

Cambridge University Press

052147566X - Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration: Literature, Drama, History

Edited by Gerald Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Cambridge University Press

052147566X - Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration: Literature, Drama, History

Edited by Gerald Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

*Literature, culture, and society in Restoration
England**Gerald MacLean*

I

What we mean when we talk about the Stuart Restoration might at first seem clear enough. But like similar terms used to indicate both a specific historical event and a period, “Restoration” has been used in different ways for different purposes and has different meanings in different contexts. Most often, the Restoration appears simply as a date that marks the beginning or ending of some other period. Marking either the final exhaustion of the “Renaissance,” or the start of the long eighteenth century, the Restoration is frequently conceived as simply an adjacency. When studied as a political event, the Restoration can refer to those circumstances that made necessary and possible a return to monarchical government, and so primarily designates those events and negotiations of 1658–60 surrounding and immediately following Charles’s return.¹ But political historians have also taken a longer view and regard the Restoration as an uneasy, brief settlement within longer-term political negotiations among Crown, Parliament, Church, and people, the struggles over which continue through the Revolution of 1688 to reverberate well into the eighteenth century and beyond.²

For social and cultural historians, the years following the Restoration constitute a period of contending activities and attitudes, ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving, that cannot entirely be accounted for in terms of the attempted political settlement of 1660.

¹ See, for example, Godfrey Davies, *The Restoration of Charles II, 1658–1660* (San Marino, Calif., 1955), and Hutton, *Restoration*.

² See J. R. Jones, ed., *The Restored Monarchy, 1660–1688* (1979), Introduction; Paul Seaward, *The Cavalier Parliament and the Reconstruction of the Old Regime, 1661–1667* (Cambridge, 1986), and “The Restoration, 1660–1688,” in Blair Worden, ed., *Stuart England* (Oxford, 1991) pp. 147–55; and Tim Harris, *Politics Under the Later Stuarts: Party Conflict in a Divided Society 1660–1715* (1993).

Cambridge University Press

052147566X - Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration: Literature, Drama, History

Edited by Gerald Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)

It has long been clear that the nation which summoned Charles back in 1660 differed considerably from the realm over which his father had once attempted to rule. The traditional scholarly emphasis on the self-consciously neo-classical style in conversation, theatrical staging, music, oil-portraiture, and clothing, initially introduced by members of Charles's Court to London and thence to the nation at large, has shifted toward study of those continuing forms of resistance, dissent, and control, of contending political and religious languages and practices, that were inherited from the 1640s and 1650s.³ The king's return was accompanied by various constitutional and social changes that might appear to indicate a general return to conditions prevailing before the civil wars, but the Restoration was, as Tim Harris puts it, "a deeply contradictory affair, the product of an already divided society."⁴ Church courts were reopened, some sequestered estates were given back, Court censorship returned. With monarchy came the return of the House of Lords, of bishops, tithing, the licensing of clergymen, and attempts to legislate religious uniformity. Women, though granted certain novel freedoms like that of professional acting, often found themselves again subjected to gender codes that they had been busily undoing during the revolutionary decades.⁵

³ See Harris, *London Crowds*; Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660–1770* (Oxford, 1989); Andrew Colby, *Central Government and the Localities: Hampshire, 1649–1689* (Cambridge, 1987); David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603–1660* (Oxford, 1985); Jonathan Scott, *Algernon Sidney and the English Republic, 1623–1677* (Cambridge, 1988), and *Algernon Sidney and the Restoration Crisis, 1677–1683* (Cambridge, 1991); Richard L. Greaves, *Deliver Us From Evil: The Radical Underground in Britain, 1660–1663* (New York, 1986); N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth-Century England* (Leicester, 1987); Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion* (Oxford, 1989); David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (1989); and John Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England, 1646–1689* (New Haven, 1991). In a useful review article, "Reconstructing the Restoration," *Journal of British Studies* 29: 4 (1990): 393–401, Victor L. Slater concludes that "the Restoration reconstruction was a vital turning point" (p. 401). ⁴ Harris, *Politics*, p. 26.

