

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12855-1 - Literature and the English Civil War

Edited by Thomas Healy and Jonathan Sawday

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THOMAS HEALY AND JONATHAN SAWDAY

Introduction: 'Warre is all the world about'

The anniversary of the execution of King Charles I was celebrated as normal on 30 January by the Society of King Charles the Martyr, an esoteric group on the rainbow fringes of high church/right-wing/monarchist/anglo-catholic frontiers who hope and pray for the king's canonization. An altar was set up in the Banqueting House in Whitehall – the scene of his execution supposedly consecrated by his spilled blood. Much gin was drunk. All in all a funny sort of gathering for Mr John (Selwyn) Gummer to be found addressing, expressing his hope that the spirit of King Charles would enter the heart of the Bishop of Durham.

The Guardian, 2 February 1985

This day the Parliament voted that the bodies of Oliver, Ireton, Bradshaw, &c, should be taken up out of their graves in the Abbey, and drawn to the gallows, and there hanged and buried under it: which (methinks) do trouble me that a man of so great courage as he was, should have that dishonour, though otherwise he might deserve it enough.

Samuel Pepys, *Diary* 4 December 1660

I

THIS BOOK is concerned with remembering the events of the mid-seventeenth century which we have come to term the English Civil War, and with reading the literature which emerged from that conflict. The two quotations with which we begin this introduction reflect some of the problems which have faced interpreters of that period. They record attempts not just to recollect what *happened* in the 1640s and 1650s in England, but to (literally) *re-present* those events. They are, in fact, reproductions of history reflecting both the participants' and the observers' sectarian and historical perspectives.

At the same time, these two accounts point to the problematic relationship with the Civil War which British writers, historians, scholars, literary critics and, indeed, politicians enjoy. In Pepys's 1660 account, parliament's action is designed not merely to signal a restoration but to recast events into a different mould. The dead and buried (but not forgotten) resurface in order to meet a different end. In the 1985 account, we hear of an altar – a key symbol and point of confrontation in the mid-seventeenth century – rather than a scaffold being erected in Whitehall. It seems that seventeenth-century

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12855-1 - Literature and the English Civil War

Edited by Thomas Healy and Jonathan Sawday

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 THOMAS HEALY AND JONATHAN SAWDAY

divisions cannot be repressed. A minister in a parliament 325 years after the Restoration registers the fact that the social, political and religious oppositions which were inescapable in 1649 still lurk within the imagination, if not the actuality, of the present.

These quotations further identify problems interpreters face in establishing their own perspective. Pepys reveals the unease many (though not all) contemporary recorders felt in judging recent events.¹ He is troubled by the significance of what is performed. He is also uncovering a commonly found confusion in assessing what was actually done in the Civil War and how it should be remembered. Cromwell might, in Pepys's view, have deserved hanging for what he did, but his reputation ('a man of so great courage') does not. Or does it? The record of the latter-day commemoration of the execution of Charles I isolates a somewhat different problem. Superficially, the event recounted seems to exist on the fringes of mainstream British social and political debate. Stylistically, the author of the piece is hoping to confirm that marginalisation. Here, in popular British political parlance, is the 'Loony Right' at play. Yet, the account also reveals how a participant at the centre of modern British political life (a government minister) uses an adopted seventeenth-century platform and mode of discourse to address another recognised player in the political debate – the 'progressive' Bishop of Durham. The apparent irony of reversals – a member of parliament speaking for monarchy and established religion against a Bishop who is perceived of as representing radical opinion – is revealed only when we replace this act of remembrance into the historical context which it sets out to celebrate.

The essays in this volume are all concerned with this process of remembering and replacing. Their focus is on the literature which has come down to us from what is regarded as a key moment in British history, but where a bewildering variety of conflicting opinion, analysis and interpretation is invested. The contributors to this volume reflect that diversity in their own adoption of a variety of perspectives and methodologies to explore the ways literary texts anticipated and participated in events of this period.

