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052102420X - The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London

Cynthia Wall

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In September 1666 the Great Fire destroyed four-fifths of the ancient City of London within three days. All that had been familiar, settled, *known*, was suddenly and entirely swept away. Londoners faced an emptiness that was not only physical but also historical, social, financial, and conceptual. *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London* is the first study to situate the literature of Restoration and early Augustan England within the historical and cultural contexts of the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire. Cynthia Wall reads the marked topographical specificity of plays, poems, and novels as part of a wider cultural network of responses to changing perceptions of urban space, and she shows how the literatures of the period – along with the technologies of surveying, mapping, rebuilding, and official redesccribing the city – attempt to reinvest the city with comprehensible meaning and create new spaces for new genres.

Cynthia Wall is Assistant Professor at the University of Virginia. She is editor of the Bedford Cultural Contexts edition of Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, and has published essays on Defoe, Pope, and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and the gendering of architectural space in eighteenth-century literature.

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## Contents



<i>List of illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii

### PART I. DESCRIBING LONDON

1 The Great Fire and rhetorics of loss	3
2 <i>Londini Renascenti</i> : the spaces of rebuilding	39
3 Redrawing London: maps and texts	76

### PART II. INHABITING LONDON

4 The art of writing the streets of London	115
5 New narratives of public spaces: parks and shops	148
6 Narratives of private spaces: churches, houses and novels	182

<i>Notes</i>	221
<i>Bibliography</i>	243
<i>Index</i>	268

## *Illustrations*

1 “A Map or Groundplot of the City of London and the Suburbes thereof,” by John Leake, engraved by Wenceslaus Hollar (1666). (Courtesy of the Henry E. Huntington Library.)	<i>page</i> 37
2 John Evelyn’s third plan for redrawing London (1666). (Courtesy of the Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.)	48
3 Richard Newcourt’s first plan for redrawing London (1666). (Guildhall Library Ms 3441, Courtesy of the Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.)	49
4 From Mills’s and Oliver’s <i>Survey of the Building Sites</i> (1667): Pissing Alley. (GL Ms 84, Courtesy of the Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.)	57
5 From Mills’s and Oliver’s <i>Survey of the Building Sites</i> (1667): Mr. Lascoe’s house covering Mr. Wharton’s house (1672). (GL Ms 84, Courtesy of the Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.)	58
6 St. Bride Fleet Street List of Householders (1666). (GL Ms 14819, Courtesy of the Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.)	61
7 St. Benet Gracechurch Account of Inhabitants (1670). (GL Ms 4056, Courtesy of the Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.)	62
8 The Monument, from Strype’s <i>Survey of London</i> (1720). (Courtesy of Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library.)	74
9 Detail of Langbourn and Candlewick Wards, showing the Monument, from Strype’s <i>Survey of London</i> (1720). (Courtesy of Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library.)	75
10 Detail from the “Agas Map” (c.1552). (Courtesy of the Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.)	79
11 Newcourt and Faithorne’s plan of the West End (1658). (Courtesy of the Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.)	81
12 <i>A Plan of the City and Suburbs of LONDON as fortified by Order of PARLIAMENT in the Years 1642 &amp; 1643</i> . (Courtesy of the Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.)	82
13 From Ogilby & Morgan’s <i>Survey</i> (1676); detail (Smithfield, Bartholomew Close). (Courtesy of the Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.)	85
14 From Jefferys’s edition (c.1749) of Morden & Lea’s map (1720) based on Morgan’s map (1682); elevations reinstated (and Moll’s route around Newgate, chapter four). (Courtesy of the Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.)	87
15 From Strype’s <i>Survey of London</i> (1720); Smithfield, Bartholomew Close. (Courtesy of Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library.)	88
16 From Strype’s <i>Survey</i> (1720); Southampton Square. (Courtesy of Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library.)	92
17 From Strype’s <i>Survey</i> (1720); King’s Square (Soho Square). (Courtesy of Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library.)	93
18 From Ogilby and Morgan’s map (1676): Drapers’ Gardens; Pinners’ Hall. (Courtesy of the Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.)	139

Cambridge University Press  
 052102420X - The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London  
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 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