⁵ See Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity*. Despite considerable interest in women writers of the Restoration period, there is still no detailed social and cultural history of how the Restoration affected women's lives. On women writers, see also Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1660–1800* (1989); Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford, 1986); Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby, and Helen Wilcox, eds., *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen* (1989). Roger Thompson's *Women in Stuart England and America: A Comparative Study* (1974) can still prove useful, but in the category of general histories has been superseded by Antonia Fraser's *The Weaker Vessel* (1984). See also important new specialized work such as Susan Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern*

Cambridge University Press

052147566X - Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration: Literature, Drama, History

Edited by Gerald Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)

What recent scholarship has been making increasingly clear is that not all of these measures were similarly successful or long-lived. Public theaters were back in business, the publishing trade flourished, often in defiance of government controls, and women continued to write and to publish.⁶ Religious dissent by no means came to an end; despite evidence of initial support for a return to the Anglican liturgy, widespread absenteeism and Nonconformity bedeviled attempts to impose an established state Church.⁷ With England's continuing growth as a commercial nation, expansion overseas in search of resources and new markets led to conflicts with other powers, and brought about increased contacts with, and colonization of, Asia, Africa, and the "New World." Questions of national identity and difference, of what it meant to be English or British or both, could be framed in terms of international trade and imperial ambition that operated independently of loyalty to the Crown.⁸ For political, social and cultural historians, the Restoration constitutes a complex intersection of changing practices and ideas that are central to our understanding of early-modern Britain, and what was to pass for civility in much of the modern world.

Of course, for literary historians, the Restoration has usually appeared to be a rather more literary phenomenon. Treated as contextual background to the literature, the years following Charles's

England (Oxford, 1988), and Susan Cahn, *Industry of Devotion: The Transformation of Women's Work in England, 1500–1660* (New York, 1987).

- ⁶ For the public theaters, see Nancy Klein Maguire, *Regicide and Restoration: English Tragicomedy, 1660–1671* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 102–37. On the continuing activities of the radical press, see Greaves, *Deliver Us*, pp. 207–25. On publications by women writers before and after the Restoration, see Patricia Crawford, "Women's Published Writings 1600–1700," in Mary Prior, ed., *Women in English Society 1500–1800* (1985), pp. 211–82. Kathryn Shevelov, *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical* (1989) provides a useful neo-Foucauldian take on how English periodicals published between 1690 and 1760 helped construct the discursive figure "woman."
- ⁷ Geoffrey Holmes writes of "the sheer confusion of practice at parish level," in his recent *The Making of a Great Power: Late Stuart and Early Georgian Britain* (1993), p. 40; and see Spurr, *Restoration Church*, p. xvii, and Cressy, *Bonfires*, pp. 48–49. For a summary of recent scholarship, see Tim Harris, "Introduction: Revising the Restoration," in Harris, et al., *Politics of Religion*, pp. 1–28; on absenteeism, see pp. 17–18. See also J. A. I. Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660–1730* (Cambridge, 1992).
- ⁸ See Holmes, *Great Power*, pp. 93–105; Brian Levack, *The Formation of the British State: England, Scotland and the Union 1603–1707* (Oxford, 1987); Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London 1660–1730* (1989); and, more generally, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). And see Cressy's argument throughout *Bonfires*, that the peculiarity of "the calendar in seventeenth-century England... was based on, and gave expression to, a mythic and patriotic sense of national identity" (p. xi).

Cambridge University Press

052147566X - Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration: Literature, Drama, History

Edited by Gerald Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)

return provide seemingly self-evident examples of how the disciplinary distinction between “literature” and “history” arises both inevitably and inexorably. The traditional literary-historian’s version is a familiar one. In 1660, after a period of bloody civil unrest during which arms flourished and arts withered, the king returned. Now that the “Puritan” revolution was over, everyone wanted peace and order: satire flourished to translate disruptive anger and hostility into either companionable irony and innuendo or partisan indignation, the public theaters reopened (with women actors) to entertain an urban public, poets started writing in heroic couplets that structurally replicated principles of social order and civic harmony, and the novel figuring the rise of the bourgeois self began its problematic emergence as the dominant literary genre.