But for all their differences in approach, the essays share a number of common concerns. All recognise that literature does not act as a passive register of historical events but exists in a dynamic engagement with its context. The poems, plays, masques, diaries, pamphlets and records which are the subjects of these essays are understood as texts which are involved in the actual production of history. The 'literary' shapes and provides a framework, a narration, not only for the events which are witnessed, but also for intellectual and imaginative participation in the social and political world. Literary texts may adopt any number of rhetorical, generic, and imaginative patterns through which to investigate the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12855-1 - Literature and the English Civil War

Edited by Thomas Healy and Jonathan Sawday

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

present. So, it might be added, does historiography. But literature reads and interprets history intertextually. It recalls other texts in other historical moments which have attempted to frame the present – just as we, as readers, are aware of other texts pressing upon our interpretations. In this sense, literature is continually engaged in a process of revising its own moment of production. This revisionary process is the textual equivalent of that desire to re-enact the past which Samuel Pepys recorded in December 1660.

In terms of the literature which was produced in the revolutionary period, a desire to recapture and, if necessary, re-shape the past is an overwhelming concern, and one that is investigated in a number of essays in this collection. That urge to call on the resources of the past is manifested in those early attempts, after the Restoration, to shape what ‘happened’ into a narrative which can serve to order the present. Clarendon’s *History of the Rebellion* begins, for example, by invoking both present and future, in the belief that it is all too easy for those ‘few’ who, in Clarendon’s words, ‘opposed and resisted that torrent’, to ‘lose the recompense due to their virtue in the present’. Here, Clarendon is investigating what he terms the ‘general combination, and universal apostasy in the whole nation from their religion and allegiance’. The ‘castigation of heaven’, Clarendon is willing to believe, may await this majority in the future. But the intervention of providence might be assisted a little by the historian. In the present it is Clarendon’s task, in framing a ‘full and clear narration’, to indicate where virtue should be rewarded.²

Clarendon’s desire to record those ‘few’, who, in his opinion, stood out against the ‘madness’ of the times might alert us to a similar model of heroic resistance to the tyranny of the majority:

So spake the seraph Abdiel faithful found,
Among the faithless, faithful only he;
Among innumerable false, unmoved,
Unshaken, unseduced, unterrified
His loyalty he kept, his love, his zeal;
Nor number, nor example with him wrought
To swerve from truth, or change his constant mind
Though single.³

Milton’s Abdiel stands as a witness to match Clarendon’s ‘few’ who were moved by ‘duty and conscience’ to resist the force of rebellion. For Milton and for Clarendon, both of them recorders of revolutions and participants, though on opposite sides, in the English Revolution, the post-revolutionary task is to authorise the present.

How, in concrete terms, does this fusion of the past and the present display itself? In 1630, Sir Richard Fanshawe, later to become Charles II’s

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12855-1 - Literature and the English Civil War

Edited by Thomas Healy and Jonathan Sawday

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 THOMAS HEALY AND JONATHAN SAWDAY

ambassador to Portugal and Spain, wrote his celebratory ‘Ode Upon Occasion of His Majesties Proclamation in the Yeare 1630’. The proclamation to which Fanshawe would appear to be referring is that of 9 September 1630, which urged all country gentlemen with no particular business at court to return to their estates. This proclamation was itself only the latest in a long line of such royal suggestions that the gentry were best employed in the provinces rather than in London – the earliest being that of James I in May 1603. James had himself written an elegy, in 1622, whose title was very similar to that of Fanshawe’s piece: ‘An Elegie written by the king concerning his counsell for Ladies and gentlemen to depart the city of London according to his Majesties proclamation’.⁴ Fanshawe’s poem, though, opens as follows:

Now warre is all the world about,
And everywhere *Erynnis* raignes,
Or else the Torch so late put out
The stench remains.⁵

