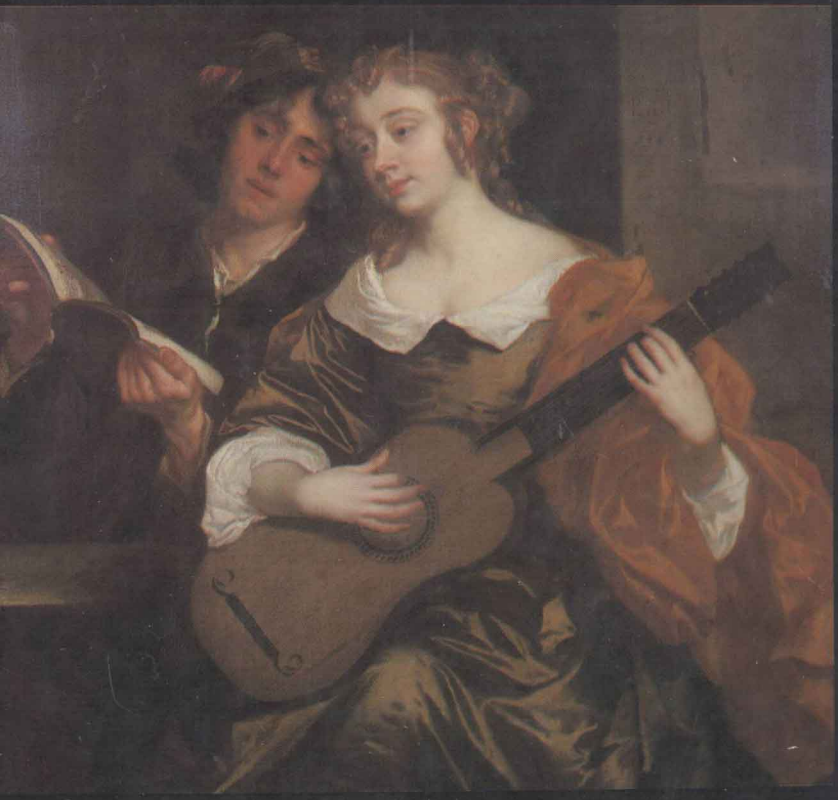
English Poetry of the Seventeenth Century

George Parfitt



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George Parfitt

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Editors' Preface

The multi-volume Longman Literature in English Series provides students of literature with a critical introduction to the major genres in their historical and cultural context. Each volume gives a coherent account of a clearly defined area, and the series, when complete, will offer a practical and comprehensive guide to literature written in English from Anglo-Saxon times to the present. The aim of the series as a whole is to show that the most valuable and stimulating approach to literature is that based upon an awareness of the relations between literary forms and their historical context. Thus the areas covered by most of the separate volumes are defined by period and genre. Each volume offers new and informed ways of reading literary works, and provides guidance to further reading in an extensive reference section.

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Author's Preface

This volume, in accordance with the aims of the series of which it is part, tries to be something different from traditional literary history. Such history, as with the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, provides useful information and may also give a valuable sense of literary development over a long period of time. But the tendency of such history is inevitably towards generalization and the loss of a sense of detail and individuality. Often, too, literary history has little to offer in the area of the relationships between literature and history. Yet anyone who attempts a book like the one which follows this preface is likely to have sympathy with the problems which confront the literary historian, for the problems of organization are acute. The chosen approach here – the generic one – allows, it is hoped, for some sense of development and comparison, while it is also an advantage that the approach conforms to an emphasis of the seventeenth century itself, the poetry of that century being very genre-conscious. But, of course, it needs to be remembered that the divisions used here are far from absolute. Satire and mock-heroic overlap; poetry of place and poetry of occasion merge at times; religious and secular lyric have much in common.

The effort to avoid merely listing authors and works in continuous prose has two chief effects. It means, first of all, selection, concentration, and, therefore, exclusion. Naturally, I have stressed what seems significant to me and I am particularly aware that I have emphasized the work of several poets who I think have been unjustly neglected (Carew, Cleveland, Cotton). Some readers are likely to feel that the dismissal of such as Traherne is too terse. The effort, however, has not been to say something about every poet of the century who has been felt by someone to have written a poem of merit, but to provide – and this is the second of the effects mentioned above – a suggestive account of a century's poetry and to give some idea of how this poetry relates to the century in which it was written.