## ILLUSTRATIONS

- |    |  |     |
|----|--|-----|
| 19 | From Strype's <i>Survey</i> (1720); engraving of Lincoln's Inn. (Courtesy of Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library.)  | 151 |
| 20 | From Strype's <i>Survey</i> (1720); Covent Garden. (Courtesy of Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library.)   | 160 |
| 21 | From Strype's <i>Survey</i> (1720); St. James's House and Park. (Courtesy of Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library.)  | 161 |
| 22 | Leybourn's combined plan of the markets. (Document AF410, Courtesy of the Corporation of London Records Office.)   | 169 |
| 23 | From Strype's <i>Survey</i> (1720); market spaces. (Courtesy of Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library.)   | 171 |
| 24 | From Strype's <i>Survey</i> (1720); The Royal Exchange. (Courtesy of Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library.)  | 172 |
| 25 | From Daniel Defoe, <i>The Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe</i> , illustrated by George Cruikshank (London: David Bogue, 1853); Crusoe's hut. (By Permission of the British Library.)                                | 200 |
| 26 | From A. E. Richardson and C. Lovett Gill, <i>London Houses from 1660 to 1820</i> (London: B. T. Batsford, 1911); first floor plan of Ashburnham House, Westminster, designed by Inigo Jones. (By Permission of the British Library.) | 208 |
| 27 | "A new mapp of the City of London, much enlarged since the Great Fire in 1666," by Wenceslaus Hollar (1706). (By Permission of the British Library.)   | 219 |
| 28 | "A New Plan of the City of London, Westminster, and Southwark," published for Stow's <i>Survey</i> [Strype], 1720. (By Permission of the British Library.)   | 220 |

## Preface

In September 1666, the Great Fire destroyed four-fifths of the ancient commercial and topographic center of London within three days. All that had been familiar, settled, phenomenologically *given* was suddenly and entirely swept away; Londoners faced an emptiness that was not only physical and structural but also historical, social, financial, *conceptual*. In the decades that followed, the demands of rebuilding the city generated an intense and widespread interest in urban redefinition that shaped a new set of technologies and a new set of literatures. This study situates the literature of Restoration and early Augustan England (roughly 1666 to 1730) within the historical and cultural contexts of the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire, reading the marked topographical specificity of the plays, poems, and novels as part of a wider cultural network of responses to changing perceptions of urban space. I want to argue that the literatures of this period share with the technologies of surveying, mapping, rebuilding, and officially re-describing the city an attempt to reinvest a city emptied of nominal topographic familiarity with comprehensible meaning, to reattach some sort of signification to the signs, both literal and figurative, of the city's streets and structures.

Part I, "Describing London," focuses primarily on the technical and cultural texts of the Fire and rebuilding to show in what different but conceptually related ways the changing, fluid boundaries of London came to shape a new kind of cultural self-consciousness that would in turn shape new kinds of literary self-representation. Part I reads the different disciplinary documents – political, journalistic, architectural, cartographic, and topographical – precisely for their common conceptual concerns. I assume that the disciplinary differences will remain obvious enough; I am interested in the ways their rhetorical features *correspond* in narrative structure, vocabulary, and even in imagery. I argue that such correspondence supplies evidence first, for shared cultural awareness – that is, that similarities across disciplinary strategies indicate similarities in disciplinary intent – and second, for the basic argument of part II, that the specific literary genres of the Restoration and early eighteenth century are equally grounded, conceptually and structurally, in the cultural strategies of remapping, rebuilding, and renegotiating the boundaries of urban space.

Chapter one, "The Great Fire and rhetorics of loss," describes how the narratives of the Fire, reiterated through various forms of public discourse such as

## PREFACE

royal proclamations, newspapers, sermons, and poems, on the one hand begin the cultural process of spatial self-awareness and on the other formulate patterns of narrative structure and emphasis that cross generic and diachronic boundaries. The contours of loss were publicized; the narratives of loss consistently structure themselves around litanies of street names, the sense of fragmentation, the inadequacy of traditional metaphors, the disruption of social space. The various forms of cultural texts combine, in reporting and renarrativizing the Fire, to create a consistent rhetorical pattern of response that literally as well as figuratively lays the ground for future, more “literary” representations of and in the city.

