STEVEN N. ZWICKER

Politics and Language in Dryden's Poetry

The Art of Disguise

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IN DRYDEN'S POETRY

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THE ARTS OF DISGUISE

Steven N. Zwicker

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In memory of my father,
WILLIAM ZWICKER

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List of Abbreviations

DNB	*Dictionary of National Biography*
ECS	*Eighteenth-Century Studies*
ELH	*Journal of English Literary History*
HJ	*Historical Journal*
HLQ	*Huntington Library Quarterly*
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
JHI	*Journal of the History of Ideas*
MLN	*Modern Language Notes*
MLR	*Modern Language Review*
PLL	*Papers on Language and Literature*
PBSA	*Publications of the Bibliographical Society of America*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
RES	*Review of English Studies*
SEL	*Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*
SP	*Studies in Philology*
TLS	*Times Literary Supplement*

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POLITICS AND LANGUAGE
IN DRYDEN'S POETRY

1. *Language as Disguise*

POLITICS AND POETRY IN THE LATER SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

POLITICAL thought of the later seventeenth century is often studied as the history of and ideologies implied by such words as "property," "liberty," and "prerogative." Nor is it surprising that students of political thought should have isolated these terms for special attention; they appear prominently and repeatedly in the writing and recorded speech of nearly every political actor of the age. In fact, they appear so frequently and in such contradictory contexts that we must wonder not only what meaning such words had but if indeed they had any meaning at all, or rather if meaning was their most important function. Since the study of political language often stresses its conceptual character to the neglect of the polemical circumstances of its expression, I should like here to redress the balance. My intention in doing so is to supplement what is already understood about meaning with an argument about polemic, about the character of such key words as "property" and "liberty" and such central terms of political self-definition as "moderation" not exactly as noise but as reflexive response, as the invocation of a nearly uniform set of calling cards whose presentation seems to have been demanded of all those engaged in political discourse in the later seventeenth century. I am concerned, then, with the extent to which key words in the later seventeenth century are dysfunctional as a description of behavior and belief; I am concerned, in other words, with lying.

Scattered widely through the political documents of this age are indicators of moderation, dispassion, flexibility, and compromise. The words "enthusiasm" and "fanaticism" are frequently used as terms of slander and abuse, implying as they do extremity and rigidity in politics and religion. Yet the years between the return of Charles II and the end of the century yield little real evidence of moderation and dispassion; they are, in fact, years marked by a high pitch of verbal abuse, by steady threats to civic stability from extremes of the left and right, by political dissension and political polarities. The legacy of the civil wars was an ineradicable partisanship which turned in the later decades of the century to bitter party politics and an equally powerful denial of partisanship and party in obeisance to a fiction of patriotic conformity to civic stability. Politics in these years became a spectacle of men declaring moderate goals, often engaging in immoderate designs, apprehending such deceit, and hurling at one another accusations of disguise and masquerade.

Wing's *Short-Title Catalogue* gives some evidence for my contention.[1] Under such headings as "true," "faithful," "plain," and "character" fall a very large number of titles purporting to be documents of political analysis and political revelation. Indeed, the sheer number of these entries raises a question of whether there is any literature so wholly given over to unmasking and unveiling, to the discovery of hidden character and true motive as the political pamphlet of the later seventeenth century. Wing's entries for "character" include, for example, such items as "The character of a popish successor," "The character of a biggoted prince," "The character of a protestant jesuit," "The character of an agitator," "The character of an antimalignant," "The character of a modern sham-plotter," "The character of a church-papist," "The character of two protestants in masquerade." And first-word entries locate only the most obvious and most accessible source for such language. In an atmosphere so highly charged with suspicion, the very expression of political opinion was taken as a sign of party, sect, or political obligation. Accusations of covertness and deceit are so widespread that the artless denial of partisanship had itself become an automatic and a nearly pointless gesture. Honesty and politics were virtually exclusive conditions.

Nor is political masquerade confined to broadside and pamphlet. The most important crisis of the age, the most significant treaty of the later seventeenth century, and the most far-reaching political revolution in this age of revolutionary change are themselves indisputable and brilliant examples of masquerade, of the nation caught in its every turn and gesture by the habits and compulsions of deceit. The Popish Plot was in large part the incredible fiction of one man playing on the political gullibility of the nation; the Treaty of Dover was a double bluff hinged on secret clauses; and the Glorious Revolution was carried off by men willing to pretend that James II had abdicated and that William of Orange sailed to England with 12,000 troops merely to supervise free parliamentary elections.

