

The Scrutiny of Poet Squab: John Dryden and the Figure of the Critic in Late Seventeenth-Century London, 1668-1700

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ABSTRACT:

This essay intends to investigate the role of the Restoration Poet Laureate, John Dryden, (1631-1700) in the emergence of literary criticism in the late seventeenth-century, and the extent to which he and his works were scrutinised by his libertine contemporaries.

By examining the interconnecting literary spaces of Restoration London, this study will demonstrate how the city's coffeehouses were associated with and utilised by a rising class of critics as a public platform for the distribution and consumption of criticism. Moreover, it will elucidate the way in which these coffeehouses were simultaneously viewed as a threat to the established forms of a libertine masculinity. This essay will discuss plays and poetry that scrutinised the literary critic, but were themselves the creative expression of critical perception. Such works include *The Rehearsal* (1671) by George Villiers, Second Duke of Buckingham (1628-1687), which is taken to caricature Dryden in its portrayal of the character Bayes, an unrefined conformist playwright preoccupied with his own fame. Other courtiers who formed a literary coterie with Buckingham, such as John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester (1647-1680), championed the aristocratic judgement of art, and were opposed to the literary ideologies expressed by Dryden's criticism and his social position. In the 1670s, shortly after Dryden's appointment as Poet Laureate, this culminated in the lashing out of a libertine culture that had newly reinstated its dominance over literature and taste at the time of the Restoration in 1660.

The role of the Restoration Poet Laureate John Dryden (1631-1700) in the emergence of literary criticism in the late seventeenth-century is well documented in the literature of the period. Yet his influence certainly did not pass unchallenged by his contemporaries. How thus were such challenges articulated and what do they reveal about attitudes to Dryden as a cultural and social figure of criticism?

Consideration of this critique of Dryden, and the differing forms in which it appeared, provides an insight, beyond this one figure, into the criticism of his day, as it reveals a wider uneasiness with the developing practices and platforms of criticism in the late seventeenth-century. In the 1670s,

shortly after Dryden's appointment as Poet Laureate, such apprehension concerning incipient modes of literary criticism culminated in the lashing out of a libertine culture that had newly reinstated its dominance in the sphere of literature and literary taste at the time of the Restoration in 1660. Aristocratic literary figures, such as George Villiers, Second Duke of Buckingham (1628-1687), and John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester (1647-1680), were keen to reinforce the influence of their own, actively and inherently exclusive coterie. The arguments put forward by these libertines, as to who exactly should hold sway over the period's developing literary culture, was a conversation that was enacted through the performative media of poetry and drama. Far from being unintentional, the *modus operandi* here was to make Dryden a figure of ridicule precisely because of his developing public role as a respected critic. Of particular interest, too, were the growing interconnecting literary spaces of Restoration London, and the ways in which the city's coffeehouses were associated with and utilised by a rising class of critics as a public platform for the distribution and consumption of criticism. Indeed, the proponents of libertinism were keen to expose coffeehouses as a threat to the established forms of masculinity by exploiting and encouraging the customary perception of those who frequented them as representing social, critical, and sexual distortions.

To begin with an example, literary failure is frequently placed in parity with sexual inadequacy in the literature of libertinism. Yet Rochester, who had previously supported Dryden in his theatrical career in the early 1670s, is particularly explicit in expressing how he feels Dryden inadequately represents the reprehensible practices of those who made writing their profession:

*Dryden in vain tried this nice way of wit,
For he to be a tearing blade thought fit.
But when he would be sharp he still was blunt:
To frisk his frolic fancy he'd cry 'c !';
Would give the ladies a dry bawdy bob,
And thus he got the name of Poet Squab.¹*

In these lines of Rochester's verse satire 'An Allusion to Horace: The Tenth Satire of the First Book' (circulated in manuscript in 1675),² he lampoons John Dryden as facetious and impotent, lacking in skill, grace, and individuality in both idiosyncrasy and art. This caricature portrays Dryden as a mimic, a pretender to libertinism who is incapable of wielding sexually charged rhetoric: an idea that is paralleled in the remainder of the poem with his unsuitability as a leading literary figure of his time.

