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PLEASURES OF THE  
IMAGINATION

## I

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## Composing a literary life: introduction

John Dryden has come down to us through the exemplary practices of literary editing: a large number of uniform volumes, learnedly prefaced, packed with history and explanatory notes. Who first thought of *The Works of John Dryden*? Not, I think, the poet himself. During his long writing life Dryden showed little interest in collecting or revising his work; neither he nor apparently anyone else kept his manuscripts; and Dryden seldom wrote of, or even seems to have imagined, a coherent and progressive literary career of the kind that was often on Spenser's or Milton's mind. Of course, the idea of collected works would have been obvious to Dryden from the humanist editions of classical authors, from *The Works* of Ben Jonson or the Shakespeare folios, or from collected editions even closer to hand – Cowley, Cleveland, and Suckling. Dryden himself contributed an elegy to John Oldham's *Remains*, and he knew too of the *Œuvres* of Corneille and Racine. His shrewd publisher Jacob Tonson made an effort at such collection in the 1690s, but the sustained impulse to collect “the works” began after Dryden's death, first with Tonson's various compilations of poems and plays, then at the end of the eighteenth century with Edmond Malone's edition of Dryden's prose. Sir Walter Scott's monumental edition in eighteen volumes appeared in 1808, to be revised late in the nineteenth century by George Saintsbury, and in the early 1950s planning began for what would, half a century later, become *The Works of John Dryden*, complete in twenty volumes that bind together, apparatus and all, close to ten thousand pages.

Neither Dryden nor his first readers could have quite imagined the way in which his works would later be presented, especially work that was written, as it were, on the run. Not that Dryden wrote only on the run, but the rapidity with which he turned out his work, its original daring, and the sense of entrepreneurship and experiment that informed much of it – these are difficult to imagine from within the solid uniformity of *The Works*. It might seem churlish to complain of the labor that has unlocked so much of a world that is now lost to us without scholarship, and yet there is something lost as well

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in these monumentalizing editions, and not only of the rapidity and fluency with which Dryden managed the thousands of pages of verse and prose – prologues, epilogues, and plays; songs, satires, state poems, and panegyrics; commendatory verse and elegies; epitaphs, epistles, odes, essays, dedications, prefaces, biographies, and a raft of translations from ancient and modern languages – but also of the contingent, combative, and improvisatory atmosphere in which a good deal of the work was at first imagined and written. Lost too in the habits of editing monumentally, of tracing sources and influences, is the collusive character of much of early modern writing, how responsive that writing was not just to occasion and not just to the long shadow of the classical and vernacular past, but to the exactly contemporary texts, conditions, and communities within, and against, which it was read and circulated through adaptation and allusion, and even plagiarism, and through mockery and scornful imitation.

What set a good deal of Dryden's work in motion was competition and combat, the spinning together of interest and vindication, and this while the poet wrote with an eye on the commerce of the stage and print and on the favor of patronage. But merely to identify commerce and patronage as the most important institutional circumstances of this career is to conjure too stable and homogeneous a world, for print and patronage were themselves volatile and sinuously complex institutions, at one moment proffering glamor and privilege, at the next humiliation and scorn. And the larger civic structures to which Dryden sought to attach himself – the crown, its instruments and ministers, its programs and prerogatives – were not much more fixed or stable than were taste and favor. The civil wars, their persistent shadow, and the repeated crises of the later seventeenth century taught the fragility of institutions and the uncertainty of fortune. From the beginning of his career to its end, Dryden operated in a mercurial political environment and in a fiercely competitive market, even while reforming letters, fashioning a new theatre, and inventing a place for himself in the pantheon of letters, as well as in the trade of books.

How then should we imagine the poet in negotiation with all the varied and volatile circumstances of his work? Neither Dryden nor his readers understood this career as the first move in the creation of Augustan literature or as the farewell of print commerce to aristocratic patronage and Renaissance humanism. Retrospectively the career allows both constructions, but as Dryden got that career underway – and rather late, near the age of thirty – he must have seen himself as elbowing his way into a crowded writerly field opened by such occasions as the death of the Lord Protector, the restoration of monarchy, and the revival of the theatre. When Dryden's first important verse was published – an elegy on the death of Oliver Cromwell – the

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poem was part of a nervously contrived effort at commemoration with a last-minute change of publishers and substitution of verse; and when he turned from republican eulogy to Stuart restoration, Dryden entered a field of play in which his verse had to jostle for recognition with a hundred other entrepreneurial offerings. How then did Dryden as poet laureate, historiographer royal, and finally inventor of Restoration literature emerge from such competition?