For immediate cause, we need not seek far in explaining why men felt impelled to adopt disguise, to cling tenaciously to the fiction of constitutional conservatism in an age of frequent and violent assault on that constitution. The fact of change itself and the extremes to which political change had run impelled men to seek the stance and language of centrist politics. To what degree men intended to deceive one another by doing so and to what degree they deceived themselves as they justified radical or absolutist solutions to political problems under the pretense of constitutional legalism, it is difficult to say.[2] What is certain, however, is that the number of accusations of such deceit and hence the level of suspicion of politics was very high; we may safely assume that actual examples of concealment were also widespread.

But disguise in Restoration politics, whether self-delusion or deliberate malfeasance, was seldom a matter of shallow cover or simply verbal habit. It was a deeply felt political imperative that influenced the ways in which men used and conceived language. Of course, the study of politics in any age reveals discrepancies between language and behavior. And the presence of disguise as political stance and political theme over the whole of the century is underscored by the striking parallels between earlier and later seventeenth-century political crises, parallels relentlessly uncovered and exploited by Restoration politicians. Moreover, the religious and philosophical skepticism of Donne's satires, the riddling of language and literary conventions in the *Songs and Sonnets*, the brilliant anatomies of masquerade in the *Alchemist* and *Volpone*, and the critique of court life in the lyrics of Gascoigne, Greville, and Raleigh suggest the continuity of the theme and the sophistication with which men had thought on the implications of disguise in the earlier English Renaissance.

And yet the degree to which disguise permeates and defines national life in the Restoration is not fully to be explained by contemplating deceit as a universal in politics or by citing the literary themes and tropes of earlier generations. There are, as well, specific short- and long-range conditions that help account for its character and intensity in these years. The fear and suspicion of politics and of constitutional speculation in the aftermath of the civil wars, and the precarious balance between king and parliament throughout the Restoration, heightened the need for political disguise. Moreover, the long history of conspiracy mentality in post-Reformation England;[3] the transformation of Royalist politics into Royalist conspiracy during the Commonwealth and Protectorate years;[4] the repeated partisan uses of plots and alarms following the return of Charles II;[5] and the Jacobite conspiracies and steady threat of counterrevolution in the last decade of this century sharpened both the accusations and awareness of disguise in national politics.[6]

Political revolution and the repeated fears of such revolution drove men to the exigencies of disguise, but revolution in the seventeenth century was not confined to politics. Not only was there a fundamental and self-conscious change in political relationships over the course of this century, there occurred, as well, a revolution in language theory that changed the ways in which men thought about language.[7] The revolution in the theory of meaning turned language from divine fiat to arbitrary social pact, heightening men's awareness of the often inconvenient alignment of words and things and allowing new resolution to such troubling imperfections. At the beginning of this century, language theorists—nor were they alone—acknowledged such imperfection yet insisted on the God-given integrity of words and things.[8] By the end of the century, many of those who speculated on the nature of language were willing to assert that this relationship was arbitrary, that there was "no divine ordinance and governance of language."[9] Hobbes had so insisted at mid-century,[10] and in 1690 Locke described the connection between words and things as a "*perfectly arbitrary Imposition.*"[11] Locke did not intend "irrational" to follow from "arbitrary"; the thrust of language theory throughout this century was to codify and systematize, to reduce error, confusion, and ambiguity. Such was the aim of the Royal Society; and the work of both Adamic theorists and those who argued against innatist principles was meant to rescue language from the babel of hectoring, parsing, allegorizing, and warfare that had reduced words to such confusion.[12]

But it is to simplify the course of political language over the later seventeenth century and the impact of language reform to assume a sudden resolution, a modification of all language in the direction of clarity and precision. In political discourse, language became more rather than less complex; words, the counters of political argument, needed to be weighed more exactly as the impulse to hide and repress became increasingly powerful over the second half of the century. And in the realm of theory, the move toward arbitrary language principles may have been a reaction against the abuses and unsteadiness of language, but it was, to begin with, an assertion of the fundamentally arbitrary character of language itself. The theory of language as arbitrary sign aimed at correction not by denying that words had been loosened from things but by acknowledging that those moorings were unsteady, that language was social convenience. How striking that in the later seventeenth century, men should have simultaneously explored the possibilities of construing both the sources and forms of governance and language not as inviolable gifts of heaven, unalterable truths, but as social contract, contingent arrangement. And the presence of both philosophical and political issues, the fact that the heightened drive toward political masquerade took place at a time of intense philosophical speculation on the source, character, and fixity of meaning in language helps us to grasp the singular complexity of disguise in this age. By the close of the century, disguise was at once political cover, an acknowledgment of the profoundly contingent character of political experience, and an effort to negotiate the difficult currents of language and meaning at a time when their relation had undergone a radical change. It is such a set of crosscurrents that we can feel in the debates of the Convention Parliament, in Dryden's complex and brooding translation of Virgil's political epic, and in the delicate and enigmatic lyrics from *Fables*.