Chapter two, “*Londini Renascenti*: the spaces of rebuilding,” argues how both the exigencies and the documents of rebuilding – the idealized plans by Wren, Evelyn, and Newcourt, the massive surveying by Mills and Oliver, the property disputes in the Fire Courts, and the publicization of the local and general concerns of rebuilding in the city’s newspapers – contributed to an awareness of the contours and the implications of spatial boundaries across a wide swathe of citizenry, from distant landlords to social tiers of tenants within the same house, from members of Court to members of the guilds, from parish clerk to parish widow. Spatial debates became a matter of truly public concern. How the City was finally to look – what should be preserved and recovered, what should be changed and improved – was not in the end decided by King or Parliament or Men of Leisured Science (although lengthily debated by all those), but in fact by the cumulative pressures, desires, debates, and decisions of individual citizens, the tenants, the merchants, the shopkeepers, the tradespeople – the taverners and poulterers and brewers and chandlers, as much as the landlords and officials. Through such cultural reconstruction the contours of London both large and local became themselves possessive property, the conscious concern of virtually all Londoners. Thus, although most of my evidence and most of my argument have to do with texts, and therefore with those who wrote and read them, those texts also directly concerned, sometimes described, and always imply not just those whose historical responses, in the words of Pocock, “were verbalized, recorded, and presented,” but also the “*mentalité* of the silent and inarticulate majority” (*Virtue, Commerce, History*, 18) whose voices appear (often verbatim) in the newspaper accounts, the Fire Courts, the trial minutes, the surveying records, the parish records, the many documents of cultural recovery.

Chapter three, “Redrawing London: maps and texts,” charts the visual and verbal changes in spatial self-perception of the City. Both the strategies of cartography and the grammars of topography changed in response to the Fire and its demands for recovery, and reveal a perception of urban space that itself is changed, become abstract, modern, as much a product of social and economic practices and fluctuations as of physical structures and relations. Very few maps of



## PREFACE

London before the Fire were drawn by Londoners, and such as existed (based primarily on Tudor map-stock) were largely bird's-eye-views, luxuriantly detailed elevations which privileged the viewer's sense of spatial comprehensibility over topographical accuracy. After the Fire, however, scores of new maps by London mapmakers appeared, and they unanimously favor the topographical comprehensiveness of the two-dimensional groundplan, which enables the accurate visual recovery of even the most obscure courts and alleys. The dense topographical anarchy of the medieval street patterns was thus stringently recovered rather than (as before) politely refigured. The textual topographies, on the other hand, mark a slightly different sense of change. As with the maps, before the Fire there were few published descriptions of London printed in London, and those few were based almost entirely on John Stow's 1598 *Survey of London*. Such topographies described the City as much in terms of history as in spatial structure, and their grammars were the grammars of stasis, built on forms of "to be" and resting on verbs of immotion and possession: "there sits," "there stands," "there lies"; "here have you," "here have we." Topographies after the Fire, however, are both more numerous and more "active," borrowing explicitly a technical vocabulary from new surveying strategies and, in response to the increasing anxieties about the expanding *new* building in the "out-parts," working out ever more comprehensive ways of capturing and containing the sense of the rapidly changing city for its own inhabitants.

The text which closes part I and leads directly into part II is Defoe's *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-26), because in the London section of the *Tour* Defoe comes closest to explicitly articulating what Henri Lefebvre calls "the production of space," the modern sense of space as abstract, shifting, culturally rather than simply physically produced. Defoe creates a surveyor's "Line" that *travels* with the energy and ingenuity of his novelistic characters around the contours of the city, creating as much as marking them, and offering a sense of spatial awareness that employs and celebrates elasticity, that replaces a view with a tour, and moves from description into narrative, into what Michel de Certeau calls a storied sense of space.