In various forms, this pragmatic version of events as background to literature has encouraged what we might call a division of textual or archival labor. To literary scholars belongs the study of the works of Samuel Butler, Andrew Marvell, John Bunyan, John Dryden, the Earl of Rochester, Daniel Defoe, William Congreve, William Wycherley, and Aphra Behn; to historians the study of the lives and works of Charles, Clarendon, Shaftesbury, Samuel Pepys, Gilbert Burnet, John Locke, Isaac Newton, and Robert Hooke, together with all the Court records, Parliamentary debates, parish registers, and other published and unpublished archival materials. Yet this division of the archive, to the extent that it has helped to shape the way generations of scholars have set about understanding the period, corresponds more readily to the subsequent development of academic disciplines than it does to Restoration beliefs or practices. And it has recently begun to show signs of breaking up, to the advantage of all concerned.

Scholars of Restoration literature have traditionally acknowledged the importance of historical context, in part, no doubt, because of this literature’s highly developed engagement with the history of its own times. But if it is difficult to imagine reading *Absalom and Achitophel* without some understanding of the high politics of the time, the literary critic’s use of historical background to explain topical references in Restoration literary texts has often depended upon and served to reinforce the archival and disciplinary distinction between literature and history. To read a literary text as referring in some precise way to otherwise knowable historical events is one way of demonstrating how the literary and the historical differ categorically:

Cambridge University Press

052147566X - Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration: Literature, Drama, History

Edited by Gerald Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)

here is the literary text, and here are the historical events to which it refers and which make available some of its specific resonances. Sometimes the evidence seems intractable, but the grounding distinction remains clear. Earl Miner, for example, reports a number of places where Dryden “has been supposed to have related historical fact, although the only evidence derives solely from what he wrote.”⁹ Even when it contains little or nothing relevant, the archive of historical information can nevertheless be supposed to offer necessary and independent evidence confirming a text’s claim to accurate historical documentation, as well as reinforcing its literary status. Literature, Miner assumes, is not history; a formulation that would have made sense in Restoration Britain, but not perhaps in quite the same ways it does today.

To paraphrase Miner, both literature and the Restoration seem to require greater attention than has been given to what people were writing about literature in the seventeenth century, and to the relationship of literature to other cultural activities.¹⁰ When Miner writes that “critics and poets during the Restoration hold to a concept of literature that was dignified, grand, and perhaps even exorbitant in its claims,”¹¹ we might wonder if “poetry” – or better yet “poesy” – would not be more appropriate than “literature.” For our current academic understanding of the ways “literature” differs from “history” can come dangerously close to misreplicating the neo-classical, and largely rhetorical, distinction between “poesy” and “history” still being discussed by critics and poets following the Restoration. At that time, the question involved the differing formal, generic and compositional practices appropriate to treating different subject-matter in a particular national language; this is the thematics of Dryden’s important preface to *Annus Mirabilis* (1667), and it underlies many of his concerns in *Of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), both of which imaginatively frame their discussion of literary concerns within the nationalistic enterprise of naval supremacy. Although “poesy” or “poetry” had started becoming restricted to signifying metrical composition rather than prose from the middle of the seventeenth century – most notably in the exchange between Hobbes and Davenant over the latter’s *Gondibert* (1650) – “literature” did not become associated with specifically imaginative writing, as opposed

⁹ Earl Miner, “The Restoration: Age of Faith, Age of Satire,” in Antony Coleman and Antony Hammond, eds., *Poetry and Drama, 1570–1700* (1981), pp. 90–109; this passage p. 108.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Cambridge University Press

052147566X - Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration: Literature, Drama, History

Edited by Gerald Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)

to historical or scientific writing, until much later. Poetry, after all, was commonly written on historical themes. If it meant anything at all to Dryden and his contemporaries, then, distinguishing “literature” from “history” would have meant marking the general differences between writing and past events. Not until long after 1660 did “literature” start assuming the imaginative and fictional specificity formerly indicated by “poesy.”

