

THE DARING MUSE

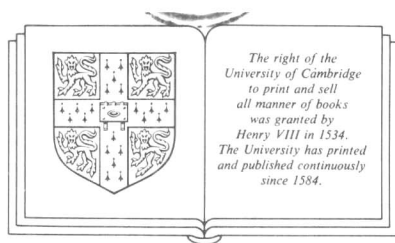
Augustan Poetry Reconsidered.

MARGARET ANNE DOODY



THE DARING MUSE
AUGUSTAN POETRY RECONSIDERED

MARGARET ANNE DOODY



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
LONDON NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE
MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1985

First published 1985

Printed in Great Britain at
the University Press, Cambridge

Library of Congress catalogue card number: 84-17061

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Doody, Margaret

The daring muse.

1. English poetry – Early modern, 1500–1700
– History and criticism 2. English
poetry – 18th century – History and criticism

I. Title

821'.009 PR561

ISBN 0 521 25825 1 hard covers

ISBN 0 521 27723 x paperback

*This book is dedicated
to
my sister
Freda*



Ye sacred Nine! that all my Soul possess,
Whose Raptures fire me, and whose Visions bless

(Pope, *Windsor Forest*)

*Beat not the dirty paths where vulgar feet have trod,
But give the vigorous fancy room*

(Swift, "To Mr. Congreve")

A note on editions

The following works by these authors (frequently cited in this book) are quoted throughout as they appear in the modern editions given here. A note will be supplied only when the text referred to differs from that on this list.

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| Marvell | <i>The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell</i> , H. M. Margoliouth, ed., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927). |
| Butler | <i>Hudibras</i> , John Wilders, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). |
| Rochester | <i>The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester</i> , David M. Vieth, ed. (London and New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968). |
| Dryden | <i>The Works of John Dryden</i> , H. T. Swedenberg, General Editor, with numerous other editors, 19 vols. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1958-). |
| Swift | <i>Swift, Poetical Works</i> , Herbert Davis, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967). |
| Philips, John | <i>The Poems of John Philips</i> , M. G. Lloyd Thomas, ed. (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1927). |
| Gay | <i>John Gay Poetry and Prose</i> , Vinton A. Dearing and Charles E. Beckwith, eds., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). |
| Pope | <i>The Poems of Alexander Pope</i> . A one-volume edition of the Twickenham text, John Butt, ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963). |
| Thomson | <i>The Seasons</i> , James Sambrook, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). |
| Gray | <i>Thomas Gray and William Collins, Poetical Works</i> , Roger Lonsdale, ed. (Oxford University Press, 1977). |
| Collins | |
| Johnson | <i>The Lives of the Poets</i> , George Birbeck Hill, ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905). |
| Cowper | <i>The Poetical Works of William Cowper</i> , H. S. Milford, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1950). |
| Chatterton | <i>The Complete Works of Thomas Chatterton</i> . A bicentenary edition, Donald S. Taylor, in association with Benjamin B. Hoover, eds., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). |

Preface

In this work I have endeavoured to describe and account for the peculiar complexity and strange richness of the poetry of one important period of England's literary history. The "period" is in this work generously defined. There is another kind of profit in cutting the age into segments, but on this occasion I wish to pursue resemblances and connections, to see what can be said to unite Butler and Gray, what threads connect Rochester with Crabbe.

The book is as richly illustrated as I dared to hope; I am indeed grateful to the Cambridge University Press for allowing me to include the illustrations. Augustan poetry is highly (if often oddly) visual. Illustrators during the period interpreted the poems and their images for their contemporaries, and can help us to see what is there. I hope that looking at my book can give the modern reader some idea of what looking at eighteenth-century books of poetry can be like – an experience far removed from the sensation of grey unbroken columns which some anthologies have inflicted as the essential effect of Augustan poetry.

I wish here to express my sense of indebtedness to a number of people. First, I wish to acknowledge the inspiration offered by Rachel Trickett, since I trace the true origin of this book to a seminar she gave in Oxford to graduate students in eighteenth-century studies. I have always admired *The Honest Muse*, and I am sure the Principal of St. Hugh's will be entertained at seeing I have in my title forsaken honesty for daring.

Like all who teach, I am indebted to my students, and in particular to the graduate students who attended seminars on Augustan poetry in Berkeley and Princeton. To the students in the class held at Princeton in the spring of 1982 I am especially grateful.

