

Macaulay: *Mandeville, a genius of science*

1. F.B. Kaye quoting from Macaulay.

Though mentioning Mandeville only once, Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) is a rather well-known name in Mandevillean literature. F.B. Kaye fell in love with a passage from Macaulay's famous *Essay on Milton* (1825), which he may have seen in John Mackinnon Robertson's essay on Mandeville or in Paul Goldbach's dissertation *Bernard de Mandeville's Bienenfabel* (1886), p. 67. Like Goldbach, Kaye condensed Macaulay's reference to Mandeville into a much smaller and more striking quotation than Robertson's: "If *Shakespeare* had written a book on the motives of human actions, it is...extremely improbable that it would have contained half so much able reasoning on the subject as is to be found in the *Fable of the Bees*." He inserted this quotation twice in his edition of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1924), *Fable i*, p. vi, and *Fable ii*, p. 441, but he did not explain it. So the quotation should speak for itself, suggesting that Macaulay thought Mandeville twice as good as Shakespeare in reasoning on the motives of human actions. Twice as good as the great poet Shakespeare? Would this really be in agreement with Macaulay's opinion?

2. Robertson quoting from Macaulay.

How did Robertson refer to Macaulay? He quotes: "Says Macaulay, in his early essay on Milton: — If Shakespeare had written a book on the motives of human actions, it is by no means certain that it would have been a good one. It is extremely improbable that it would have contained half so much able reasoning on the subject as is to be found in the *Fable of the Bees*. But could Mandeville have created an Iago? Well as he knew how to resolve characters into their elements, would he have been able to combine those elements in such a manner as to make up a man, a real, living, individual man? --"

To this Robertson adds as an explanation: "The criticism is an arresting one; and on reflection it recommends itself as just. It is certainly well borne out, as regards the last sentence, by the *Virgin Unmask'd*. But the praise remains very sufficient, and is not lightly to be discounted."

While focusing on Mandeville, it seems that Robertson is forgetting Shakespeare. Macaulay did not rule out that Shakespeare might have been capable of writing a good book on the subject and Mandeville of creating an Iago. But as Macaulay argues in his essay, if Shakespeare would have written a book like Mandeville's, it would have contained half so much able reasoning on the subject. Why was Macaulay of this opinion? Why did he compare Shakespeare and Mandeville? No better way than to get the answers from Macaulay himself.

4. Macaulay's context, from his *Essay on Milton*.

"(...) We venture to say, on the contrary, paradoxical as the remark may appear, that no poet has ever had to struggle with more unfavourable circumstances than *Milton*. He doubted, as he has himself owned, whether he had not been born "an age too late". For this notion *Johnson* has thought fit to make him the butt of his clumsy ridicule. The poet, we believe, understood the nature of his art better than the critic. He knew that his poetical genius derived no advantage from the civilization which surrounded him or from the learning which he had acquired: and he looked back with something like regret to the

runder age of simple words and vivid impressions.

We think that, as civilization advances, poetry almost necessarily declines. Therefore, though we admire those great works of imagination which have appeared in dark ages, we do not admire them the more because they have appeared in dark ages. On the contrary, we hold that the most wonderful and splendid proof of genius is a great poem produced in a civilized age. We cannot understand why those who believe in that most orthodox article of literary faith that the earliest poets are generally the best, should wonder at the rule, as if it were the exception. Surely, the uniformity of the phenomenon indicates a corresponding uniformity in the cause.

The fact is, that common observers reason from the progress of the experimental sciences to that of the imitative arts. The improvement of the former is gradual and slow. Ages are spent in collecting materials, ages more in separating and combining them. Even when a system has been formed, there is still something to add, to alter, or to reject. Every generation enjoys the use of a vast hoard bequeathed to it by antiquity, and transmits it, augmented by fresh acquisitions, to future ages. In these pursuits, therefore, the first speculators lie under great disadvantages, and, even when they fail, are entitled to praise. Their pupils, with far inferior intellectual powers, speedily surpass them in actual attainments. Every girl who has read Mrs. *Marcet's* little *Dialogues on Political Economy* could teach *Montague* or *Walpole* many lessons in finance. Any intelligent man may now, by resolutely applying himself for a few years to mathematics, learn more than the great *Newton* knew after half a century of study and meditation.

But it is not thus with music, with painting, or with sculpture. Still less is it thus with poetry. The progress of refinement rarely supplies these arts with better objects of imitation. It may, indeed, improve the instruments which are necessary to the mechanical operations of the musician, the sculptor, and the painter. But language, the machine of the poet, is best fitted for his purpose in its rudest state. Nations, like individuals, first perceive, and then abstract. They advance from particular images to general terms. Hence, the vocabulary of an enlightened society is philosophical, that of a half-civilized people is poetical.

This change in the language of men is partly the cause, and partly the effect of a corresponding change in the nature of their intellectual operations; a change by which science gains, and poetry loses. Generalization is necessary to the advancement of knowledge, but particularly in the creations of the imagination. In proportion as men know more, and think more, they look less at individuals and more at classes. They therefore make better theories, and worse poems. They give us vague phrases instead of images, and personified qualities instead of men. They may be better able to analyze human nature than their predecessors. But analysis is not the business of the poet. His office is to portray, not to dissect. He may believe in a moral sense, like *Shaftesbury*. He may refer all human actions to self-interest, like *Helvetius*, or he may never think about the matter at all. His creed on such subjects will no more influence his poetry, properly so called, than the notions which a painter may have conceived respecting the lachrymal glands, or the circulation of the blood, will affect the tears of his *Niobe*, or the blushes of his *Aurora*. If *Shakespeare* had written a book on the motives of human actions, it is by no means certain that it would have been a good one. It is extremely improbable that it would have contained half so much able reasoning on the subject as is to be found in the

Fable of the Bees. But could *Mandeville* have created an *Iago*? Well as he knew how to resolve characters into their elements, would he have been able to combine those elements in such a manner as to make up a man — a real, living, individual man ?

Perhaps no man can be a poet, or can even enjoy poetry, without a certain unsoundness of mind, if any thing which gives so much pleasure ought to be called unsoundness. By poetry we mean, not of course all writing in verse, nor even all good writing in verse. Our definition excludes many metrical compositions which, on other grounds, deserve the highest praise. By poetry we mean the art of employing words in such a manner as to produce an illusion on the imagination: the art of doing by means of words what the painter does by means of colours."

4. Macaulay's appreciation of Mandeville.

Both Kaye and Robertson have been quoting out of Macaulay's original context. Macaulay was discussing the difference between poetry and science. Within this framework Macaulay compares a poet, William Shakespeare, to a man of science, Bernard Mandeville.

His appreciation of Shakespeare is unambiguous: 'Shakespeare has had neither equal nor second' (Macaulay in his essay on Mme. D'Arblay, 1843).

The essential importance of Macaulay's reference to Mandeville is that he is putting Mandeville on a par with Shakespeare. It is Macaulay's notion that they are of the same cultural greatness.

By placing him on Shakespeare's level, Macaulay was most probably the first man to identify Mandeville as a genius of science.

5. Macaulay's *Essay on Milton* is available on the internet.