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Ian Jack
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Introduction

I ORIGINALLY thought of having as a frontispiece to this book the illustration of Chaucer reading to a courtly audience which adorns the manuscript of *Troilus and Criseyde* in the library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. There is the poet: there is his book: and there is his audience.

If the illustration were reliable it would provide a clue to a question which must have occurred to many readers of Chaucer. What sort of audience did he write for? Did he (for that matter) write all his major poems for the same audience? Were *The Canterbury Tales* written for the same audience as *Troilus and Criseyde*? Was *The Knight's Tale* written for the same audience as *The Miller's Tale*? If we could give a definite answer to these questions we would be in a stronger position as interpreters and critics of his poetry.

At the moment there is no consensus among Chaucerian scholars, perhaps because the concept of a courtly audience has not been sufficiently analysed. While some experts continue to regard Chaucer as a Court poet, others go so far as to describe *The Canterbury Tales* as 'palpably not a courtly work'.[1] We are left to speculate how far, and in what respects, his poems were influenced by the audience or audiences he had in mind as he wrote.

The question which presents itself so naturally when we read the long poems of Chaucer or Spenser or Dryden may seem less urgent with lyrical poetry. It is still sometimes supposed that lyrics are spontaneous utterances created without thought of an audience – except perhaps, in the case of love poetry, that formed by the poet's beloved. Critics used to praise Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' for its sincerity, and I remember one distinguished old scholar assuring me that it could only have been written by a man deeply in love. I wonder. Those of us who are interested in the rhetorical background of seventeenth-century literature may be forgiven for arguing that Marvell's poem tells us more about his audience than about his lady, and concluding that whether or not he had a coy mistress when he wrote it he

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must certainly have possessed, in the company assembled at Appleton House or elsewhere, an audience of cultivated people who could be relied on to appreciate his art. 'Rare Poems ask rare friends.'[2]

We know that the greatest of Greek lyric poets, Pindar, was so far from writing without thought of an audience that he celebrated public events for a public audience; and the whole history of lyric seems to suggest that his audience frequently exercises a strong influence on a lyric poet. There is no reason why this should imply the absence of strong personal feeling: if ever a poem was inspired by deep personal grief it was *In Memoriam*, and we know that Tennyson told his son that he had begun 'the elegies' without thought of publication: as they multiplied, however, over a long period of years, publication became inevitable, and the nature of the reading public of the day clearly exerted an influence over many aspects of the poem. If Tennyson had made it less 'cheerful' – as he sometimes thought that he should have done – *In Memoriam* would not have proved such an immediate success, and it is unlikely that its author would so soon have found himself Poet Laureate.

Shelley, whose work exerted so profound an influence on Tennyson, once described the poet as 'a nightingale, singing in solitude'. Yet the essay which contains that phrase ends with the proud claim that 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world', and we have only to read Shelley's letters to find that he was always deeply concerned about the potential audience for his poems. He took a keen interest in the manner of their publication, for example, urging that *Queen Mab* should be printed 'in quarto, so as to catch the aristocrats', and showing a realism which did not always characterise his reflections on the subject by adding, 'they will not read me, but their sons and daughters may'.

Just as the fact that an élite has played a vital part in the history of civilisation is distasteful to many people today, so the fact that the laws of supply and demand have a bearing on the history of poetry may be found disconcerting by readers whose aesthetic is more romantic than they know. They should recall Samuel Johnson's pithy comment on the history of drama –

> The Drama's Laws the Drama's Patrons give,
> For we that live to please, must please to live[3]

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– and reflect that the history of European music, painting and sculpture cannot be intelligently studied without reference to the overwhelmingly important part played by the patronage of Church and aristocracy. Dryden's career will no more be understood than will that of Henry Purcell by a critic who ignores the position of a poet or a musician in the reign of Charles II.

Except Shelley, each of the poets with whom I am concerned succeeded in creating for himself a large reading public: a public whose tastes and prejudices inevitably influenced the nature of his poetry. The same is true of most successful poets. It is evident that Dylan Thomas, who proclaimed so eloquently that he did not write for

> the proud man apart
> From the raging moon . . .
> But for the lovers, their arms
> Round the griefs of the ages,
> Who pay no praise or wages
> Nor heed my craft or art[4]

was wholly dependent on those who did heed his art and were prepared to find money to encourage it. If it had not been for the enlightened patronage of the BBC Third Programme he would not have written *Under Milk Wood* in the form in which we know it, a remarkable work which serves admirably to illustrate how the nature of the audience which he envisages helps to determine a poet's choice of genre ('A Play for Voices'), subject-matter, and treatment.