Ostensibly the poem then proceeds to celebrate Britain’s preservation from the Thirty Years War raging on the continent. Only Britain, the poem argues, is preserved from this fury. Yet, that preservation is put at risk by the recalcitrant determination of the gentry to ‘rowle themselves in envy’d leasure’ in the town rather than discover ‘more solid joyes, / More true contentment to the minde’ in the country. Expressed thus, we can read the poem as evidence in the historians’ debate concerning the origins of the Civil War. Fanshawe, an ardent royalist who, between 1644 and 1650 was to spend much of his time travelling in Britain and on the continent on royal business, nevertheless sees the decadent court culture as sapping (the plant metaphor is Fanshawe’s own) the virility of the gentry who would be better employed spreading their ‘quickning power’ through the distant parts of the commonwealth. More than this, however, we can see how the poem’s *generic* ancestry is rooted not only in the conventional Horatian theme of honest country life versus decadent town existence, but in a previous poem, written by the monarch himself, which functions as an ambivalent piece of quasi-executive command somewhat foreign to modern ears. Did the king’s poem of 1622 contain the same force of command as was intended by the king’s proclamation? What happens to the sovereign will, in other words, if it is expressed through the medium of poetic rather than proclamatory discourse?

It is this ability of the literary text to intervene in its own historical moment which is of concern here. Having placed the poem in that historical moment, and having uncovered its sources, have we explicated the history or the poem? We think not. Fanshawe’s poem was first published in 1648 by which time its whole function, which we have just enshrined

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12855-1 - Literature and the English Civil War

Edited by Thomas Healy and Jonathan Sawday

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

(as it were) in history, had radically altered. To put the question in the following Borgesian way seems helpful: is Fanshawe's 'Ode Upon His Majesties Proclamation' as written in 1630, the same poem as his 'Ode Upon his Majesties Proclamation' published in 1648? We would argue that it is clearly not the same. In 1630 the opening line of the poem 'Now warre is all the world about' served as a possibly anxious reminder that in other places life was not as comfortable as it was, for some, in Charles's England. But by 1648 the text has become an ironic commentary on the fact that war is now, quite definitely, all the world about. The irony is a product of the 'historicity' of the text.⁶

Poems, literary texts, clearly live and move in the history in which we place them. As our opening quotations illustrate, the past is re-made by the present, just as the present is fashioned by the past. The 1630 poem changes when it becomes the 1648 poem, and the experience of other wars and other texts serves continually to re-fashion past and present. At the same time, the relationship between reader and literary text is not constrained by that text's origins. This subtle relationship between the reader, the text, and historical process is what this collection sets out to explore.

II

The essays in this volume have been arranged to highlight five areas in which the debate between literature and history in the Civil War appear to be particularly significant. This topical arrangement is not designed to suggest that essays within each section are homogeneous in the interpretive strategies which they employ, nor are the groups exclusive in their concerns. By isolating these areas, though, we hope to show the ways in which civil war discourse operates across the more familiar boundaries of authors or genres. More than that, however, we hope that this arrangement will allow the reader to perceive the parameters of debate within the given areas of discussion. Few of the essays in this collection are in agreement with one another – though all of them establish points of contact which we believe are fruitful. In the remainder of this introduction we shall try and indicate some of the areas of agreement and disagreement.

Annabel Patterson's opening essay raises the central issue of how language is implicated in historical moments, an issue with which the volume as a whole is clearly concerned. What, in effect, are we to call the events which took place in England between 1640 and 1660? This question has been addressed more than once by historians, but it is one that tends to be evaded by those whose primary focus is the literature of the period. Paradoxically, it is the historian who has been most adept at, or at least

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12855-1 - Literature and the English Civil War

Edited by Thomas Healy and Jonathan Sawday

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 THOMAS HEALY AND JONATHAN SAWDAY

most concerned about, attending to the nuances of language and terminology:

[The historian] can state without fear of contradiction that civil war broke out in England in 1642, but he cannot state categorically why, and even his choice of terms – whether he calls this event a rebellion or a revolution for instance – is often open to serious objections . . . Yet for want of anything better we have to go on using such terms, and other terms which would almost certainly have been meaningless to contemporaries . . . Any interpretation of the past is not only anachronistic but often written in anachronistic terminology.⁷