Partly, of course, the emergence is retrospective, the clearing of a crowded field of texts in the interest of admiration and anthology, and in the securing of lines of inheritance – Milton yielding Thomson, Blake, and Shelley; Dryden yielding Swift, Pope, and Byron. In the busy workshop of early Restoration literature, Dryden's emergence was not so certain, though by the end of the first decade of his career, it seems to have been decisive. He wrote buoyantly on his own behalf, in prefaces and dedications, in prologues, epilogues, and free-standing criticism, and not only of his own projects and patrons, but of the world of letters, ancient and modern, English and continental, that he meant to join.

In achieving that ambition, Dryden had a certain amount of luck and some personal connections; effort and proximity pushed him into visibility. Member of a minor branch of a distinguished Northamptonshire family, educated at Westminster School and at Cambridge, Dryden went down to London in his mid-twenties, worked in some minor capacity for the Protectorate government, then met and lodged with the volatile and opinionated Sir Robert Howard, an aristocrat interested in politics, theatre, and self-display. After his first occasional pieces for the new regime – poems on the Restoration and coronation of the king, and a celebration of the lord chancellor – Dryden married Lady Elizabeth Howard, Sir Robert's sister, joined the newly formed Royal Society, and began to write for the theatre. In the summer of 1665, with the theatres closed and the plague raging in London, Dryden retreated to the country estate of his father-in-law, the Earl of Berkshire. There he wrote two extremely ambitious pieces in which he invented himself as a man of letters – entrepreneurial, articulate, self-conscious, perhaps a touch shy or diffident (like his counterpart Neander in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*), and certainly opinionated – and there he mastered a subtle and dexterous prose style with which to set in motion a wide range of opinions on a variety of literary topics.

The verse that Dryden created from his country retreat was a city poem called *Annus Mirabilis* (1667); his prose was *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668). In its range of learning, its contrapuntal form, its mastery of vernacular dramatic traditions, and its ability to articulate and balance contradictory points of view, all the while arranging the vindication of English theatre – its

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mixtures, flexibility, and capaciousness of form – the *Essay* is the masterpiece of Dryden's first decade as author. By contrast, *Annus Mirabilis* – Dryden's poem on the Anglo-Dutch wars and the Great Fire of London – seems a display of brilliant amateurism with a breathless variety of scenes: naval battles and the appetites of trade, a city laid low by fire and plague, the colors of heroism, the plangent notes of despair. Dryden displays an impressive ability to think strategically and polemically in *Annus Mirabilis*, but the verse is effortful and the learning self-conscious, the poet anxious at once to register erudition and not to irritate with learning: "In some places, where either the fancy, or the words, were [Virgil's] or any others, I have noted it in the Margin, that I might not seem a Plagiary; in others, I have neglected it, to avoid as well the tediousness, as the affectation of doing it too often" (*Works* 1: 56). A guileless admission, but when Dryden has fully mastered this medium, the anxiety will get folded completely into the verse and the poet will disappear behind the veil of his art, as he does so immaculately in the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, where he makes a piece of theatre out of the eagerness to please and impress that he cannot quite control in *Annus Mirabilis*.

When Dryden returned to London in the fall of 1666 it was to the theatre and theatrical controversy, and to the enterprise of fashioning, theorizing, and defending heroic drama. That work thrust Dryden fully into the world of Restoration theatricality with its controversies, critiques, and tart opinions. In the quickened pace of pamphleteering that swirled around the theatre of the 1660s and 1670s, there emerged not only a delight in slander and abuse but as well a taste for opinion and, more broadly, for aesthetic responsiveness. With greater clarity and certainty than ever before, criticism – though not always by that name – became one of the formative contexts for the conduct of literature, and Dryden's great achievement in the early years of his career was to operate simultaneously as poet, playwright, and critic, at times theorizing on behalf of his own work, at times writing more disinterestedly within – and by that act helping to create – an emergent discourse of literary criticism.

