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# THE HISTORY OF THE STATE POEMS

George deForest Lord

**M**y introduction to *Poems on Affairs of State* occurred in a large, dark room in the house of James M. Osborn in New Haven. It was the fall of 1955. Osborn was a former banker who had redirected his talents to collecting manuscripts of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British writers, in the process becoming a major scholar in the field.

A pingpong table was covered with liquor cartons, and Mr. Osborn (soon Jim) led me around to show me samples. Since I had not even heard of *Poems on Affairs of State* despite my solid graduate school grounding in seventeenth-century English literature, my responses to this tour were inane. Here were hundreds of poems in manuscripts and printed books that I knew nothing about. Furthermore, as Osborn explained, he had one of the largest collections in the world.

On further perusal I realized that most of the poems were topical revelations of the misconduct or incompetence of the king and his ministers, of high naval officers, of navy commissioners, of the clergy, of the king's supporters in parliament, with a strong animus against Louis XIV and "Popery." Affairs of state included, I soon discovered, affairs of all kinds: the

many mistresses of Charles and his brother, the high jinks of the "Court Wits" (especially Rochester, Sedley, Dorset, and Buckhurst) and the lascivious conduct of various prelates.

In the too-familiar but useful phrase of Virginia Woolf, poetry makes nothing happen. Here, however, was a vast outpouring of poems (if worthy of the term) that were bent on making things happen or preventing them from happening. From a later perspective I saw that all this highly detailed scandal-mongering comprised a decline and fall of: Charles II (decline) and James II (fall). The Restoration which had begun with Charles's joyful welcome from his subjects on May 30, 1660 (even an approving comet appeared), ended in the clandestine flight of James, who threw the Great Seal in the Thames on his way to a refuge in France. Later I realized that the flood of "satyrs" and lampoons had contributed markedly to this decline and fall and the memorable Revolution that brought William and Mary to the throne. The sheer bulk of revelations of misconduct and negligence (alleged or true) spoke for their wide popularity. Thus a "paper scuffle" helped to muster public opinion against Charles II and even more against the authoritarian Catholic brother who succeeded him.

Although some of the state poems were printed in 1689 and more in many later editions (altogether some fifty volumes) far more of them had never been published. Because of the penalties for unlicensed printing of "libels," multiple copies were made in scriptoria, and that explains why we have an average of five MS versions of any single poem.

It is worth remembering that authors and distributors of anti-government "libels" risked and sometimes suffered hideous punishments: Aylofffe, Marvell's friend, hanged, drawn and quartered before his law school; Stephen College hanged after a travesty of a trial; the printer "Elephant" Smith punished by the loss of his ears; and Algernon Sidney executed for merely possessing a copy of a seditious poem. In the latter case it is interesting to know that *that* outrageous murder itself became the subject of another libel.

To go back to that encounter with the liquor boxes on Jim's ping-pong table, my first reaction was that I wanted nothing to do with such material. For one thing, as a New Critic I had little interest in history and hence knew almost nothing about the dramatic events of that strange period called the Restoration. For another, my teaching and scholarship had been concerned only with the best of the best, and I was here confronted with what struck me as the dregs. My book on Chapman's *Odyssey* had just been accepted by Chatto & Windus, and epic was my chief delight. So what could I do with mock-epic, not to mention nasty, vituperative pieces composed by persons who knew nothing of such conceptions?

In that dark room my impulse was to offer a graceful no thanks and point out my insufficiencies for editing such material, but instead I asked Jim Osborn for a week or so to examine the collection more closely. If James Osborn and Maynard Mack had chosen me for the task, I should give the offer further consideration. Today I cannot remember how or why I decided to undertake editing *POAS*, but, forty years later I am glad that I did.

As I read my way through the huge collection, I made some provisional choices. There were a lot of pieces too inept or dull to consider publishing, but there were some sapphires in the mud. I particularly remember the second and third *Advices to a Painter*, concerned mainly with the naval disasters of 1665-1666. Pepys, who was the most efficient and knowledgeable of the Navy Commissioners, testified to their truth and power in his diary. Although they were published (under a Breda imprint) as Sir John Denham's, Denham at the time was mad; some said because Lady Denham had become the Duke of York's mistress, but he wasn't mad enough to satirize himself as a cuckold or to print these highly informative mock-heroic poems under his own name. The government searched in vain for the real author, who was, I think, Andrew Marvell. Not all scholars agree with my attribution, but in style and structure those *Advices* are much like *The Last Instructions to a Painter*,

which is accepted as Marvell's. That poem, incidentally, so impressed Benjamin Franklin that he set it up and printed it in Philadelphia. A single copy survives. Of all the authors of State Poems Marvell is the only one effectively to make the leap from lyric to mock-heroic. His poetical career illustrates the radical shift in sensibility that occurred in the Restoration and its aftermath. The State Poems witness a revolution more than political, a massive shift from poetry that is essentially personal to a poetry that is essentially public.