I am also very much obliged to many librarians, including those in the Bodleian Library, Oxford; the Rare Books section of the Green Library, Stanford; the Bancroft Library, Berkeley; the New York Public Library; the Firestone Library, Princeton. I owe my thanks also to Robert Taylor who is always so generous in allowing use of the Taylor Collection, and to Nancy Coffin, his librarian. I would like to express very warm thanks to the Librarians of the Firestone Library Rare Books department, who hunted up works with zeal and held books on "my" trolley for a time generously made boundless to an almost Augustan extent. I wish to mention in particular Charles Greene, Jean Preston and Ann Van Arsdale. I am of course especially obliged

to those libraries which allowed photographs to be taken of illustrative material, and to the various photographic departments which took the pictures.

I should not wish this book to see the light without inscribing in it the names of those who have so kindly helped me by reading part or all of it in sundry phases. In particular I wish to express my gratitude to the following: Zelda Boyd, Carol Christ, Deborah Laycock, Thomas P. Roche Jr., Steven Shankman, Steven Volentir. Claudia Johnson read the whole manuscript in first draft as each chapter appeared and supplied detailed comments and encouragement at an early stage; I have very much appreciated her continued interest in the project. Florian Stuber has been an acute and supportive reader of the work throughout its progress, offering informed comment on eighteenth-century matters and capably pointing out possible solutions to stylistic problems. I value his contribution as a reader, and hope the final version pleases him. My colleagues and friends have enlightened me as to errors or omissions; any mistakes that remain are my own responsibility.

In conclusion, I would like to express my appreciation to my editor, Andrew Brown, for his tact, cheerfulness and encouragement. And I am most grateful to him for putting into my head the notion of writing my projected book on Augustan poetry not in some hazy future but (in true Augustan fashion) in the immediate hazardous present.

Margaret Anne Doody
Princeton, N.J.
March 1984

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Figures 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 21, 23 and 24 are from works in the collection of the Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, and were photographed by the Doe Library photographic service.

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Introduction

English poetry of the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth century has attracted many faithful readers and a number of good critics, but it still seems, among college students and the public at large, to be at a disadvantage, to labour under a certain unpopularity. It may be that Matthew Arnold's condescending damnation, "Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose,"¹ has done its work so well as to leave lingering effects a century later. General notions of the period have not helped. "The Age of Reason" is a phrase that arouses dislike, perhaps because the hearer conceives him or herself to be less devoted to reason, or less capable of using it, than those who would seem to flourish it about. Attempts have been made to substitute other descriptions of the period, e.g. "The Age of Exuberance," "The Age of Passion," but the older term has stuck.² And we have not time to explain quite what our writers meant by "Reason" before a large part of our potential audience wanders away. The term "Augustan" puts off students and other readers, as it seems to refer to something high and arcane, something so Roman and classical as to remain ever obscure to a modern mind.

The novelists of the eighteenth century have by now been largely rescued from the opprobrium in which the whole period once seemed sunk. Novelists write about characters, about adventures and money and sex; they are entertaining, and not really "Augustan." Besides, the novel as a genre was not classical, not a regulated or traditional form; writers could invent and experiment as they went along. But was not poetry in the period subject to set ideas of correctness, enslaved to rules, and directed not (like the novel) to the mass of readers but to well-read gentlemen? How then could such poetry appeal to us?

Something like this reasoning (crudely put here) would seem to have inhibited the study and, more important, the general enjoyment of poetry of the period between the flourishing of the Metaphysicals and the rise of the Romantics. Our modern poets, too, have in general not been notably eager to talk about their relation to Augustan poets, even if real relationships may be seen to exist. T. S. Eliot experimented with couplets somewhat in Pope's manner in the original version of *The Waste Land*, but Ezra Pound told him to take them out, remarking "Pope has done this so well that you cannot do it better."³ With direct imitation suppressed, the influence of Pope (and of others of the period just before and just after Pope) on Eliot remained obscured. Eliot is better known as the champion of the Metaphysicals, whom he helped to raise into new favour; despite his essay on Dryden,⁴ he did not do much for the

reputation of the Augustans. Indeed, they remain the poor fragmented victims of "dissociation of sensibility."