Since it is my view that writers about seventeenth-century poetry have tended to avoid serious consideration of the relationship of the verse with the century's socio-political history, I have emphasized this, rather than the intellectual and purely literary context, although I am aware of the importance of both and also that my treatment of the socio-political history is no more than a sketch.

The main body of the text is intended to be 'open' rather than 'closed'. It is designed to be suggestive and stimulating rather than dictatorial, and

in this sense is meant to teach. One thing which follows is that the Chronology, the General Bibliographies, and the Individual Authors – notes should be seen as important parts of the book, complementing, amplifying, and qualifying its arguments. They are designed to help the reader fill out the picture drawn in the body of the text. Eventually the reader should be able to create her/his own picture, although naturally I hope it will be identical with my own.

One other preliminary point needs to be made. The introduction begins with a section on seventeenth-century history. This is only an outline but it is an attempt to suggest the framework within which seventeenth-century literature is created. It is placed where it is because that framework seems to me to be particularly important for an understanding of the poetry of the century.

Many books and many conversations over a number of years have contributed to this book, and I should like to thank all unknowing helpers. More particularly I should like to thank my students and former students (especially Marta Grcar and Rosemary Heatley) for commenting on ideas used here; John Lucas, Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis for their words and friendship; Michael Wheeler and David Carroll for their help and thoroughness as General Editors; and my wife, Maureen Bell, for all sorts of things.

George Parfitt

For Maureen, with my love

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Introduction

1

Between 1600 and 1700 two British kings lost their thrones other than through natural causes. The overthrow of monarchs had happened earlier in British history (most famously with Richard II) but, despite the uncertainties of the Tudor claim to the English throne and the religious and political upheavals consequent upon Henry VIII's reformation, the sixteenth century managed to avoid dispossession, even though Edward VI came to the throne as a minor and the reign of Mary I meant both a Spanish consort for an English queen and the return of Catholicism as the state religion.

On the surface, the dispossessions of Charles I and James II are very different. Charles, after a trial by a parliamentary court which, reasonably enough, he refused to recognise, was formally beheaded in January 1649 ('justly condemned, adjudged to die, and put to death, for many treasons, murders and other heinous offences committed by him'[1]). Monarchy was abolished and a Commonwealth declared. James, heir to the throne to which his brother (Charles II) was restored in 1660, survived both the Exclusion crisis, brought on largely by his Catholicism, and the Monmouth Rebellion, but by 1688 a group of national figures had invited William of Orange to England. William landed at Torbay in November and on 13 December James fled England. Complex, even confused, discussions led to the naming of William and Mary (his wife and James's daughter) as monarchs in February 1689. Charles I had conceded little to his enemies, except militarily, and behind his execution lie the bodies of the Civil War dead. Moreover, the claims that Charles was dealt with constitutionally hold little water, it being nearer the truth to say that the constitution was remade to allow the monarch's trial and execution. By contrast, James was, on the surface, finally willing to conciliate and his fall involved virtually no bloodshed. And although James did not give up his claim to the throne his behaviour at the end of 1688 amounts to an abdication.

Yet these two throne-losses have links which are more important than the dissimilarities, so much so that it can be argued that the Civil War made the Glorious Revolution possible. Both events, in fact, are parts of a single process of questioning, defining, and redefining the roles of ruler and ruled in seventeenth-century Britain. To Burke the Revolution of 1688 and the

Declaration of Rights of 1689 mark the beginning of modern times, the triumph of a constitutional middle way in Church and State[2]. To a modern historian like J. H. Plumb the Restoration and Glorious Revolution mean the consolidation of power in the hands of the great landed magnates.[3] Monarchy survives, somewhat chastened by the Interregnum (which is one way of reading Charles II's Act of Indemnity of 1660 and his restraint over royalist appeals for restitution and revenge) but the bloodless substitution of William and Mary for James effectively establishes that the throne is in the power of the people.[4] When Dryden wrote *The Medal* (1682) he accused Shaftesbury of preaching 'to the Crowd, that Pow'r is lent,/But not convey'd to Kingly Government' (ll. 82–3): 1688 confirms the principle which the poet abhors, although the change of monarch was not, in any modern sense, effected democratically.