As my provisional plan for the edition took shape, I thought of having a textual editor do all the selected poems, after the example of the California Dryden. Elias Mengel from Georgetown came aboard, and we soon realized that it would be better to have each editor responsible for all the materials in his volume. So Elias was to edit Volume II, soon to be joined by Howard Schless of Columbia and Galbraith Crump of Kenyon for Volumes III and IV. At this time 1688 was the limit of the project, but we began to realize that 1714 was a better terminus. The appetite for libels was not entirely satisfied by the Glorious Revolution. William and Mary had scarcely reached London in their triumph before they were satirized as usurpers and parricides, and the satiric muse flourished as before, but from a different point of view. To edit these later poems Bill Cameron came to New Haven from Australia and Frank Ellis from Smith.

Large as it was the Osborn collection could obviously not include all poems on affairs of state. A continuing project that Elias and I began was to get microfilms of holdings in major libraries like the British Museum, the Bodleian, the Folger. We sent letters to scores of other libraries and to private collectors like the Earl of Crawford and the Marquis of Bath.

Bill Cameron proved to be especially good at sniffing out state poems in smaller libraries. We were gratified by the generous responses we received. Only one librarian out of dozens denied us access.

The project was generously supported by my late uncle, William Symington, who helped to make it possible for each of us to devote a year to the editorial task. This meant there were always at least two editors plus a research assistant working at one time in the fifth-floor room assigned us in Sterling Library. There was ample opportunity to exchange information and ideas. A further advantage was Duke Henning's proximity, since he was working down the hall on the members of Charles II's parliaments. So we all worked out of a collection of a few thousand books on reserve.

To add a not-so-trivial note. In the first years of the project the Beinecke Library was being built outside our windows. Because an underground stream had been found on the site, the pile-driving took longer than expected. In the heat of summer the noise was deafening, and I somehow managed to get air conditioners installed in both rooms. What a difference they made!

As our microfilm collection grew and the selection process continued, the provisional contents of each volume clearly had to change. Each volume would arrange poems chronologically by subdivisions, such as political, ecclesiastical, court, or literary. Elias Mengel had a section called *The Paper Scuffle* (the *ad hominem* wars between satirists), and Howard Schless had a whole section on shrieval elections in London in the 1680s in which Shaftesbury played such a large part.

In the course of time some almost unknown figures began to emerge as significant players in the game. The fiery John Aylofffe, associated with Marvell in a Dutch-based fifth column, was hanged in the Inns of Court for his violently anti-Stuart satires and his participation in an uprising in Scotland. The notorious Colonel Blood who tried to steal the royal regalia from the Tower seems to have arranged his own "death" in the face of charges of *scandalum magnatum* brought by the Duke of Buckingham. The corpse exhumed by the magistrates was identified only by a "great thumb" and Blood went on to pursue his strange career under a new guise. Frank Ellis

reconstituted the author of "The History of Insipids," a trenchant and skillful satire, and managed to restore John Freke as an important figure.

Because the poems on affairs of state tend to be highly topical and detailed and both their subjects and authors often obscured by time, the most difficult editorial task was identifying the figures involved. We all spent months tracking down allusions to characters and issues that, two centuries later, had fallen into oblivion. To the extent that we succeeded, the poems themselves and our introductions and commentaries amount to a highly detailed account of the events of a momentous period.

As our detailed knowledge of the period increased I began to see how Dryden was in some respects the tip of the iceberg. "Annus Mirabilis" was, *inter alia*, a rejoinder to a host of satires on Charles, James and the Duke of Albemarle. "MacFleckno" became even more brilliant in light of new knowledge of almost forgotten figures it was attacking, and "Absalom and Achitophel" (unquestionably the finest satirical poem of the period) acquired new brilliance when we know the negative images (in *POAS*) of Charles that Dryden incorporates and suavely dismisses in the opening lines of his poem. No other poem can match the urbanity with which Dryden moves from that opening view to the final revelation of Charles as a responsible and powerful monarch. The blend of satirical contempt and epic majesty is almost uniquely Dryden's, but there are precedents in the work of his old enemies Rochester and Marvell.

It is possible that "Lilliburlero" (so much loved by Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim) sang James II out of three kingdoms (as the author claimed), and it is possible that the ballads of Stephen College "the Protestant Joiner" were dangerous enough to bring him to the scaffold in Charles's reign. The subtleties of Dryden's poetic defenses of the establishment were too fine to be popular, and catchy lampoons were more effective in mustering opposition to "popery and arbitrary government."

Osborn had James II's own manuscript volume of anti-government satires, and many more were copied in the state papers of various foreign diplomats. Like *samizdats* in the Soviet, most of them were not published but circulated anonymously or pseudonomously. Most of them are not worth the dignity of print, but many are so informative of the state of affairs that they seemed to us worth preserving. To avoid gaffes or misinformation we arranged to have each volume vetted before publication by noted historians like J. H. Plumb and J. P. Kenyon. Otherwise historians have shown little interest in the series, perhaps with the idea that the state poems are factually unreliable. I think such historians are wrong: though often biassed, these poems not only recorded history but helped to make it.