¹ John Wilmot, 'An Allusion to Horace: The Tenth Satire of the First Book', in *Rochester: Selected Poems*, ed. by Paul Davis (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 36 (ll.71-76). This, and all subsequent citations, are taken from this edition. I have taken the liberty of censoring the expletive on line 74.

² Dates given for all poems and prose works are their date of first publication, unless otherwise stated. For dramatic works, the dates given correspond to those of their first known performances.

Describing Dryden as ‘squab’ is a multifarious insult, which can be taken to describe Dryden as short and overweight, low in stature, undeveloped, or unfledged. Here, Rochester is depicting Dryden as a distorted or inadequate figure of masculinity. The last two meanings also have particular reference to the word’s definition of a fledgling pigeon, which could be seen to be indicative of Rochester’s stance on the status of the professional writer.

Scribbling Authors and Common Libellers

At the time of Dryden’s death, it is known that many professional writers showed solidarity in a public grieving that celebrated his contribution to their development in the 1690s. William Congreve (1670-1729) was indebted to the former laureate’s guidance in the early stages of his literary career in the theatre. Dryden was also commended in a series of dedicatory poems in *The Nine Muses, Or, Poems Written by Nine severall Ladies Upon the death of the late Famous John Dryden, Esq.* (1700). These women wrote anonymously, but are now known to be Mary Pix (1666-1709), Susannah Centlivre (c.1669-1723), Catherine Trotter (1674?-1749) and Delarivière Manley (c.1670-1724), among others. Dryden’s critical stances contributed prominently to such compendiums of criticism as Sir Thomas Pope Blount’s (1649-1697) *De Re Poetica, Or, Remarks upon Poetry, with Characters and Censures of the Most Considerable Poets, whether Ancient or Modern, Extracted out of the Best and Choicest Criticks* (1694). These works and literary relationships bear testament to the theories developed by such critics as Marcie Frank,³ which have sought to illuminate Dryden’s involvement in the shaping of an indiscriminately classed group of professional writers, and his relationship with both the past and future of English literary tradition. However, such recognition and support, along with his status as combined essayist, apologist, poet, playwright, translator, classical scholar, and literary critic, belies the vulnerability and precariousness of Dryden’s position. In truth, his appointment as Poet Laureate in 1668 – the first of its kind to be made official – inspired a decade of the most comic and intensely hostile interpretations of his literary judgement that were to affect his image and authority as a critic until and beyond his death at the turn of the eighteenth-century. ‘An Allusion to Horace’, for example, is by no means the only work written or performed in the 1670s that criticised Dryden’s character as well as the genres and styles in which he wrote.

In response to such censure, Dryden appeared to practise indifference towards such attitudes and wrote in the dedicatory preface to his ‘Essay on Satire’:

³ See Marcie Frank, *Gender, Theatre, and the Origins of Criticism: From Dryden to Manley* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

I have been the public mark for many years ... but they ever shot at rovers, and therefore missed, or their power was so weak, that I might safely stand them, at the nearest distance ... Heaven be praised; our common libellers are as free from the imputation of wit, as of morality; and therefore whatever mischief they have designed, they have performed but little of it.⁴