Democracy remains a smear word throughout the seventeenth century. Dryden, in *Absalom and Achitophel*, again attacking Shaftesbury (as Achitophel) claims that his aim is 'That Kingly power . . . might be/Drawn to the dregs of a Democracy' (ll. 226–7) and Dryden liked the latter line enough to use it again in *The Hind and the Panther* (1687). He is merely echoing a distaste which is voiced constantly, and not least by parliamentarians.[5] Democracy is part of the Leveller vision,[6] but the Army Debates at Putney in October and November 1647 show how unappealing the idea was to the parliamentary gentry.[7] The radicalism of the sects has had its issue since the seventeenth century (although its visions are largely unrealized even now) but at the end of that century radicalism seemed as defeated as absolutism.

If there can be said to be a single key moment in seventeenth-century British history, it must be when the axe fell on the neck of Charles I. One way of seeing the century can then be in terms of the questions, 'How did we come to this?' and 'How do we live in its aftermath?' From our twentieth-century perspective it is difficult to imagine how unthinkable the execution was. Monarchs had been rebelled against often enough, and violently disposed of, but not formally tried and executed. Moreoever, the Tudor century had seen obedience preached with an intensity and consistency which reflect both the weakness of the Tudor claim and the national desire for internal peace after the long broils of the Wars of the Roses. For their part, the first Stuarts codified the doctrine of divine right, relying upon the effect of those habits of obedience which the Tudors had laboured to inculcate. Rebellion was neither fashionable nor easy in seventeenth-century England; not least because few men could envisage a social order other than one where a monarch headed a social hierarchy. How, then, did England come to try and then execute Charles I?

In July 1642 Bulstrode Whitelocke, an intelligent and politically experienced man, found the slide into civil war nearly incomprehensible:

> It is strange to note how we have insensibly slid into this beginning of a civil war by one unexpected accident after another, as waves of the sea, which have brought us thus far . . . [8]

He is aware of a drift from 'paper combats' to 'the question of raising forces, and naming a general and officers of an army',[9] and Whitelocke's 'paper combats' can be found featuring prominently in Anthony Fletcher's *The Outbreak of the English Civil War* (1981), a book which documents in detail national awareness of crisis and also the fears and frustrations of those who sought to resolve that crisis. Fletcher's account tends to support Conrad Russell's view that 'neither side really wanted the war, but both were too frightened of the other's intentions to trust any settlement', and Russell adds that 'Attempts to explain a deliberate revolution are inappropriate to a situation in which no deliberate revolution took place'.[10]

As we look back, centuries after the Civil War, we can discern patterns in the decades which precede it, but Whitelocke's feeling of an insensible slide is probably reasonably characteristic. Yet people were aware of a dangerous drift and some thought they knew what was causing it. Edward Ludlow felt the central issue was clear enough:

> The question in dispute between the King's party and us [was], as I apprehended, whether the King should govern as a God by his will and the nation be governed by force like beasts; or whether the people should be governed by laws made by themselves, and live under a government derived from their own consent.[11]

Ludlow sets government by a godlike king against government by consent, and his analysis (which, rephrased, could appeal to many royalists) is echoed whenever the issue is defined as being between the King's prerogative and Parliament's privileges. But the choice which Ludlow presents was not thought of as one between distinct constitutional models. What A. G. R. Smith says of the Jacobean situation holds true of the Caroline:

> . . . the dominant constitutional theory, accepted by king, Parliament and common lawyers alike, was of a balanced constitution which was founded on certain inalienable rights possessed by both Crown and subjects.[12]

Kingly prerogative and parliamentary privilege are both accepted: the disputes are about definitions and interrelationships. Moreoever, specific disputes are often both important in themselves and for what they suggest about the state of relationships between the disputants. Thus the famous Ship Money dispute raised major issues about how far Charles's prerogative ran (and it is perfectly possible to argue that the King was attempting nothing illegal) but it is equally important in showing how little trust could be drawn upon in the 1630s.

