint of Dennis is that the conspiracy of Sempronius and Syphax against Cato, Cato's own consultations with Juba, Juba's demand of Mercia from her father, Juba's quarrel with Syphax—these and many other parts of the action are all jumbled up in Cato's hall, which makes the plot improbable. This could have been managed better by Addison, even if he had decided to stick to the unities of time and place.

The other point we seek to discuss pertains to the sphere of poetic justice. Dennis is sore that throughout the play Addison "makes virtue suffer and vice triumph." His plea is that whatever be the reality of life, the poet ought to distribute reward and punishment in proportion to the merits and demerits of his personages. In this, Dr. Johnson fortunately does not support Dennis. His contention is that if drama be the "mirror of life," why should the poet hesitate to present sometimes this painful fact on the stage? I would like to point out that Dr. Johnson's observations look more thoughtful here than those in his "Preface to Shakespeare" where he states that the great poet-dramatist "makes no just distribution of good or evil nor is always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked." We would like to add that this whole issue of "poetic justice" is concerned with the bigger concept of idealization in art. There arises very often clear opposition between what ought to happen and what actually happens. And so more often than not, we have to swallow in, at least, the physical/material suffering of the virtuous.

In the final analysis Dr. Johnson's essay on Addison is valuable in as much as it brings out the great essayist's excellence in middle style and his pleasant persuasiveness in morals and manners. "His prose is the model of the middle style; on grave matters not formal, on light occasions not groveling; pure without scrupulosity, and exact without apparent elaboration: always equable, and always easy, without glowing words or pointed sentences...His page is always luminous but never blazes in unexpected splendor." Dr. Johnson also notes other aids and in gradients of Addison's literary method. He shows truth sometimes "as the phantom of a vision." at times, he conceals and reveals it through allegory or fancy. "His sentences have neither studied amplitude, nor affected brevity." His work is diffused with a peculiar humour which gives "the grace of novelty to domestic scenes and daily occurrences. We may add to this Addison's habit of putting in interesting anecdotes and incidents and at times, traditional or coined legends.

"As a describer of life and manners" and "as at each of wisdom." too, Addison's position is enviable. He is neither weakly credulous" nor "want only sceptical." "His morality is neither dangerously lax, nor impracticably rigid." His success, I would venture to think, is more owing to his agreeable form. To echo Mark Schorer's term, it is the "achieved " content or the form that makes a work of art appealing and lasting.

Before I conclude, I would point out that Dr. Johnson's essay is not a great help to know Addison as a literary critic except in a general way. He makes only passing references to Addison's criticism of *Paradise Lost* and *Chevy Chase*. He also recommends to the reader the study of Addison's essays like "Remarks on Ovid" "Wit and the Pleasures of Imagination. However, Dr. Johnson's assessment that Addison can contribute considerably to the infusion of literary curiosity and the exaltation (or better, refinement) of taste is, of course, valid. His journalistic talent and unobtrusive learning did play their desired role in his achievement.

#### References

1. Samuel Johnson *Lives of the Poets Vol. I. The World's Classics Series*, Oxford University Press, London, 1968, p. 403.
2. *Ibid.* 3. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 400.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 404.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 418.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 418. Here, the allusions are to Addison's *Papers in the Spectator No. 2*, 113, 517. *op. cit.*, p. 410.
7. See above, f.n. 8. 11. Some of these characters are: Captain Sentry, Will Honeycomb, Sir Roger's Chaplain, Will Wimble, and Moll White-they appear in *No. 2*, 106, 108, 112, 117, 131, 335, 517. *op. cit.*, p. 410.
8. The reader may specially look into *Spectator No. 2*, *op. cit.*, p. 412. 15. *op. cit.*, p. 432, *op. cit.*, p. 435.
9. See *English Critical Texts*, ed. D.J. Enright and Ernst De Chickera, OO.U.P., Delhi, 1979, p. 140.
10. W. Basil Worsfold, *Judgment in Literature*, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., London, 1957, p. 87.
11. Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery", *Twentieth Century Criticism* ed. William J. Handy and Max Westbrook, Light and Life Publishers, New Delhi, 1976, p. 71.