It is my aim to throw light on the careers of six major poets by considering how far the audiences for which they wrote seem to have influenced their poetry. When we read a poem in an anthology, or in the artificial situation required by the demands of 'Practical Criticism', it is reduced to the condition of a cut flower. If we wish to understand the poem it becomes necessary to try to see it, in the manner of an ecologist, in its natural habitat. How *could* Dryden write *Absalom and Achitophel*, how *could* Pope write *The Rape of the Lock*, how *could* Byron write *Don Juan*, how *could* Yeats write the poems in *The Tower*? In each case one clue to the answer is to be found by studying the nature of the reading public for which the poet wrote.

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I · DRYDEN
Servant to the King

THE future Laureate of Charles II could not have had a more suitable education than Dryden received as a King's Scholar at Westminster, a school described by the great preacher Robert South as 'so untaintedly loyal, that . . . in the very worst of times (in which it was my lot to be a member of it) we really were King's scholars as well as called so'. He remembered how on 'that black and eternally infamous day of the King's murder . . . the King was publicly prayed for in this school but an hour or two (at most) before his sacred head was struck off'.[1] On that day in January 1649 Dryden was probably one of the boys who were led in prayer by the Master, Dr Richard Busby, a man who was to remain his friend and to become the recipient of a notable compliment from him more than forty years later. The highly rhetorical and linguistic training provided by the curriculum formed an admirable education for a poet. In the first of his critical essays Dryden was to deplore careless poets who 'constantly close their Lines with Verbs; which though commended sometimes in Writing *Latin*, yet we were Whipt at *Westminster* if we us'd it twice together.'[2] If Dryden was never to write a line without being conscious of his audience, the early and forceful presence of Busby may help to explain the fact.

He first reached print as one of the 'divers persons of Nobility and Worth' who lamented the untimely death of the eldest son of the Earl of Huntingdon in 1649. 'Upon the death of the Lord Hastings', which appeared in the company of poems by Denham, Herrick, and Marvell, among others, is the work of a clever schoolboy who was preparing for Cambridge, where John Cleveland was the poet of the day. Like Cleveland, Dryden addresses himself to a self-consciously intellectual and academic audience. When we read such lines as these:

> O had he di'd of old, how great a strife
> Had been, who from his Death should draw their Life?

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> Who should, by one rich draught, become what ere
> *Seneca*, *Cato*, *Numa*, *Caesar*, were:
> Learn'd, Vertuous, Pious, Great; and have by this
> An universal *Metempsuchosis*

we are reminded of John Evelyn's description of Cleveland as a man who had 'lived long in Universities' and who affected 'words and expressions no where in use besides'.[3] There is a certain piquancy in finding a poet who twenty years later was to censure Cleveland for expressing everything 'hard and unnaturally' himself writing in just such a manner, and for the same reason. As Dryden developed and began to write for a wider and more 'polite' audience the wit which appears so affected in this early poem was refined for Courtly readers.

Since he published only one poem in the next decade, and that an insignificant epistle, Dryden is bound to strike us as one of the least precocious of our poets. The explanation is to be found in the troubled and uncertain times. After his residence at Trinity College, during which his father died and left him a considerable estate, he moved to London and soon came under the protection of his powerful kinsman Sir Gilbert Pickering, a close friend of Cromwell's. It was no doubt under his influence that Dryden wrote the 'Heroique Stanza's, Consecrated to the Glorious Memory of . . . OLIVER Late LORD PROTECTOR', his first considerable poem, and one which was to return to haunt him in his maturity.[4] From the sure tone of the opening to the decisive dignity of the conclusion it is the work of a poet who has cast aside puerilities. Classical allusions and scientific images abound, and the elegy is obviously intended for a highly educated audience; yet we no longer find the ostentation of wit and learning which renders the earlier poem so gauche. As surely as the early work of Milton himself, this is the verse of a young poet who is studying the great masters of his art and aspiring to the highest kinds of poetry. While Dryden's skill in panegyric is already evident he refrains from satire on Cromwell's opponents, so that the elegy may be read as an essentially patriotic composition. As if anticipating his role as the official poet of England, Dryden prophesies a great future, a future enriched by trade due to the nation's foreign conquests.

The same patriotic ardour which led him to eulogise Cromwell inspired *Astræa Redux* (The Return of Justice), in which he

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celebrated the Restoration. If Dryden changed, as Johnson later observed, 'he changed with the nation'.[5] General Monck made the King's return possible by eventually changing his allegiance: Pepys's cousin, another of the main parliamentary naval commanders, also moved to the King's cause: Locke, Waller and Thomas Sprat were among the numerous poets who had celebrated Cromwell but who now hastened to greet the new monarch in triumphal verses: and Dryden joined the chorus.