Defoe provides an apt transition into part II partly because he so explicitly connects cultural, disciplinary, and generic concerns from the 1660s to the 1730s. As Richard Helgerson has argued in *Forms of Nationhood*, "an atlas and a lengthy poem [can] be considered points on a single line – a line that also passes through an odd assortment of other texts, descriptive and antiquarian . . . [because] they are bound by a dense net of intertextual relations. Nor are the relations only between texts. They are also between people" (131). Throughout this book I make (and find) explicit and implicit connections between maps and poems, architectural treatises and comedies, topographies and novels, partly because the

## PREFACE

different genres share conceptual and rhetorical strategies, and partly because the mapsellers were also booksellers (Ogilby, Morden), the mapmakers were fablists (Hollar, Ogilby), the urban planners were Royal Society Fellows (Evelyn, Wren, Hooke), the architects and builders were writers (Wren, North, Pratt, Barbon), the playwrights were architects (Vanbrugh), the playwrights were Royal Society Fellows (Dryden), the playwrights satirized Royal Society Fellows (Shadwell, Behn, Centlivre), the poets satirized Royal Society Fellows (Swift), the novelists were spatial planners (Defoe), and above all, the most obvious: all were concerned with rebuilding or rewriting the city, and all were, in one way or another, at one end or the other, inhabitants of the city.

Defoe's works dominate the second part of the book, "Inhabiting London," because he does articulate so well and in so many generic forms the concerns and strategies of managing the many new forms of modern urban space in its various public and private forms. But I also look closely at how the urban poetry of Dryden, Pope, Gay, and Swift, and the formal and conceptual strategies of Restoration drama, participate in this larger literary reoccupation of London. Part II privileges literary texts and reads them as various generic manifestations of the same larger cultural attempt to reinvest place name with meaning, to remap social structures within spatial boundaries, to chart, contain, and inhabit the strange new spaces of the modern city. Defoe's urban novels and novelistic treatises most consistently employ the innovations in cultural and technical strategies within his narrative innovations. I take care to contextualize these works within and against the substantial body of pre-Fire works that also center on London (the Jacobean city plays, the London tavern songs, the occasional poems, the cony-catching manuals), illustrating the ways in which I see the post-Fire London literature as more specific, more concentrated, and more jointly involved not in negotiating within *given* space but in discovering and defining what had become a sort of *terra incognita*: some things could no longer be taken for granted; they needed to be *asserted*.

At one point I had considered making genre itself the chapter-boundary: how do poems, plays, novels, *as* genres, separately represent and negotiate the urban space? But I decided finally to organize the literary material spatially, as I had in some ways ordered the cultural material generically, because of course different works often shape and imaginatively occupy the various spaces of London in a number of ways at once, and it became more interesting to me to study the ways that poems, plays, and novels approached the street spaces, the public buildings, the houses, and the dark corners of the city.

Chapter four, "The art of writing the streets of London," marks the most obvious and insistent connection with the other cultural material of the rebuilding in the nearly ubiquitous literary fascination with London streets. Street space

## PREFACE

in London before the Fire had been generally subordinate, liminal space designed for (or, at least “sustaining”) transition, transportation – a physical configuration that either helped or hindered passage from one place to another, but which was literally and physically overshadowed by the combined domestic and commercial buildings of the City. But analogically like the cartographic changes – designed to recover the tiniest topographic corners of the vanished London – poems, plays, and novels from the 1670s to the 1720s not only recover and repeat the litanies of street names, they explore them as social and experiential territories, defining their cultural as well as physical implications. Dryden’s *MacFlecknoe*, Pope’s *Dunciad*, and Gay’s *Trivia* trace the literary as well as social demographics of the city, as has been persuasively explored by Aubrey Williams and Pat Rogers, among others; but I emphasize their context of guidebooks and builders’ manuals doing the same thing, and try to show that not only does Augustan poetic form work to contain contemporary urban content, it is also created by and lends new energies to the shifting meanings and ambiguous possibilities of the newly recovered streets. Prose fiction of the period offers a different avenue of approach. From Richard Head’s *The English Rogue* (1667), Ned Ward’s *The London Spy* (1698–1700), and Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722), we see that the streets of London, carefully named and almost literally mapped, become alternative habitations, sometimes safer than houses; the intimate knowledge of these streets means the difference between freedom and arrest. Their new fictional strategies repeople the streets, suggesting ways of navigation through the art of narration.

