**DRYDEN, John** (1631-1700)

Born Aldwinkle All Saints, Northamptonshire, 1631; died London 1700. Educated at Westminster School (John Locke and Robert South were his contemporaries) and Trinity College, Cambridge where he gained a BA in 1654. His father died at the time of his graduation leaving him a small estate. His activities between leaving Cambridge and the Restoration in 1660 are obscure. He moved to London and may have served the Protectorate. He contributed his *Heroique Stanza’s* to a memorial volume for Cromwell in 1659. But with the Restoration of Charles II, he began writing public poetry in support of the monarchy, as well as essays and plays. He was elected a member of the Royal Society in 1662. In 1663, he married Elizabeth Howard. They had three sons. Both parents were devoted to their children but not to one another. In 1670, Dryden was appointed both Poet Laureate and Historiographer Royal. His main literary efforts up to 1681 were directed towards the theatre. But his activities as a wit and satirist in print as well as at Will’s coffee-house led to literary controversies and a physical beating in 1679. The rumour that Dryden had satirized Charles II, coupled with his attack on Catholics in *The Spanish Friar* (1681), suggested that Dryden supported Shaftesbury’s Whig opposition. Dryden responded by reasserting his loyalty to Charles II in *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681). Shaftesbury’s reputation never recovered from Dryden’s attack. Together with the royalist *Annus Mirabilis* (1667), the anti-Whig *The Medall* (1682) and *MacFlecknoe* (1682) and the pro-Catholic *The Hind and the Panther* (1687), *Absalom and Achitophel* established Dryden’s role as master of political poetry in both heroic and satiric modes. In 1686, Dryden converted to Catholicism and was employed by James II. At the 1688 Revolution, he lost all offices. James II’s patronage was replaced by that of the Earl of Dorset and several other noblemen. Dryden continued writing plays, poems, translations and essays and spending his evenings entertaining literary disciples at Will’s. He refused to seek William III’s favour. He died of gout complications in 1700 and was buried in the ‘Poets’ Corner’ of Westminster Abbey.

Dryden’s fame rests on his literary achievements. His poetry, prose, plays and operas were often political. They propagated a sceptical Tory view, which was royalist and constitutionalist, which owed much to Montaigne, a little to Hobbes and perhaps Clarendon, and nothing to Filmer. Dryden linked Whig resistance theory to Jesuit doctrines, the French Catholic League and the regicides of 1649. He defended the restored, ancient, providential, constitutional monarchy as ideally suited to England and as a middle way between arbitrary power and democratic chaos. He was attacked, however, as if he supported absolutism by Whigs of all shades from Thomas Hunt to John Somers. Yet his scepticism, gradualism and distaste for factionalism still carry conviction.

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