This loss of trust cannot be explained in a formula. The personality of James I may have played a part (Elizabeth's more dazzling character could clearly baffle and enchant even tough Elizabethan parliament-men) as did fears of the influence of migrant Scots and of James's favourites. Then there is religion. The Gunpowder Plot (1605) both sums up and stimulates fears of Roman Catholic plans to overthrow the government, and in succeeding

decades courtly softness on the Catholic issue is often seen as sinister complicity with such plans. John Pym's concern with 'the plot' may have been obsessive or just politically astute, but he was in touch with widespread apprehension which saw the King's court as focus for that apprehension. The tolerance of Romanists around the Catholic Henrietta Maria could only lend plausibility to apprehension.[13] Further, the rise of Arminianism within the Church of England – and especially Laud's appointment to the see of Canterbury in 1633 – seemed to many a king-sponsored move away from moderate Protestantism towards Rome, while the failure or inability of government to offer strong support in the continental Protestant fight against the Counter-Reformation could be seen in sinister terms.

Much follows from, and contributes to a loss of confidence. James seems to have had a strong liking for theory, and while his pronouncements about kingly power may well have been helpfully meant, the spelling out of prerogative could only have seemed provocative, especially granted his backing of men of mediocre backgrounds and talents. Men look more closely at what they see as their rights under James and, in so far as these are felt to be enshrined in Parliament, they object to what they see as kingly interference in Parliament's sittings and procedures – this being most fully dramatized with Charles's attempt to arrest the Five Members in the House of Commons in 1641.

Many other factors contribute to the loss of trust in the decades before the Civil War. Famine and plague play their parts, as do the varying fortunes of the gentry and their sometimes conflicting loyalties to central government and local interests.[14] Erratic and inefficient taxation is psychologically disturbing, as is the chronic inability to solve the problems of financing the monarchy. Mercantile ambition and self-confidence both provoke and respond to traditional hierarchic notions, while deep-rooted fear of the mob gains substance with London's increasing self-assertiveness.

Whitelocke's insensible slide, then, can be analysed, but we are left with a complex of causes rather than an explanation, and I suspect that the reasons for the breaking down of trust, and thus of the coming of civil war, inhere as much in the suspicious reading of kingly proclamation by opponents, and of parliamentary ordinance by king and court, as in any specific event. But even up to the trial and execution of the King, the bulk of people on both sides see the issue as one of how to operate the existing model (best seen perhaps as the idea of the nation most fully embodied as King-in-Parliament). As Russell reminds us, 'Parliamentary commissions were issued in the name of king and Parliament' during the Civil War itself, and he cites the parliamentary vice-admiral who saw himself (even in retrospect) as 'fighting to bring the king to his Parliament'[15]. Even Pym is content to see the King as the head, people as the body[16] – an image dear to James I. Structural change was a minority vision.

Yet the slide into war and the subsequent drift to Charles's execution, even if these are seen as essentially conservative phenomena, rather than revolutionary,[17] cannot, of course, conceal the facts that momentous changes were taking place and that contemporaries were aware of them. A king is defied, defeated, and executed; the office of monarchy is abol-

ished, as is the House of Lords – and, in a sense, the facts matter more than the reasons. Even the short-lived successes of Levellers and Diggers have the enormous importance of having been able to happen. The field of what is possible, and seen to be possible, is enlarged.

So perhaps the most important factor in the often tentative and confused manœuvring of the pre-war period, of the Civil War itself, and of the Interregnum, is simply that power is seen to be transferable and alienable. Charles II seems to have realized this, but so did the opponents of his brother James. The most obvious beneficiaries of this realization are, in the short and medium terms, those who become the oligarchic power-holders and power-brokers of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But it is neither sentimental nor anachronistic for Marxist historians to honour the radicals of the middle years of the seventeenth century.

One major development since the Civil War has been the gradual separation of the secular and the religious, or at least of Church and State. Augustanism is primarily a secular phenomenon and in the eighteenth century 'enthusiasm' is a dirty word. Anglicanism becomes institutionalized to such an extent that strong spiritual impulses become located mainly in nonconformity, Catholicism, and in the pantheistic tendencies of Romanticism. The State continues to use religious sanctions, but in effect gives ground to secular moralities.