Chapter five looks at “New narratives of public spaces: parks and shops” as sites of social and economic exchange, and of psychological and phenomenological *change*. With the obvious institutional structures of St. Paul’s and the Exchange destroyed and very publicly rebuilt (in both the practical and the conceptual sense), how had the sense of public space changed? Much of early Restoration drama spends most of its setting-time conspicuously *outside* the area of rebuilding, in the parks (St. James’s, Hyde Park, the Mall) – in the public spaces of London which had *not* changed, which had no need of reinvestment, which offered a psychological refuge to an audience apparently interested in distancing itself from topographic unfamiliarity, particularly from that looming economic and social power of the City. The later plays spend more time in the rebuilt City, eventually contributing to rather than satirizing its growing gentrification. Meanwhile, in the City itself, trade was resettling and the shops opened for business. Defoe’s *The Complete English Tradesman* (1725) creates a sort of how-to manual for the shopkeeper – who increasingly attends the theater – that in proto-novelistic moments stocks shops and warehouses with individualized characters and supplies a living realized context for those moments in Augustan poetry when, as in Swift’s “Description of a City Shower” (1710), daggled females flee

## PREFACE

from the rain to cheapen goods in shops. The mercantile world of the City is abandoned by drama but peopled by narrative.

With the rebuilding, and particularly with speculators like Nicholas Barbon making affordable private houses that *look* like the new houses of the wealthy, along with a wider European move from “civic community to bourgeois privacy” (as Lawrence Manley argues in *Literature and Culture in Early Modern London*), the perception of private space in the city also shifts. In chapter six, “Narratives of private space: churches, houses, and novels,” I look briefly at the rebuilt Anglican churches and their role in Restoration drama as sites of *sexualized* space, and then more closely at the Dissenting churches forced into concealment by religious persecution. Although Dissenting meeting-houses rarely appear in imaginative literature in this period (except as satiric targets in drama), Defoe’s early experience with their social and structural vulnerability and necessary architectural deceptions clearly shaped his fictional creations of private spaces in the domestic structures of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Roxana* (1724); all his works, from the *Tour* and the *Tradesman* to his urban novels, are concerned with “an Inside answerable to the Outside,” or the other way around – with a private space that looks “nothing like a Habitation.”

Finally in this chapter I explore the relation between the changes in cultural perceptions of urban space and the emergence of the novel as an extended narrative that visualizes and inhabits forms of public and more emphatically private space. I argue that the early English novel is a particularly spatial exploration of urban change, and that understanding its cultural contexts of destruction, rebuilding, and redefinition recovers some of the contemporary power and resonance of street names, place lists, public places, private spaces, and the vast netting of topographical allusion. The novel, like other new and newly adapted kinds of texts at the time, both produced and was produced by the cultural reorganization of space.

Any attempt at comprehensiveness naturally invites a search for what’s left out, and specialists in all the disciplines and genres that I’m trying to bring together here will find significant gaps. Beyond the disciplinary categories of London’s cartography, architecture, and history in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, all of which could be thickened by a book of their own, the issues of gender, class, and race may seem to some be under-represented here. I have addressed gender and class (and some ethnic and religious) considerations throughout, but I have privileged space itself as a concept, partly because as a conceptual issue it has only recently begun to receive critical literary attention in the wake of new theories in cultural geography, and partly because in its historical appearance in London in 1666 it began as a wider cultural moment of more

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[More information](#)

## PREFACE

primitive *human* concern. My literary approach is largely phenomenological, trying to recover and understand what it might have meant to a tenant or a poet of London to suffer the loss of an experiential *given*, to confront the various abrupt intersections and transformations of physically and socially determined spaces. I hope what I have put together offers a persuasive structure within which to fit much of the period's more traditional literary patterns and idiosyncracies, and I hope as I have gone along that I have resisted the temptation to explain *everything* in terms of spatial reconstruction – that the more usual elements of explanation (political, religious, philosophical, social, technological) are in no danger of my hubristically displacing them. I want this book to add another dimension to our understanding of the shape, the concerns, the common ground, of Restoration and early Augustan literature, and to see them as part of yet another larger cultural network of assumptions and experiences in the historical production and experience and expression of a world.

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