From the varied strands of literary controversy and conversation, what emerges, quite distinctively, in the late 1660s is the figure of John Dryden – Poet Laureate and Historiographer Royal, apologist for the great, dramatic theorist, and theatrical innovator. For a decade after his return to London, Dryden wrote almost exclusively for the theatre; he had become a shareholder in the King's Company and was contracted with them for three plays a year. By the time he had published his great verse satires in the early 1680s, Dryden had written nearly two dozen plays in a variety of genres: comedy, tragedy, tragicomedy, and, most innovatively, heroic drama – the form that he was most closely identified with, and so much so that the heroic style, and

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Dryden as its chief agent, became bywords for elevation and for flattering excess. Nor is it difficult to see why when we read Dryden's address to the Duke of York in the Dedication to *Conquest of Granada*:

Since . . . the world is govern'd by precept and Example; and both these can only have influence from those persons who are above us, that kind of Poesy which excites to virtue the greatest men, is of the greatest use to humankind. 'Tis from this consideration, that I have presum'd to dedicate to your Royal Highness these faint representations of your own worth and valor in Heroique poetry: or, to speak more properly, not to dedicate, but to restore to you those Ideas, which, in the more perfect part of my characters, I have taken from you . . . And certainly, if ever Nation were oblig'd either by the conduct, the personal valour, or the good fortune of a Leader, the English are acknowledging, in all of them, to your Royal Highness. Your whole life has been a continu'd series of Heroique Actions. (Works XI: 3)

The play was published in 1672, shortly before the duke's public display of his conversion to Rome, but already when he was much suspected and reviled. With the *Conquest of Granada*, Dryden moved into the center of political factionalism and professional envy, a broad cultural discourse in which heroic drama was indelibly typed by its underwriting of the personal grandeur and absolutist ambitions of Stuart monarchy. The critique was conducted through pamphlets and tracts, but nowhere to better effect than in *The Rehearsal*, a skit by the Duke of Buckingham and a coterie of aristocrats and literary amateurs who mocked the heroic drama by ridiculing the stylistic excesses, the personality, and the political ideals of its chief agent. By the early 1670s Dryden had emerged fully into public view, and there would be no retreat from that publicity. Critical, personal, and political engagement became, inextricably and indisputably, the context not only for Dryden's theatre but for all his work, and most artfully for the satires that Dryden began to write in the late 1670s, poems spun from a mix of gossip, news, literary polemics, and political argument. When we read *MacFlecknoe* (c. 1676), *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), *The Medal* (1681), or the prefaces to works like *Religio Laici* (1682) and *The Hind and the Panther* (1687), it seems remarkable that it took Dryden twenty years to figure out that satire, with all its registers of irony and innuendo, would indisputably be his form. He remarked in the 1690s, with a touch of impersonality and diffidence, that others had noticed his art – “They say my Talent is Satyre; if it be so, 'tis a Fruitful Age” – but even by the late 1670s he had developed a buoyant confidence in his satiric stride (*Works* III: 234).

*MacFlecknoe* is the first of the great verse satires. The motives for its creation, the modes of its circulation, even its subject, are still in dispute;

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what is not in dispute is Dryden's satiric mastery, his glancing way of imagining his contemporaries, veiled but easily identified, and of orchestrating together personal invective, artistic principles, political ideals, and flattery, and humiliation, of the great. Of course, Dryden did not invent the complex entertainments of satire; those he learned from the great Roman satirists Horace, Juvenal, and Persius – poets he had translated as a schoolboy and to whom he would later return. But to the themes and idioms of classical satire – the correction of vice and folly, the mingling of irony, elegance and derision – Dryden added the sheen of his own vernacular style of insult and innuendo, privileging the high style, but deftly mixing it with the buzz of personal malice and local gossip and rumor.