In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams reminds us that “as late as” Dr. Johnson, the principal meaning of “literature” continued to be “polite learning through reading,”¹² a usage corresponding more closely to our notions of literacy than to the material objects of imaginative writing. The association between reading and skilled knowledge is given a specifically practical turn by the single instance of the term in Shakespeare’s works, where it appears in the significant context of a scene that parodies Renaissance learning in the cause of arousing patriotic sentiment across striking national and social differences. In the midst of the battle of Agincourt, Act 4 scene 7 of *Henry V* opens with Fluellen’s horrified discovery that the French have slaughtered the unarmed baggage-boys back at the British camp. The Englishman Gower assures him that Henry’s command to kill any captured French soldiers is a noble and just revenge, causing the Welsh soldier to launch into his memorable panegyric of their king, in dialect, which nevertheless displays a very specific kind of historical learning and understanding of rhetorical form by humorously elaborating an extended Plutarchan parallel between the lives and achievements of Henry and Alexander the Great, one that makes much of topographical similarities between Macedonia and Wales. Ever keen to display his reading in the chronicles of British history, Fluellen is soon able, when the king enters, to remind Henry himself of his Welsh ancestry. Thus it is in the accent of Fluellen, this scion of learning and spokesman for what might be called an ethnically divided, yet resolutely “national” history, that we hear Shakespeare’s only use of any form of “literature,” when Fluellen assures Henry that “Gower is a good captain, and is good knowledge, and literated in the wars” (4.7.153–54).

This basic sense of being literated as being well read and well versed in something of national significance, a personal condition

¹² Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, (1976; rev. ed. New York, 1983), p. 184.

Cambridge University Press

052147566X - Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration: Literature, Drama, History

Edited by Gerald Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Literature, culture, and society*

9

entailing the acquisition by reading of cultural skills and knowledges, also informs Johnson's terse definition in the *Dictionary* – "Learning; skill in letters."¹³ In his *Life of Cowley* (1779), Johnson later praised his subject's "pregnancy of imagination and elegance of language" as the conditions which "have deservedly set him high in the ranks of literature," a shift from the personal condition to include the objective sense of "literary work or production."¹⁴ Williams associates this emergence of literature as "a practice and a profession of writing" with the seventeenth-century shift in literary production from patronage to commercial publishing, but he also notes that literature nevertheless retained its traditional emphasis on "the whole body of books and writing" produced by a national language well into the nineteenth century.¹⁵ By this time its Shakespearian contexts had become its contents. The *OED* cites a typical usage of 1857 that marks the association with national identity as definitive: "Literature, when it is a healthy and unforced state, is simply the form in which the knowledge of a country is registered."

This general development, from the personal qualities and cultural condition of being well-read, to the objective range of material texts, accompanied by the socially evaluative and nationalistic connotations of great books by great English men, places the history of the concept of "literature" centrally amidst the development of a precise critical vocabulary suited to making these very distinctions. For the emergence of this critical language, with all its social and cultural implications, we are largely indebted to the efforts of Dryden, to whom literature meant the production of writings in English, whether on historical or imaginative topics. Before 1660, there had been little general concern over questions of the national literature as such. But by the time Dryden died at the end of the century, literary history had become a key component of a nationalist cultural enterprise. Various literary texts, and even entire genres, had served nationalistic purposes before, but the development of a specifically national literature, one which could look backward into its own past in order to trace its origins and progress from a distinguished body of vernacular writing: this development took on new and distinct importance as a public discipline of knowledge. In short, the Restoration period saw the development and dispersal of a soph-

¹³ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (1770); cited in Williams, *Keywords*, p. 185.

¹⁴ Cited *OED* 2.

¹⁵ Williams, *Keywords*, p. 185.

Cambridge University Press

052147566X - Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration: Literature, Drama, History

Edited by Gerald Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

GERALD MACLEAN

isticated critical vocabulary suited to the needs of a great national literature, one with a distinguished history that was eagerly being written, and with a future that was no less eagerly being projected. The theatrical success of attempts to improve Shakespeare's plays indicates something of this historical shuttle between continuously revised pasts and projected futures in the construction of a national literature.