Dryden confidently asserts to his addressee that ‘The neglect of the readers will soon put an end to this sort of scribbling’, and indeed such confidence may not have been unfounded.⁵ By the 1690s, literature of all genres had become more concerned with a consuming public than it was with the prerogatives of aristocratic patrons. With the intensification of poets and playwrights who wrote for a living, prominent aristocratic figures – particularly those from libertine circles – were becoming tragically aware of the philosophy’s irreconcilable incompatibility with social progression, in politics as well as in the production of literature. It became apparent that Dryden and his fellow professionals were creating their own circles and support networks amongst themselves as late-seventeenth century literary culture progressed. This was a culture still reliant upon aristocratic patronage, but less concerned with the artistic and metaphysical ideals of a court on which libertinism was increasingly losing its grip. In the theatres, libertine comedy and tragedy retained its titillating shock value for audiences, but theatrical reformers such as Jeremy Collier (1650-1726) continued to put pressure on their theatrical production by attempting to expose its representations and seeming support of sexual depravity. By the end of the 1690s such reformers had all but succeeded. Writers such as Pix and Congreve, producing plays in the mid-1690s, were perhaps the last to successfully utilise the sexual comedy of their predecessors in such a way that the whole piece was not consumed by it. The libertine literary elite struggled to maintain simultaneous control on patronage, artistic culture, and a parochially selective audience, and were further hindered by the somewhat exclusive nature of manuscript culture: a medium in which writers such as Rochester preferred their work to be disseminated when they had control over its publication. Indeed, Rochester, so as to ensure there is no doubt concerning where his loyalties lie, asserts repeatedly in ‘An Allusion’ that his work is meant for the pleasure of a select few. He even goes as far as to name some prominent literary figures – the majority infamous libertines – with whom his reading public would have been familiar:

I loathe the rabble; ’tis enough for Me
If Sedley, Shadwell, Sheppard, Wycherley,
Godolphin, Butler, Buckhurst, Buckingham
And some few more whom I omit to name

⁴ John Dryden, ‘Essay on Satire’ in *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. by C. D. Young (Charleston: BiblioLife, 2009), pp. 8-9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Approve my sense: I count their censure fame.

(ll.120-124)

Yet, in order to understand the merits and justifications of Rochester's above-cited earlier criticism of Dryden, we must, as Marianne Thormählen has identified, determine to what extent 'An Allusion' is 'the work of a serious artist about standards in writing', or whether it is merely 'one among many records of Restoration literary bickering'.⁶ 'An Allusion', which is written in a style that communicates with the original satire by Horace (65BC-8BC) and reflects Rochester's lampooned view of the contemporary literary scene, can hardly be dismissed as a mere poetic libel. Nor, however, should it be seen as an entirely serious work, fraught as it is with Rochester's typical caustic humour. It is hard to disagree with Thormählen, who deems Rochester to be uncharacteristically 'speaking *in propria persona* without any disguises or reservations'.⁷ The tenor of the speaker is indeed conversational, as the poem begins with the lines 'Well sir, 'tis granted I said Dryden's rhymes / Were stolen, unequal, nay dull many times' (ll.1-2). The rhetorical essence of Horace's original is thus maintained.⁸ 'An Allusion' is clearly adapted so as to demonstrate further closeness with its original predecessor as Rochester also retains Horace's use of irony, evident in such lines as 'Nor dare I from his sacred temple tear / That laurel which he best deserves to wear' (ll.79-80). For Rochester, prolificacy does not equate to quality, as is demonstrated by his claim that 'Five hundred verses every morning writ / Proves you no more a poet than a wit' (ll.93-94). 'Such scribbling authors', Rochester quips, 'have been seen before' (l.95). He argues that Dryden's verse, for example, unceremoniously 'Hits the false judgment of an audience / Of clapping fools, assembling a vast crowd' (ll.13-14). Rochester implores Dryden to 'Scorn all applause the vile rout can bestow / And be content to please those few who know (ll.102-103); that is, submit to the aristocratic judgment of art and the hegemony of the court coterie. As for any retort the working writer may put forward, 'Should I be troubled' (l.115), Rochester scoffs, 'when the poor led poets of the Town / For scraps and coach-room cry my verses down?' (ll.118-119). In response, however, Dryden seems to have been content with a wider, but no less discriminating audience. Indeed, seemingly rebutting Rochester's satire, in the epilogue to *Aureng-Zebe* (1675) Dryden writes:

Who would excel, when few can make a Test,
Betwixt indifferent Writing and the best?

⁶ Marianne Thormählen, *Rochester: The Poems in Context* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 311.

⁷ Thormählen, *Rochester: The Poems in Context*, p. 309.

⁸ John Davie's translation of Horace's 'Satire 10, Book One', when compared alongside 'An Allusion', demonstrates Rochester's ability to preserve the mood of the classical text which he adapts to his own purposes. See Davies, *Satires and Epistles* (New York: OUP, 2011), pp. 28-31.