Thus J.P. Kenyon, who, like Clarendon, is in no doubt that what happened in the seventeenth century was a ‘rebellion’. Kenyon’s implied solution to the problem is that all would be well if we could only recover not just contemporary definitions of terms, but stable agreement (from the past and the present) as to both the denotative and connotative aspects of seventeenth-century writing. Patterson’s essay takes this argument significantly further, raising both the historical and the theoretical question of naming. As she indicates, a current division amongst interpreters of the seventeenth century locates them either as historians of ‘Order’ or ‘Disorder’ – a categorisation which, she argues, can also be uncovered amongst those writing in the period itself. In the seventeenth century, just as much as today, the choice of a particular model with which to characterise events betrays often unvoiced political and social expectations. To assign a name is not simply a matter of clarification, or historical precision, but an ideological choice. Choices of vocabulary may either marginalise or centralise the issues from which we construct those interpretive stratagems by which we try to explain the past and the present. Patterson directs us to the affective component of history and the language of cultural memory, in the hope of isolating those cultural myths which operated in the civil war years.

Graham Parry continues this debate about names and definitions by examining a different set of myths. Parry looks at the ways in which the writings of Sir Richard Fanshawe, together with the work of other poets of the pre-civil war years, can be seen as attempting a ‘recovery’ of some form of political and ideological stability. If the ‘Arcadia’ of England has been violated by the present, then there exists the possibility of turning to the past in order to ‘sustain a vision of the future that could overlap the calamities of the present’. Again, we sense how desperately important the past was to those who saw the nation drifting into what might now be termed a political crisis.

But which past was to be turned to? Was it a model of the past to be uncovered in the reading of Virgil, Tacitus and Seneca? Or was it, instead, a scriptural past, or even an anglo-saxon one, that could be refurbished

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12855-1 - Literature and the English Civil War

Edited by Thomas Healy and Jonathan Sawday

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

and made to serve for the future? We might remind ourselves that it was in 1641 that Coke's *Institutes* were published by order of the Long Parliament, a decision which served to confirm that powerful historical myth of the supposedly pre-Norman origins of English law. Similarly, Gerrard Winstanley's understanding of the institution of private property also rooted itself in a historical argument.⁸ In the two opening essays this struggle to name the present in terms of the past is highlighted, a topic to which several of the essays return.

An alternative was to avoid the problems of past, present and future altogether – to turn away from the world of messy political confrontation and create an idealised world of art or devotion. Whether such a retreat was possible (whether, indeed, it ever took place) is a theme of a number of the essays. It is the dominant concern of the second section of the book to investigate two very different forms of what have often been understood as escapism: devotional poetry and the masque. To link these two together might initially seem to be perverse. The masque is a determinedly public spectacle existing within the court culture. Devotional poetry, on the other hand, would seem to exist in total opposition to extravagant public utterance.

Yet, the juxtaposition of two very different sets of cultural vocabulary helps to illustrate the fracture which existed within aesthetic forms that, from the outside, appear self-enclosed, even resistant, to any form of self-scrutiny.⁹ Both masque and devotional poem encode within their different structures a veiled commentary on the present. For Martin Butler the masque is not a representation of wilful escapism. Instead, it was an important means by which the king and his political elite could communicate with one another. In the moment of crisis of 1640, however, that possibility of communication had fallen apart. Davenant's *Salmacida Spolia*, far from being, in Butler's words, 'an attempt by an already superannuated monarchy to dazzle its sceptical audience into forgetting the problems of the moment' instead represents an attempt to 'intervene in events and construct a platform of confidence'. That project, we now know, was a failure, but it is a failure which can be investigated not only from the circumstances of the masque's production, but from within the structure of the masque itself.