A central aim of the present book is to restore the contemporary senses of "literature" to the literatures produced, in English, during the period following the return of monarchy. The increasingly emphatic understanding of literature as a key to national identity situates Restoration literary activity as a whole within the broader social and cultural developments of the modern era. Consequently, this book adopts a historicized sense of literature that includes scientific, economic, religious and political texts, as well as the conditions of, and constraints upon, their production and reception.

II

When Charles arrived in England, literature was already thoroughly politicized in ways that would have been unthinkable at his grandfather's Court.¹⁶ During the 1640s and 1650s, writers, printers, and booksellers had become confidently aware of the special intimacy enjoyed between literature and politics, and had grown accustomed to assuming the freedom and authority to comment in public upon the personal lives and policies of national leaders in the hopes of guiding opinion and, thereby, the course of events. This self-authorizing freedom, of using print to challenge and even ridicule political leaders, was a direct and irreversible inheritance from the revolutionary decades. It can be traced back at least to the collapse of censorship in 1641 and the immediate appearance of the oppositional and insurgent writing that led people to take up arms against the traditional authority of the Crown, Lords, and Bishops.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore, 1983); Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restor'd: The Culture of the Stuart Court, 1603–42* (Manchester, 1981). See also Kevin Sharpe, *Criticism and Complaint: The Politics of Literature in the England of Charles I* (Cambridge, 1987). For a recent assessment of how Restoration England inherited a literary culture that had been transformed by the 1640s and 1650s, see Thomas Corns, *Unclioister'd Virtue: English Political Literature, 1640–1660* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 294–308.

¹⁷ See Christopher Hill, "The Restoration and Literature," in *A Nation of Change and Novelty: Radical Politics, Religion and Literature in Seventeenth-Century England* (1990), pp. 218–43; and

Cambridge University Press

052147566X - Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration: Literature, Drama, History

Edited by Gerald Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Literature, culture, and society*

11

After 1641, subsequent attempts at censorship by no means stopped writers from attacking authority; the threat of possible prosecution rather redirected the languages of irreverence and protest by challenging writers to continue adopting imaginative forms of coding and disguise.¹⁸ Criticizing royal policy obliquely by mocking powerful Court favorites or royal advisers – such as the attacks on the Duke of Buckingham in the 1620s, and Archbishop Laud and the Earl of Strafford in the early 1640s – gives way to bolder and more direct forms of criticism during the revolutionary decades, including personal attacks on the king. Satiric character assassinations of royal persons and powerful governmental leaders continue after the Restoration: in the anti-Rump satires of 1659–60, in the work of writers as different as Behn, Samuel Butler, Milton, Marvell, and Rochester, and even in the muted ironies of Dryden's portrayal of Charles in *Absalom and Achitophel*.

Restoration literature is characteristically political not only because it commonly addresses social and political issues with an irreverent attitude toward established authority, but also because of the ways in which reading and writing had made public debate increasingly central to the political experience of ordinary people living through the social and cultural changes of the 1640s and 1650s. Attacks on political authority published during the early years of the Civil War both accompanied and encouraged widespread public debates on other questions of received authority, most notably those formerly regulated by the established Church, such as biblical interpretation, baptism, communion, and marriage. For two decades and in unprecedented numbers, works of religious and theological controversy, moral tracts, biblical commentaries, sermons, and works of prophecy, often expressing not simply anti-prelatical but even heretical ideas, found their way into print and into the conversations, attitudes, and expectations of an increasingly critical reading public.¹⁹ In 1661 one commentator warned: “The liberty of the late

Gerald M. MacLean, *Time's Witness: Historical Representation in English Poetry, 1603–1660* (Madison, 1990), pp. 64–126.

¹⁸ See Zwicker, *Politics and Language*; Margaret Doody, *The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered* (Cambridge, 1985); Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison, 1984); and most recently, Lois Potter, *Secret Rites and Secret Writing: Royalist Literature, 1641–1660* (Cambridge, 1989).

¹⁹ See Paul S. Seaver, *The Puritan Lecturerships: The Politics of Religious Dissent, 1560–1662* (Stanford, 1970), and *Wallington's World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London* (Stanford, 1985). It is a shame that Nehemiah Wallington, upon whose writings Seaver's