For Favours cheap and common, who wou'd strive
Which, like abandoned Prostitutes, you give?
Yet scatter'd here and there, I some behold,
Who can discern the Tinsel from the Gold:
To these he writes; and, if by them allow'd,
'Tis their Prerogative to rule the Crowd.
For he more fears (like a presuming Man)
Their Votes who cannot judge, than theirs who can.⁹

Crucially, and unlike Rochester's manuscript poem, this is a dramatic piece, intended to be spoken in front of an audience in a playhouse that was progressively shaking off the influence of court and libertine culture. Yet the increasing social rejection of libertinism – that which Jeremy W. Webster has coined 'libertine isolation'¹⁰ – was in turn met with particular and witty indignation in the play *The Rehearsal* (1671). Although principally attributed to George Villiers, Second Duke of Buckingham, the play was reportedly a collaborative effort.¹¹ The clear agenda of its authors was to clarify that the court coterie were still capable of generating the wittiest social and dramatic criticism. On a simple, comic level, *The Rehearsal* is an attack on popular drama – the heroic form of tragedy, of which Dryden had become particularly fond – but it is important to note that the play also had a much more complex socio-political agenda. The characterisation of Bayes, a self-important, misguided, talentless playwright, is layered with manifold literary and political allusions. It has been suggested that Bayes is a composite of many identifiable social figures: Henry Bennet, Earl of Arlington (c.1618-1685); Sir William Davenant (1606-1668); and Dryden included.¹²

The play begins on the streets of London, where two distinguished, civilised gentlemen – Johnson and Smith – meet. As Johnson is unable to inform Smith of the exact purposes of bombastic heroic drama, they intercept the genre's most prolific arbiter, who conveniently passes by on his way to the theatre. Treating Johnson and Smith warily, as if they were potential critics of his work, Bayes seems unable to grasp their questions about the drama. However, once Bayes realises that he is in the presence of men of quality, he becomes more accommodating – apparently in the hope of attracting patronage – but no more comprehensible. Ultimately, by way of humouring Bayes' pomposity and arrogance, the two wits expose the playwright to be exceedingly crass. Bayes cannot even

⁹ Dryden, 'Epilogue to Aureng-Zebe' in *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. by John Sargeant (Oxford: OUP, 1948), p. 226 (ll.34-43).

¹⁰ Jeremy W. Webster, *Performing Libertinism in Charles II's Court: Politics, Drama, Sexuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 139.

¹¹ Among those who are suspected of collaborating with Buckingham are Martin Clifford (c.1624-1677), Thomas Sprat (*bap.*1635, *d.*1713), Samuel Butler (*bap.*1613, *d.*1680), Edmund Waller (1606-1687), and Charles de Marguetel de Saint-Denis de Saint-Évremond (*bap.*1614, *d.*1703). For more information see the introductory notes in Robert D. Hume and Harold Love's edition of works attributed to Buckingham, *Plays, Poems, and Miscellaneous Writings Associated with George Villiers Second Duke of Buckingham, Volumes I & II* (Oxford: OUP, 2007). The play itself seems to have taken influence from a variety of other dramatic works, such as *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670) by Molière, and Ben Jonson's *Poetaster* (1601).

¹² Bayes notably wears a brown plaster on his nose. It was well known that Davenant used the same technique to hide his pox ridden nose, and the Earl of Arlington did likewise to cover up an unsightly scar he had sustained in the civil wars: furthering the ambiguity of the characterisation.

comprehend that an audience will dislike his work, and is prepared to go to theatrical and excessive ends to try and outwit their right to criticise:

Bayes. [...] To
 which end, my first Prologue is, that I may
 come out in a long black Veil, and a great
 Huge Hang-man behind me, with a Furr'd-cap
 and his Sword drawn; and there tell 'm plainly,
 That if, out of good nature, they will
 not like my Play, I gad, I'l e'en kneel down, and
 he shall cut my head off. Whereupon they all
 clapping – a –

Smi. I, But suppose they don't.