No cure is here offered for this state of affairs. But it seems right that those of us who do like "Augustan" poetry should speak out. The time would seem to be right for offering new reasons for liking the poems. Too much talk about "decorum" and "correctness" can only depress the uninitiated, and even among the initiated some of us may feel there are matters of more importance to be discussed first. The time seems propitious. There have been many excellent new studies of poets of the period, some of them indicating a more lively and stirring view of our Augustans. To single out new works would be invidious, but I would like to pay a special tribute to Donald Davie's discussion of Watts and Wesley.⁵ The placement of hymns within the canon of eighteenth-century literature is welcome and long overdue; the new interest may indicate a welcome amplification of the canon in general. There are a number of indicators that the period (or rather, our view of what constituted the literary work of the period) is getting bigger, is broadening so as to include more of what was written – by Dissenters, for instance, or by women. Studies of Restoration and eighteenth-century literature are at present in a more restless and mobile state than formerly. Now would seem to be the time to persuade not only college students but also general readers to take another look at the poetry. It also seems possible now to hazard some speculations, to take up some positions even at the risk of being wrong – to become, in short, controversial about Augustan poetry, a topic that has seldom been truly controversial because the poems have been too seldom read, or read widely.

What I propose is not a complete discussion of Augustan poetry (that would be impossible) but a discussion of some major points of interest. I do not deal with only one poet, nor do I take up a group of writers hitherto little regarded (female poets, hymn writers) though these may figure in my discussion. It is my major purpose to restore the sense of excitement that can come from a reading of Augustan poetry.

It is true that "Augustan" is not a really satisfactory term for the poetry I am describing. It is both too specific and too vague. It meant various things to contemporaries; in 1709 Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea, thought the "*Augustean Days*" in England had gone with the age of Charles II.⁶ Some modern critics have tried to do without the word. Donald Greene treats "Augustan" and "Augustanism"⁷ (a "maddeningly opaque term") to a memorable rejection. Yet, if it is not a satisfactory term, it is the term we have, the one we have used for years, the one that inspires recognition. It is partly my object to change slightly what "Augustan" means, so that certain forms of poetic excitement become associated with the term. It is not a novelty to point out that there is a resemblance and a relationship between the works of very diverse poets from Butler and Dryden to Cowper and Crabbe, and that poets from 1660 to the end of the following century (or even slightly beyond that) come into the same story. The relationship between a poet like Dryden (or

Thomson or Pope) and a Romantic poet like Wordsworth (or Coleridge or Keats) also exists, but that is another story; it is, however, true that English literature can in one light be seen as a continuum and that all breaks of "periods" and so forth are somewhat artificial. The "Augustans" were what the Romantics knew.

I wish, however, to stress qualities that I think are peculiar to or characteristic of this poetry which is often too little regarded. My emphasis will be on the excitement of the works, and on their strangeness. That is not because strangeness is all that could be found in the poetry, but because precisely these qualities have received least attention, and are least associated with the poetic work of the age. Even "irony" or "wit" (topics which have been much talked about in this connection) could, at least momentarily, become clearer or more engaging if seen in stimulating association with other matters. I take the liberty of ranging in time and in hierarchies. That is, the discussion is not primarily chronological, and "minor" or almost unknown works will be quoted as well as the works of the established poets.

After first discussing in general some of the most salient characteristics of the adventurous Augustan poetry, I shall turn in the second chapter briefly to the past, the past of the Civil War, to examine the origins of the new poetry which, as the following chapter observes, was marked by stylistic versatility, generic self-consciousness and distrust of set forms. The fourth chapter deals with what the English Augustans found useful or congenial in the great Roman poets, particularly in those who were markedly versatile in use of styles and experimental in genre. The fifth chapter, "Charivari and metamorphosis," discusses the Augustan poem in the light of its energies of transformation. The sixth chapter traces out connections between the English eighteenth-century novel and the poetry of the age in terms of similarities in modes of proceeding, in transformations and in formal distrusters. The eighteenth-century English novel has long been felt by students to be more accessible than the poetry; I wish to show how closely related they are and to point out that understanding the one assists comprehension of the other. The last chapters deal with more purely "poetic" topics, ultimately bringing the entire previous discussion to bear on a detailed examination of the use and significance of that great poetic achievement, the Augustan couplet.

I do not believe that my discussion will provide a final statement on Augustan poetry. I could not even hope for that — should not, as Augustan poetry is greater than any (or all) of its critics. ("Critic" is a portentous word in the period, and the Augustans gave us much good advice about "*Pride, the never-failing Vice of Fools.*") I do hope, however, that some new suggestions will be found stimulating, will arouse some argument and response, and, in so doing, will help push Augustan poetry to the forefront of the consciousness of those who like English poetry. Some of my suggestions may seem peculiar, others rash, but literary rashness, as the Augustans themselves were fond of pointing out, is not always a fault if it serves some worthy end.