Devotional poetry, on the other hand, does seem to signal a form of retreat, as Helen Wilcox argues. But what kind of retreat is possible? Here, Wilcox discovers a series of paradoxes which place the question of engagement or retreat into more complex configurations than those which have been proposed by modern commentators on seventeenth-century writing. It is all too easy to believe that devotional writing exists as no more than a form of recreational solace: an alternative form of literary disengagement from the present.¹⁰ But powerlessness, passivity,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12855-1 - Literature and the English Civil War

Edited by Thomas Healy and Jonathan Sawday

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 THOMAS HEALY AND JONATHAN SAWDAY

weakness (terms invoked most frequently, though not exclusively, by the women poets whom Wilcox examines) may become in themselves articles of strength within a poetic which is struggling to find utterance in a time of confrontation. The result, Wilcox suggests, is a religious aesthetic of 'confinement' – one shared by both male and female devotional poets.

Confinement is a rather different proposition to disengagement. Confinement suggests that the war cannot be escaped, that it has intruded into individuals' experience not only of the world, but of themselves. The essays in the third section of the book carry this argument further. In the accounts of civil war writing offered by Francis Barker, Thomas Corns and Jonathan Sawday, the language of conflict and war seems to have entered the very structure of thought so that very little in the writer's experience can remain neutral, or even appear to be the product of a unified sensibility.

This sense of dislocation, explored in Wilcox's account and returned to in the context of women's writing in the penultimate essay in the collection, informs Sawday's account of that revolutionary 'madness' identified by Clarendon looking back on the war. Clarendon, however, was not alone in sensing that a profound psychological change had occurred in the war years. In Sawday's essay, the language of division, fragmentation and insanity is investigated in the context of seventeenth-century expressions of a wished-for psychological unity. An impossible ideal of wholeness, rooted in literary fables of self-completion, is opposed to the discovery that retirement into the psychological fortress of the mind may actually hasten that self-destructive moment which individuals, at a moment of profound political crisis, were set upon evading.

The essays in the central section of the book are concerned with registering the means whereby the war lies buried within the discourses available to the writer, sometimes hidden, but always inescapable. For Corns – taking Milton as his subject, and acknowledging that very few writers have been politically interrogated to the extent that Milton has – there is no single ideological position to which Milton can be consistently assigned. Instead, Corns argues, we are faced with a 'plurality' not just of ideologies, but of Miltons, writing in a diversity of genres each of which demands its own interpretive strategies, and each of which carries with it an ideological perspective which cannot be simply shunted aside. Corns' essay, therefore, returns us to that problem identified in the opening account – how can we begin the business of interpretation?

Barker also takes Milton's writings as his starting point, but juxtaposes his reading of Milton (specifically *Areopagitica*) with a reading of Thomas Hobbes who, like Milton, dominates our understanding of seventeenth-century writing. For Barker, Milton and Hobbes meet, or rather just fail to meet, in that vexed word: Truth. In Milton's writing, Barker argues,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12855-1 - Literature and the English Civil War

Edited by Thomas Healy and Jonathan Sawday

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

Truth is embodied and given a concrete presence in tropes of militancy and war. Truth is associated with violence, with the armed female figure who, paradoxically, slips (or is pushed) into the position of victim of just that violence which Milton's text invokes. Where Milton's Truth and Hobbes's truth differ, crucially, is in the theory of discourse which underpins each account. In Milton, discourse rests upon struggle, almost as though the war being fought in England could be understood as fortuitously available to substantiate Milton's own evocation of knowledge as a species of armed struggle. In Hobbes's *Leviathan*, however, truth remains un bodied. It has no need of that process of figuration so insistently urged upon us in Milton's images. In part, this absence of embodiment can be ascribed to the fact that *Leviathan* itself demonstrates the procedures whereby the abstract commonwealth can become corporeal. More than this, however, is the vital part played by Hobbes's own theory of discourse. 'Rebellion', whether against power, reason or truth, becomes impossible, given the inter-linking of a theory of language and the theory of contract, because it involves a 'falling away from true language and even from language itself'. The whole endeavour of Hobbes's language is revealed as an attempt at keeping at bay the disruptive force of civil war through the demonstration that language and 'obedience' are indivisible.