On the title-page we find one of the most famous lines in all poetry, the eighth of Virgil's fourth eclogue: '*Iam Redit & Virgo, Redeunt Saturnia Regna*'. As Frances Yates reminds us, for later ages 'The golden age is the Augustan rule, the Augustan revival of piety, the peace of the world-wide Augustan empire.'[6] And so the poem ends on a note of jubilant assurance:

> And now times whiter Series is begun
> Which in soft Centuries shall smoothly run;
> Those Clouds that overcast your Morne shall fly
> Dispell'd to farthest corners of the sky.
>
> . . .
>
> Oh Happy Age! Oh times like those alone
> By Fate reserv'd for Great *Augustus* Throne!
> When the joint growth of Armes and Arts foreshew
> The World a Monarch, and that Monarch *You*.

It is impossible to understand the strange graph traced by Dryden's poetic career if we do not realise that it is the resultant of two very different forces: the pattern of Virgil's career, leading to the culmination of a great patriotic epic, and the hard facts of political and financial circumstances.

If Charles was to be Augustus, and Dryden Virgil, who was to play the essential part of Maecenas? Dryden's first answer is provided by the poem which he wrote immediately after his coronation panegyric, *To My Lord Chancellor*. This eloquent address, thick sown with scientific images which Clarendon can have had no difficulty in understanding, makes it clear that Dryden hoped he would be the English Maecenas, as Richelieu had been the French:

> When our Great Monarch into Exile went
> Wit and Religion suffer'd banishment:
>
> . . .

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> At length the Muses stand restor'd again
> To that great charge which Nature did ordain;
> And their lov'd Druyds seem reviv'd by Fate
> While you dispence the Laws and guide the State.

The scientific imagery with which Dryden flattered Clarendon is even more obviously apt in the epistle 'To my Honour'd Friend, Dr *Charleton*, on his learned and Useful Works; and more particularly this of STONE-HENG, by him Restored to the true Founders'. As Phillip Harth has pointed out,[7] this poem, written within a few weeks of Dryden's election to the Royal Society, is inspired by the same wave of intellectual excitement that is so unmistakable in other publications by early members and their associates. Dryden compares the way in which truth had grown 'scarce, and dear, and yet sophisticate' when Aristotle was regarded as its only supplier to the phenomenon of expensive quack medicines. He moves on to compliment his friend with a brilliantly appropriate image from science:

> Nor are *You*, Learned Friend, the least renown'd;
> Whose Fame, not circumscrib'd with *English* ground,
> Flies like the nimble journeys of the Light;
> And is, like that, unspent too in its flight.

Important truths are to be found in Charleton's writings, 'like rich veins of Ore', while his pen possesses a 'healing virtue . . . To perfect Cures on *Books*, as well as *Men*'. He must be a fine physician since he is able to 'make *Stones* to live'.

Dryden's interpretation of what may be termed decorum of audience is further exemplified in the lines 'To the Lady *Castlemain*, Upon Her incouraging his first Play'. There is nothing difficult about his opening comparison of himself to 'Sea-men shipwrackt on some happy shore', or in the lines

> You, like the Stars, not by reflexion bright,
> Are born to your own Heav'n, and your own Light.[8]

We have only to compare this poem with the 'Verses to her *Highness* the *Dutchess*' prefixed to *Annus Mirabilis* four years later to see that this is a 'prentice piece, yet we notice that Dryden was already trying to find the proper style for a complimentary poem to a lady so brilliantly exemplified and defined on that occasion:

> Some who have seen a paper of Verses which I wrote last year to her Highness the *Dutchess*, have accus'd them of that onely thing I could defend in them; they have said I did *humi serpere*, that I wanted not onely height of fancy, but dignity of words to set it off; I might well answer with that of *Horace, Nunc non erat his locus*, I knew I address'd them to a Lady, and accord-

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ingly I affected the softness of expression, and the smoothness of measure, rather then the height of thought.

The style of the complimentary epistles brilliantly illustrates Dryden's constant awareness of his audience.

Dryden had good reason to be grateful to the Countess of Castlemaine, the licentious beauty with whom Charles was rumoured to have spent the first night after his Restoration. The King's passion for the theatre made it inevitable that any writer of ambition should attempt the drama, but Dryden's first venture, *The Duke of Guise*, did not seem successful even to his friends, and when the first of his plays to be acted, *The Wild Gallant*, was produced in 1663 the King, according to Pepys, 'did not seem pleased at all'.[9] It was the Countess – whom Pepys described as 'all worth seeing tonight' – who appears to have liked the comedy, and it was no doubt due to her influence that Dryden could claim that it was 'more than once the Divertisement of His Majesty, by His own Command'. When one reads the play it becomes easy to see why Jeremy Collier was to blame Dryden for doing more than any other writer to introduce a strain of profanity into the drama of the time, while the freedom with which religious topics are handled helps to explain Evelyn's remark, three years later, that he very seldom went to 'the publique *Theaters*, for many reasons, now as they were abused, to an atheisticall liberty'.[10]