This is important for us in the attempt to understand the seventeenth century because such separation makes little sense for that period, so much so that efforts to discuss developments in secular *or* religious terms are misleading and misconceived. Contemporaries were quite capable of making distinctions between religious and secular impulses (as often when Donne is writing about love). Machiavelli and Bacon had not written in vain, and it is proper to see a tendency to separation in the course of the century, not least in the 'realism' of Hobbes and, towards the end of the century, in the cool dismantling by Locke of much of what is involved in spiritually weighted accounts of experience. But for most people, most of the time, the religious and the secular were felt to be, actually or ideally, one.

The Grand Remonstrance of 1641 provides a fine example of this intertwining. It talks of the 'root' of the crisis between King and Parliament as a 'malignant and pernicious design of subverting the fundamental laws and principles of government upon which the religion and justice of this kingdom are firmly established'. 'Government' is that 'upon which' both religion and justice are established, and when the Remonstrance goes on to list the 'actors and promotors' of the alleged sedition it speaks of 'Jesuited Papists', Arminian clergy, and of councillors and courtiers who work to 'further the interests of some foreign princes or states'.[18] We tend to see the Remonstrance as primarily a political document, but we begin to go wrong if we regard references to religion, papists, and 'the corrupt part of the clergy' as covers for essentially secular concerns. The Remonstrance's involvement with both papists and 'foreign princes' should remind us that fear of Catholicism is simultaneously political and religious. Spain is both a great political power and a great centre of Catholicism: it cannot be a

political threat without being a religious one. Papal pronouncements might seek to reassure non-Catholics that religious toleration need not be seen as politically dangerous, but there is a stubborn refusal to accept this view: hence the failure of James II's Declarations of Indulgence, the efforts to pass the Exclusion Bill, and James's fall in 1688. Without violence a Catholic could not be monarch for long in seventeenth-century Britain. The office and the religion are not finally separable, and, of course, the Henrican reformation had formalized their union.

The Remonstrance's linking of government, religion, and justice is commonplace and it is not to be seen as merely a political formula. Pym's persistent anti-Catholicism was certainly a theme he used politically, but it is so potent because it draws upon deep fears of political tyranny, foreign domination, and, simultaneously, imposition of a 'superstitious' religion. Pym himself can be seen as both patriot and convinced Protestant, but he would probably have regarded the two as one. The same could be said of Cromwell. Hostile contemporaries are liable to call him 'atheist', and modern historians are understandably fascinated by the politics of his extraordinary career, but there is no good reason to doubt the sincerity of his searchings for divine help in his quest for political and military success. And, of course, reading the writings of such as Winstanley[19] is to see how scrutiny of the Bible can issue in political activism. There is nothing eccentric in Milton's career, nor anything perverse in seeing *Paradise Lost* as Civil War epic. The Elizabethan government had used the pulpit for political propaganda. Stuart governments did the same, while rightly fearing that puritan preachers were speaking an alternative politics as well as an alternative religion. So when Laud suppressed the London Feofees of Impropriation in 1633 he was acting politically as much as in the cause of High Anglicanism.

Religious controversy in the seventeenth century, then, is also political controversy. It can be seen in terms of introvert and extrovert tendencies: protestant emphasis upon the individual conscience and response to the Scriptures versus Catholic stress on authority and tradition. But governments which were not Catholic, yet which sought to strengthen central authority, saw, again correctly, that tendencies to religious separatism were politically dangerous, while almost every gentleman suspected that separatism in religion meant democracy in politics.

Separatism can be regarded as introversion, the wish of a minority to operate with minimal organization by the majority. But the first half of the century, in particular, also shows a longing for the identification of English Protestantism with the continental reformed churches, so much so that Stuart refusal to back, say, Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden effectively is a source of grief to many which is as much religious as patriotic. James I loved the title of peacemaker, while apologists for Charles I make much of the peaceful isolation of his kingdom. It can be argued that the foreign policies of these kings were necessarily pacific, or at least necessarily involved exercises in trimming. To be seen to be sympathetic with Spain or France is to risk the hostility of Protestant Europe (and of Protestant England) while to move decisively into the Protestant bloc is to alienate the