

1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era

Volume 4

Article 8

1998

Special Feature

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty>



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(1998) "Special Feature," *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*: Vol. 4, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty/vol4/iss1/8>

Special Feature

THE YALE
Poems on Affairs of State
THIRTY-FIVE
YEARS LATER

D. N. DELUNA
SPECIAL FEATURE EDITOR

THE YALE
Poems on Affairs of State
THIRTY-FIVE YEARS LATER

D. N. DeLuna
Special Feature Editor

In having collected well over five hundred political poems from the Stuart Restoration to the death of Queen Anne, the editors of the seven-volume Yale *Poems on Affairs of State: Augustan Satirical Verse, 1660-1714* made available material that enlivened traditional accounts of the contemporary worlds of court and parliament with a new richness of detail. Concerned to deliver "Augustan satirical verse," they also presented hitherto unexplored literary contexts against which to view the major satires of Dryden, Pope, and Swift. Further, the publication of the *Poems on Affairs of State (POAS)* from 1963 to 1975 coincided with a period of burgeoning scholarly interest in political meaning in art and social life, to which these volumes contributed by putting on display a varied assortment of writers who wielded political ideas and symbols during years of dramatic change in English history. This picture of communicative hyperactivity—in Cheapside balladists, arch-poets, West End tavern wits, cit Parnassians, and aristocratic court satirists—cannot fail to engage the attention of scholars of print and scribal cultures, or to

contribute to the ongoing inquiry into politics at the intersection of literature and social history.

Was there a coherent historical genre of English state poetry written from 1660 to 1714? What are historically accurate contexts for understanding the nature and function of political poetry in these post-Interregnum years? These are questions that the Yale *POAS* project taught students of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English literature to ask, and they are questions pertinent to critical review of the volumes themselves. Below, Steven N. Zwicker assesses the value of the volumes in reconstructing the extraordinary publishing and reading practices that were in place at the time of the appearance, in 1689, of the first miscellanies advertising "poems on affairs of state." George deForest Lord claims that the Yale selections bear witness to a mass of verbally unremarkable state satires that, from 1660 on, expressed and mobilized the energies of an adversary culture hostile to the legitimate Stuart monarchy. According to James A. Winn, the editors of these selections largely neglect to consider how state poetry comprising marginally inventive ballads and answering verses may have defeated its political goals. Unlike Dryden's political poems, Winn stresses, these slavishly imitative works failed to secure rhetorical authority through artistic distinction. D. N. DeLuna attributes the misrepresentation of Daniel Defoe as a mere poetaster in the volumes to twentieth-century Humanist and New Critical formulations imposed on his urgently topical poetry. Michael McKeon points up a paradox: successful scholarly annotation of state poems militates against correct historical understanding of their political meaning. Defining state poetry as verse whose original readers found themselves confronting obscure topicalia and baffling indirections, he discusses how these and other formal traits enacted a critique of the self-serving aura of secrecy of absolutist rule, and he locates the genre within an emerging poetics of apolitical autotelism.