Bayes. Suppose! Sir, you may suppose what you
 please, I have nothing to do with your suppose,
 Sir; nor am not at all mortifi'd at it; not at all,
 Sir; I gad, not one jot, Sir. Suppose quoth a! –
 ha, ha, ha.

*Walks away.*¹³

Just as Rochester had mocked Dryden for his inopportune and improper use of obscenity in 'An Allusion', Buckingham *et al* ensure a similar representation through the theatricality of their characterisation of Bayes, typified by Bayes' portrayal as a fop: a social upstart with a dubious sexual identity. Mark S. Dawson describes fops as a 'social caricature',¹⁴ 'fictive creations [that] did not exist in complete independence of the theatre world'.¹⁵ Purely a comic oddity, the fop was a stock character of Restoration drama, an exaggeration of undesirable social mannerisms in men, often attributed as being in direct opposition to masculinity and the fundamental doctrines of libertinism. As competition for the affection of women they were not seen as a threat, but they were portrayed as threatening traditional social hierarchies. Exponents of artifice, the fops of the Restoration stage always idolise and mimic their aristocratic acquaintances.¹⁶ In fact, inadvertently identifying himself with such practices, after the debut of *The Rehearsal*, Dryden had written 'And not only I, who pretend not to this way, but the best comic writers of our age, will join with me to acknowledge that they have copied

¹³ George Villiers, 'The Rehearsal' in *Restoration Drama: An Anthology*, ed. by David Womersley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 147 (I.ii.147-161). All subsequent quotes will be taken from this edition of the play.

¹⁴ Mark S. Dawson, *Gentility and the Comic Theatre of Late Stuart London* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 146.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁶ The most successful and best-known examples of the 'fop' include: Sir Fopling in *The Man of Mode* (1676) by Sir George Etherege, and Centlivre's Sir William Mode in *The Beau's Duel* (1702) and Marplot in *The Busy Body* (1709).

the gallantries of courts'.¹⁷ Nonetheless, portraying Dryden as a pretender to aristocratic ideals was symptomatic of court culture's simultaneous craving and rejection of imitation in its own image. Bayes also exposes himself as a pretender to libertinism when he boasts that he has written a part for a woman he intends to make his mistress. He initiates bawdy banter with Smith and Johnson as the said actress passes, and once she has exited, he indulges his listeners with the information that he is kept by another woman in the city. Performing the traditional role of a fop by playing inadequately with the French language, he jokes of the similarity of the French *ma vie* (my life) with *mon vit* (a loutish term for the penis). He continues to alternate between crude, overly masculinised language and contrasting efforts to effeminise himself, as, for instance, when he explains that he is valued by this second mistress 'for a *Beau Gerson*: I am, ifackins' (I.ii.1.73).¹⁸ Here, too, Bayes betrays his low breeding by using the word 'ifackins' instead of the more refined 'in faith', associating himself with the derisory, feminised masculinity that was reported to be epitomised by those that frequented the coffeehouses. Bayes' mimicry certainly knows no bounds and leaks into his methods of writing, as he admits in the explanation of his 'Rule of Record' (I.i.11.129-130):

Bayes. [...] I come into a Coffee-house, or some other
 place where wittie men resort, I make as if I minded nothing;
 (do you mark?) but as soon as anyone speaks, pop I slap it down,
 and make that, too, my own.
(I.i.11.132-136)

The Critic and the Coffeehouse

In reality, the emerging coffeehouse coterie was making its literary and social marks decidedly distinct from that of the court, but the deliberately placed allusion in *The Rehearsal* to the image of Dryden in the coffeehouse would have been recognisable to the audience and would have certainly exacerbated the play's comic caricature. Such writers as Buckingham were all too aware that the coffeehouse, and his favoured Will's Coffee House in particular, was crucial to the enduring image of Dryden as a learned and esteemed man of letters. His affinity with the literary culture of the coffeehouse had, therefore, the potential to impact negatively on his status as a leading proponent of literary criticism.