Hobbes's concern with language and with a theory of discourse rooted in the war is a concern which has attracted some attention of late.¹¹ The link between language and rebellion, however, was an enduring concern of seventeenth-century writers. Milton's story of the tyrant Nimrod, punished by the confusion of language, finds its echo in other accounts of language in the period. The well-known passage on the 'abuse' of words in Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society* of 1667 defines language as a 'Weapon . . . as easily procur'd by bad men as good' in the belief that 'eloquence ought to be banish'd out of *civil societies* as a thing fatal to Peace and good Manners'.¹² For the war was a time of noise – a linguistic riot of conflicting sound. What Keith Lindley terms 'verbal outbursts and unorthodox conversations', the novelty of the woman preacher, 'tumultuous assemblies', petitions, and the spectacular outpouring of ballads, news-books and pamphlets particularly in the period 1642–7, substantiate the image of a conflict which was a matter of words as well as of pikes.¹³

Amidst the cacophony of sects, opinions and competing ideological and religious positions, it would not be surprising to encounter the urge to exert some form of interpretive control over discourse. Control – over interpretation, over history, over the moment of literary production, and, most importantly over territory and people – is the theme of the fourth section of this book. David Norbrook's discussion of Marvell's 'An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland' – takes as its starting

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12855-1 - Literature and the English Civil War

Edited by Thomas Healy and Jonathan Sawday

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 THOMAS HEALY AND JONATHAN SAWDAY

point the suppression of the poem until 1776. That suppression, Norbrook argues, enabled subsequent generations to understand Marvell as a 'zealous protestant patriot' but not, significantly, as a spokesman for republicanism. In fact Marvell's disengagement from *any* form of political involvement is how generations of critics wanted to understand the author of some of the most politically motivated poetry in the language.¹⁴ But, a republican culture is what the poem speaks to and for through its careful manipulation of generic expectations, and its sustained attempt at *revising* not only the politics of poetry but the politics of classical culture inherited by seventeenth-century readers. The result is an 'Ode' which sets out to defeat monarchism by defeating the rhetoric of monarchism by denying the reader's horizon of generic expectations. At the same time a further instance of the revolution's obsession with the past is underlined.

Texts and authors which out-trope their precursors – as Norbrook argues Marvell out-tropes Horace – and texts which call upon the 'horizon' of a reader's 'expectations' have, of course, become fascinating objects of contemporary theoretical study, whether concerned with a theory of literary production or interpretation.¹⁵ But to place these activities of revision and denial within a precise historical moment (as opposed to the general Renaissance desire to recover classical texts) is a more difficult task. That writers and readers were caught up in such a revisionary struggle is suggested by Milton's sonnet 'When the assault was intended to the city'. Milton's poem foregrounds a *literary* past (were knights in arms really to be found facing the trained bands on Turnham Green in the winter of 1642?) which can be located generically (in Horace and Pindar), and in an idea of poetry which has emerged 'from the study and faces out into the street . . . ready to function as a counterforce to force'.¹⁶

At issue, then, is the extent to which seventeenth-century writers believed it possible to control the 'apophradic' (to adopt Harold Bloom's term) energy of literature. Past texts could return, or be summoned. Once recalled, as Richard Overton suggested, it might perhaps be a simple matter to extract from them a contemporary meaning: 'The figure is but the shell; will you not crack the shell to take out the kernel? Pass through the Parable to the Morall thereof?' But that was precisely the problem. For, as Overton continues, 'things (however in themselves) are to others as they are taken'.¹⁷

In Thomas Healy's essay, which takes Marvell's *Upon Appleton House* as its subject, the difficulties associated with controlling the past when it is summoned to do service for the present are highlighted. What are we to make, Healy asks, of the supremely unliterary crucifixion of a woman named Agnes Griffen who, so it was recorded in 1650, was forced to eat her own flesh? Here the past, specifically the scriptural past, has returned with a vengeance. For what is enacted, in this cruel account of suffering