In *MacFlecknoe* Dryden is in superb control of satire's armory and energy – assault and attack, and scorn. But where Dryden most fully shines as satirist is in *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), his rendering of the Exclusion Crisis – the parliamentary effort to block the Duke of York's succession to the throne – as biblical history. Here satire's devices of injury and exposure are mixed with a broad range of topics and tonalities. His rogues' gallery is full of literary pleasure, but Dryden also plays admiration against enmity and his little elegy for the Earl of Ossory, the complex and funny rescue operation that he mounts in his portrait of Charles II, his mixed address to the Duke of Monmouth as the king's beautiful, favored, foolish, and illegitimate son, and his edgy indictment of the Earl of Shaftesbury display subtleties of argument and psychology that allow Dryden's capacity for assault to emerge as only one effect within a much broader imaginative field. It is not simply that range and mixture allowed Dryden to baffle and heighten insult with other literary effects, it is that Dryden's capacity to sustain argument through image, rhythm, and rhyme is itself broadened by the reach of satire into other kinds of work: the constitution of political community, the admiration for dexterity and defense, the mourning for lost opportunity. In *Absalom and Achitophel* everything came together for Dryden: his assurance, his self-understanding, his capacity to be simultaneously client and author, protégé of the great and fully his own person. Here Dryden worked under great pressure and with superb economy; his verse moves in a number of different, even contradictory ways.

Something of the same counterpoint and contrary movement is achieved at other points in this career and always to wonderful effect. In the elegy for John Oldham, Dryden uses Virgil simultaneously to express sorrow and acknowledge ambition; and later, in his address to the Duchess of Ormond, Dryden manages a range of tones and arguments that allows him, in the midst of praise and celebration, to imagine absence and longing, suffering and sorrow. He darkens and extends panegyric in new, seemingly contradictory

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ways; and yet as the poem unveils cultural compromises and personal disappointments, it projects the duchess's life as a fully imagined, coherent, and poignant whole.

In *The Medal*, Dryden worked on a narrower scheme than in *Absalom and Achitophel*, a design suggested, some said, by the king himself. The poem looks like a move to the side in Dryden's career, a simpler, angrier enterprise suited to the personal attacks that followed the pseudonymous publication of *Absalom and Achitophel* and to the backlash against the crown's triumphs over Exclusion. Dryden's tone in *The Medal* conjures the world of canting and libeling; he responds vigorously to the affronts and reproaches that now greeted his every move. But Dryden's poems of religious confession – first an Anglican apologia, *Religio Laici*, and then his remarkable, nearly impenetrable, script of Roman Catholic conversion, *The Hind and the Panther* – demonstrate that the subtle and ironic public posturing and the complexity of feeling and self-understanding that Dryden had achieved in *Absalom and Achitophel* could be renegotiated on new terrain. And religion certainly represented a new terrain for Dryden, unless we count the scandalously dismissive address to priests and priestcraft in *Absalom and Achitophel* as part of the poet's spiritual directory. But in *Religio Laici* Dryden had reason to recalibrate his address to the spiritual, or so it might seem from the preface to this poem where he adopts a beguiling deference, a bland confession of his simple faith and charity, spiritual amateurism, and reverence for authority. At the same time, Dryden manages to suggest that he has something in mind quite different from mere deference, and as the Preface unfolds Dryden strikes contrapuntally at a variety of targets, on the one hand whispering deference and charity, on the other cutting sharply against a variety of religious dogmatisms from the rigidity of dissent and the intolerance of high-flyers to the arrogance of Rome. Dryden weaves carefully between the argumentative extremes that he himself has arranged in order to emerge the cool skeptic, the private man less concerned with spiritual precision than generosity of spirit, a spokesman, but only in his privacy, for the traditional virtues of charity and harmony, for toleration and civic quiet. Rather a surprising stance for the poet laureate as civic satirist, and yet Dryden means to speak directly into and against the contemporary clamor over religion stirred not only by the "Popish Plot" – a supposed effort by Catholics to poison Charles II and install the Duke of York on the throne – and by the Exclusion Crisis, but also by Charles II's sustained campaign to achieve religious toleration simply by declaring the charity of Indulgence, a move opposed at various points both by dissenters and by the established church.