Arenas of socio-political and literary discussion, coffeehouses became spaces of prolific and energetic public performance and social communication. Close to the theatres and situated amongst a broader community of booksellers, taverns, and brothels, coffeehouses constituted a considerable part of public space and aided the emergence and growth of the public sphere. They offered a milieu in

¹⁷ See Dryden's dedication to Rochester in his *Marriage A-la-Mode*, ed. by David Crane (London: A&C Black, 2003), pp. 17-19.

¹⁸ 'For a *Pretty Boy*: I am, in faith'.

which one could take part in a variety of textual performances: verses, lampoons, impromptus, and manuscripts were shared, even read aloud; libellous and supportive pamphlets on state and acts of parliament were distributed and discussed; and the latest plays performed at the theatres were re-enacted and reproached. Together, the theatres and coffeehouses both bred and fed critical public opinion, and maintained spaces in which literary discourse could flourish. Many anonymously written pamphlets describe the hubbub of daily occurrences in the coffeehouse, portraying its inhabitants as a socially critical throng of individuals:

The *Ingenios* use it for an after *Rehearsal*, where they bring plays to Repetition, sift each *Scene*, examine every *uncorrected Line*, and damn beyond the fury of the *Rota*, whilst the *incognito Poet* out of an overwhelming affection to his *Infant Wit*, steals in *muffled* up in his *Cloake*, and sliely *Evesdrops* like a *medicant Mother* to praise the *prettyness* of the *Babe* she has newly pawn'd on the Parish ... A *Coffee-House* is a *Phanatique Theatre*, a *Hot-House* to flux in for a *clapt understanding*, a *Sympathetical Cure* for the *Gonorrhoea* of the *Tongue*, or a *refin'd Baudy-House* where *Illegitimate Reports* are got in close *Adultery* between *Lying lips* and *Itching Ears*.¹⁹

The scene created in this extract is heavily dramatised, whilst also demonstrating the close association between the production and criticism of drama. Evident, too, is a comparison of the circulation of both gossip and criticism with the unfortunate ramifications of venereal disease: 'Gonorrhoea of the Tongue'. The playwright Aphra Behn (1640?-1689), in the preface to her comedy *The Lucky Chance, or An Alderman's Bargain* (1686), similarly jests about an anonymous 'friend of mine at Will's coffee-house', who, having praised her work in the playhouse, is a 'pestilent wit' for decrying it in the presence of the coffeehouse crowd.²⁰ It is clear that the Restoration audience was increasingly exercising its right to criticise literary talent, and such conversations were spilling out from the playhouse, and into the other social spaces on offer to them. In a pamphlet entitled, like many others, *The Character of a Coffee-House*, its anonymous author provides a description of the socially disparate coffeehouse:

Now being enter'd, there's no needing
Of complements or gentile breeding,
For you may seat you any where,
There's no respect of persons there.²¹

¹⁹ Anon., *The Character of a Coffee House [1673], with symptomes of a Town-Wit* (London: Herringman, 1673), p. 6. Italics are present in the original text.

²⁰ Aphra Behn, 'The Lucky Chance, or An Alderman's Bargain', in *The Rover and Other Plays*, ed. by Jane Spencer (New York: OUP, 2008), pp. 190-191 (Preface, ll.112-113 and 115).

²¹ Anon., *The Character of a Coffee-House, Wherein Is contained a Description of the Persons usually frequenting it, with their Discourse and Humors, As Also the Admirable Vertues of Coffee*, 1665 (London: Herringman, 1665), p. 4 (ll.43-46).