Whereas Dryden seems to have had little real enthusiasm for writing comedy, the new heroic drama, which was equally popular with the King, aroused his interest as a craftsman and was destined to exert a marked influence on the development of his poetry. It is significant that the first writer to use the term in English, Sir William Davenant when he dedicated *The Siege of Rhodes* to Clarendon, referred scornfully to critics who would 'deny heroique plays to the gentry', so making it clear that the popularity of this new species of drama was due to the taste of the Court and those who took their lead from the Court. Although Dryden does not apply the term to *The Indian Queen*, in which he collaborated with Sir Robert Howard, that play has justly been described as 'the first fully formed heroic play to be acted in London'.[11] It is not surprising that the King was pleased, since the play is full of loyal sentiments:

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Rebellion is a greater fault than pride.

'Saucy rebels' receive severe censure, Montezuma turns out to be 'the issue of our murthered King', while Ynca observes that 'Kings best revenge their wrongs when they forgive,'[12] so summing up an essential part of the Restoration settlement.

The dedication of *The Indian Emperour*, which was first performed in 1665, states categorically that 'The favour which Heroick Plays have lately found upon our Theaters has been wholly deriv'd to them, from the countenance and approbation they have receiv'd at Court, the most eminent persons for Wit and Honour in the Royal Circle having so far own'd them, that they have judg'd no way so fit as [rhyming] Verse to entertain a Noble Audience, or to express a noble passion'. The play was dedicated to the Duchess of Monmouth, whom Dryden was later to describe as his 'first and best patroness';[13] and we know that the Duke and Duchess themselves acted in a Court performance three years later. The verse is stronger now, the loyalty still unimpeachable:

> Take heed, Fair Maid, how Monarchs you accuse:
> Such reasons none but impious Rebels use:
> Those who to Empire by dark paths aspire,
> Still plead a call to what they most desire.

In Act V Scene ii Montezuma asks rhetorically, 'Is it not brave to suffer with thy King?' A few lines later his reasoning anticipates that of *Religio Laici*. In the epilogue Dryden shows his usual awareness of his audience, declaring that 'Coffee-wits' should confine themselves to damning the Dutch, permitting 'the great *Dons* of Wit' the privilege 'To Damn all others, and cry up their own', and ends with the assertion that 'the Ladies' should 'have pow'r to save, but not to kill'.

When a severe outbreak of the plague closed the theatres in June 1665 Dryden decided to occupy his enforced leisure by writing a long essay on dramatic poetry. Since he was anxious to canvass various points of view, and so to clarify his own mind, he chose for his form 'a Dialogue sustain'd by persons of several opinions, all of them left doubtful, to be determined by the Readers in general', and discussed the past and future of the English drama in the 'Sceptical' manner of the Ancients, now 'imitated by the modest Inquisitions of the Royal Society'.[14] Before the essay could be published, however, Dryden began to

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write an ambitious poem celebrating three naval victories against the Dutch in the year 1666.

We may safely assume that the writing of an epic poem had been one of his earliest ambitions, and we note that it was to survive the publication of *Paradise Lost* only a few months later. It is evident that Dryden's epic would at once have been more modern in conception than Milton's, and more traditional: we may juxtapose his comment that he has chosen 'the most heroick Subject which any Poet could desire . . . the motives, the beginning, progress and successes of a most just and necessary War' with Milton's reference to 'Wars, hitherto the only argument Heroic deemed'.[15] Whereas Milton had found himself obliged to abandon the idea of a patriotic epic when his country (as it seemed to him) proved false to itself, deciding to write for 'fit audience . . . though few',[16] Dryden had no such difficulty. The fact that the recent victories had been won at sea (they are now seen by historians to have inaugurated a new era in the history of naval power) rendered them all the more suitable.[17] By a fortunate chance we know that one of the most important men in the history of the Navy, Samuel Pepys, bought a copy and approved of it highly: 'I am very well pleased this night', he wrote on 2 February 1667, 'with reading a poem I brought home with me last night from Westminster hall, of Driden's upon the present war – a very good poem.'[18] To the modern reader *Annus Mirabilis* is likely to appear an odd, baroque sort of work, but it is clear that Dryden had hit on a subject and manner admirably adapted to the audience he had in view.

One of its strange features is that while the first and longer part describes the naval battles, the latter part is concerned with the Fire of London. When the news of this catastrophe reached Dryden he must have reflected that with so large an area of their capital in ruins his countrymen would find less to excite them in a poem dealing exclusively with the war at sea, and it seems a safe conjecture that he decided to add the section on the Fire, another subject of vivid contemporary interest. This meant that the piece could have no pretensions to epic unity; but from the first he had probably intended no more than a brief 'heroic poem' or specimen of his epic manner. With some address he managed to bring the two subjects together in relation to one great theme: following *Astræa Redux* and the coronation

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