Why does Dryden insist on the privacy of *Religio Laici* when the poem's themes and arguments make it perfectly clear that he means to participate in



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the public controversies over religion? Perhaps the question contains its own answer, for the private convictions of the laureate would necessarily have been read as public relations by his contemporaries. In the wake of poems like *Absalom and Achitophel* and *The Medal*, nothing of the laureate's religious convictions could have been read outside the sphere of public debate. When we see Dryden's claims of privacy as a way of privileging the conscience as its own domain, of opening space for personal belief in the midst of an overwhelmingly public controversy over religious politics, it becomes easier to de-personalize the personal, to understand privacy as one of the rhetorics of religious confession, and an authenticating one at that. After all, no group had made more noise over privacy and personal inspiration than the dissenters – and their Whiggish allies – who now clamored against the crown; for the king's laureate to take their idioms in defense of the king's Indulgence meant that Dryden could colonize and hence disarm the factions that Charles II aimed to defeat in his efforts to impose comprehension and toleration. Recognizing the impersonality of this self-styled confession of faith allows us not only to situate *Religio Laici* fully within the rhetorical whirlwind of late seventeenth-century religious controversy but to situate the poet's spiritual life fully within the public sphere – that site of pamphleteering and sermonizing, of literary satire and parliamentary debate – to which it most surely belonged.

To turn from Dryden's confession of Anglican faith to the Roman Catholic identity he suddenly assumed in 1686 and published the next year in *The Hind and the Panther* comes as something of a surprise if we think of his poetry of religious confession as a record of personal identity rather than public policy. James II, a Roman Catholic convert, had assumed the throne in 1685, and prizes were rumored for Dryden, and pressure exerted, so that the laureate might see his way to a spiritual awakening, a conversion to the religion of kings, and a campaign on behalf of his new co-religionists. It is also true that members of Dryden's family were Roman Catholics so that this conversion might be understood not only as part of a very public program of religious politics but also in its private and domestic circumstance, and in that setting it might not seem the stunning contradiction that it appears in light of *Religio Laici* and of Dryden's sustained abuse of the Roman Catholic clergy. Yet the alarm of venality and apostasy was immediately sounded with the publication of *The Hind and the Panther*, and these accusations were hardly anachronistic. Men and women living in the early modern world understood, as much as we do – though not necessarily in quite the same terms – the meaning of integrity and authenticity. What Dryden's enemies were unwilling to allow was the fully public and political position of these poems, and of this rhetoric of spiritual autobiography. Dryden had chosen

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his stance in order to endow the public realm with the authority of private conviction and confession, and he was now to be held to, and pilloried by, the standards of his own rhetoric. *Absalom and Achitophel* and *The Medal* suggest that Dryden gave as good as he got, but we ought to acknowledge just how much and how often he got.

It is one thing to outline the conditions in which Restoration writers practiced their art, it is another to be drenched in their idioms of insult and injury, to be subject to the publicity in which they conducted their literary lives and the verbal, even physical, violence that often defined the life of letters in late seventeenth-century London. By the time the Glorious Revolution put an end to James II's Catholic kingship, Dryden must have tired of defensive strategies, and when we turn to the last phase of his career – his work after the Revolution of 1688 as principled adherent to the hapless cause of Stuart loyalism – we can sense not only the costs of sustaining a public career in an atmosphere of partisan rancor and literary vindictiveness, but perhaps too the relief that the poet must have felt as he accepted and then made a weary triumph out of the posture of political defeat. After the Revolution, Dryden was removed from pension and public office, forced back to the theatre and to translation as means of marketing his literary talents, and though complaint and lament are laced through his writing after 1688, they cast only a shadow over the literary riches of his last decade: plays and operas like *Don Sebastian* (1690), *Amphytrion* (1690), *King Arthur* (1691), and *Love Triumphant* (1694); the *Works of Virgil* (1697), a masterful translation and a poignant rendering of the costs of empire; and a last miscellany, *Fables* (1700), where Dryden seems to be utterly at his literary ease, choosing to translate just those poems of antiquity and modernity that most pleased him, and writing an essay of literary appreciation and self-display that better than any other text gives us a sense of how Dryden reflected back on what had become, by the late 1690s, a remarkable life of letters:

'Tis with a Poet, as with a Man who designs to build, and is very exact, as he supposes, in casting up the Cost beforehand: But, generally speaking, he is mistaken in his Account, and reckons short of the Expence he first intended: He alters his Mind as the Work proceeds, and will have this or that Convenience more, of which he had not thought when he began. So has it hapned to me; I have built a House, where I intended but a lodge: Yet with better success than a certain Nobleman, who beginning with a Dog-kennel, never lived to finish the Palace he had contriv'd.

(*Works* VII: 24)

The image of poetry as improvisation and architecture is meant to apply to the creation of *Fables*, but equally it is an allegory for the life of writing over the forty years of Dryden's career, with all its expenses, alterations, and