Whilst the coffeehouses' accommodation and encouragement of such sociability through a mingling of the classes was paramount to their cultural success, it was also the reason that they were viewed with suspicion by courtly government officials. Coffeehouses were gaining notoriety as places of unmonitored, libellous, even treasonous discourse. As such, King Charles II attempted to issue a bill, drawn in 1675, entitled *By the King A Proclamation for the Suppression of Coffee-Houses*. Not least because of the popularity of the coffeehouses, it was not a bill that could be effectively regulated, and was soon after abandoned. Yet for those interested in the preservation of a courtly culture supported by monarchical power, coffeehouses posed a significant threat precisely for their open sociability. Coffee was a cheap commodity that had risen to popularity in Oxford and London in the 1650s. This was during the time of the Commonwealth, which may have contributed to the distrust with which it – and the establishments that sold it – were viewed by the monarchical establishment. Coffeehouses encouraged a typical English xenophobia as some had foreign proprietors and the unfamiliar, alien taste of the beverage itself was, at least initially, seen as perversely exotic. Similar to tobacco, coffee suffered a mass of libels and lampoons, with excessive consumption of coffee also linked to effeminacy, infertility, and loss of libido, according to the pamphlets that were supposedly written by women and often entitled 'complaints'. Coffeehouses, too, were viewed as having distinctly feminine qualities, as well as encouraging feminine habits. Although relatively few women physically occupied the social space, the coffeehouse was regarded by some as a demonstration of their influence and evidence of female intrusion into traditional male sociability. Brian Cowan's extensive study of this coffeehouse culture and sociability, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse*, shows an interest in the anxieties expressed in the period about 'the popularity of such a luxurious, debauched, and effeminate oriental custom as frequenting coffeehouses',²² and the threat that it could pose to the continuation of 'masculine single-sex milieus'.²³ Petitions were organised which detailed 'the unfortunate consequences faced by those wives abandoned by their husbands who frequent the coffeehouses and have consequently lost their masculine sexual vigor'.²⁴ Such commentary 'sought to reveal to contemporaries the disastrous consequences that might entail should the men of England relinquish their patriarchal obligations to maintain proper order in state and society'.²⁵ Hence, Cowan continues, it was believed that 'Asian habits of luxurious consumption often signalled the beginning of the end for a hitherto vigorous and

²² Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 131.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

masculine polity' and 'a taste for novel, foreign, and exotic drinks could be linked to the common trope of a feminine appetite for the latest fashion'.²⁶ It is thus hardly surprising, given Dryden's frequenting of these establishments, that such implicit associations would have been alluded to in libertine libels against him.

Dryden certainly was at the centre of an emerging bourgeois movement that sought to create its own social elite, separate, but similar to that of the court. The formation of such a group, it has been proposed by Markman Ellis, 'suggests the professionalism of wit into a tribunal of critics'.²⁷ Lawrence E. Klein has noted 'the civilizing process [of the coffeehouse] was a function not of courts but of an escape from them'.²⁸ Dryden, however, especially by the end of the 1670s, was familiar with the irrevocable connection that his professional life had with the judicious opinions of the aristocratic literary elite. Outliving most of his libertine literary opponents, he only became truly free of them when the same cultural changes that had seen libertine literary influence dwindle also forced Dryden to concede the loss of his laureateship on the grounds that he was both a Catholic and a Jacobite. Indeed, at the time of the Glorious Revolution in 1688, stricter policies of literary censure came into practice, pressures to morally reform the stage became impassable, and his refusal of loyalty to the new coregency regime of William III and Mary II stripped him of his position. Thereafter, Dryden's influential contributions to literary culture became much less public and an increasingly private pursuit. Nevertheless, prior to these later developments, it is clear that the poetic and dramatised criticisms of Dryden were not merely an expression of literary critique and dramatic taste – or even exclusively class warfare – but an explicit medium of socio-sexual politics utilised to undermine the progressive prominence and prolificacy of an emerging literary bourgeois of which Dryden was a revolutionary figure. Through their use of the language of sexual politics and their critique of the emerging practices of criticism penned by working writers such as Dryden, the libertine literary elite exposed an anxiety of potential exile and exclusion from socially progressive culture. They reveal a fear of the past spent in banishment reimagined and an apprehension in the face of the inevitable forfeiture of libertinism's influence on the future of literary culture and criticism.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²⁷ Markman Ellis, *The Coffee-house: A Cultural History* (London: Phoenix, 2005), p. 155.

²⁸ Lawrence E. Klein, 'Coffeehouse Civility, 1660-1714: An Aspect of Post-Courtly Culture in England', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 59:1 (1996), p. 50.