But the Convention Parliament and the strategies of Dryden's late poetry are the climax of a story that began long before the Glorious Revolution. It began, I believe, with the Protestant reform of 1532. The legacy of that reform in England was twofold: a conviction that spiritual history was national destiny—hence the idea of England as Elect Nation[13]—and a dedication to the recovery of the primitive condition of the church and the purity of God's word. The impulse to cleanse and strip bare was turned by practicing reformers into a program of systematic recovery and revelation; sacred language was decoded by translation, priests shorn of cassock and surplice, churches cleansed of false ceremony and idolatrous sign. In such a program of decoding and divesting, it is not difficult to see the political implications of reform or its polemical character. The witch hunt of Protestant reformation endowed seventeenth-century religion and politics with a belief in conspiracy as historical explanation. In the long confrontation with Rome, spiritual impulses became fixed as principles of political perception: the Roman imposition of false signs and ceremonies was but one aspect of an eternal program of deceit. But conspiracy was hardly confined to the explanation of Jesuit intrigue. It was, in fact, a prism through which all events might be filtered, a device for seeing connections among disparate historical experiences and for giving them the shape and coherence of prophetic time. Conspiracy was, in effect, the handmaiden of providence, explaining those temporary defeats and setbacks in the program of godly reform and national salvation. As God spun out the great web of human history, the devil supplied a counterset of plots, alarms, and treasons. Such was Milton's vision of foreknowledge, history, and sin; such was Marvell's strategy in linking prophecy and conspiracy in *The First Anniversary*; such too was the assumption of innumerable writers of pamphlets and sermons on the civil wars, the Popish Plot and Exclusion Crisis, and the Glorious Revolution.

The one constant in all conspiracy theory was disguise. Only by fraud could conspiratorial aims be effected; only by dissimulation could men carry out concealed and nefarious designs. Such an assumption made it possible to impute intentions where none were expressed and to assign meaning where evidence was incomplete. Given this license, conspiracy theory, like Scripture, had the flexibility to fit all crises; it provided as much comfort to king as to parliament in interpreting the particulars as well as the whole course of the civil wars. None was content to leave those shattering and often inexplicable events in random or mechanical disposition. They were brooded over by Royalists and Parliamentarians, pressed by exegetes of both parties until they could be made to yield a coherent pattern, a narrative guided by the twin forces of providence and conspiracy. Providence needed simply to be endured; but conspiracy in its most obvious symptoms—suspicions and fear—might be countered.

And to such a task the Restoration government turned when in its first order of business, the Act of Oblivion, Charles forbade the use of "any reproach or term of distinction."[14] By such legislation the king would quell mistrust and create circumstances that might lead to forgiveness and political order. The specter of civil disorder and the extremes to which such disorder might run were so disturbing that the fragile structure of civic peace imposed by the restoration of Charles Stuart was erected on foundations of pretended political order and willed forgetfulness. Indeed, the very wording of the Act was an effort at healing and settling by altering and diminishing the past. The most destructive struggle in the history of the state had become, in the Act of Oblivion, "the late differences."[15] With the Act of Oblivion the stage was set for the adoption, almost by reflex, of a language of political discourse that was palliative and normalizing in the face of religious and political conditions that repeatedly led to political crisis through the end of the century.

The first condition of political quiescence was cleansing the political vocabulary; the second was altering and forgetting the past; the third was the reestablishment of civic themes to which all men might adhere, themes of wide ideological appeal: the defense of liberty, the rights of property, and religion by law established, phrases that run like colored threads through the entire fabric of political discourse in this age. Whatever their real political conviction, men paid homage to these common values. At the extremes stood the hated poles of absolutism with its implications of popery and arbitrary government, and republicanism with its associations of regicide and uncontrolled leveling. In the center stood the common good, the ancient constitution with its balance of parliamentary privilege and kingly prerogative. Throughout his reign, Charles made a special effort to fix his identity with the true Protestant faith and with the assertion and maintenance of the laws and liberties of his subjects, a code established in 1660 and repeatedly invoked by Charles, by James II, by William and Mary, by exclusionists and Tory loyalists, by Williamites and nonjurors, indeed by politicians of all stripes and colors.

Despite the lavishing of mutual esteem by king and parliament, despite their joint expressions of thankfulness and humility, of moderation and peaceableness, there was from the beginning of Charles's reign a nervous awareness that the personal and political bitterness that had divided the nation would not disappear. Men understood that political opinion must never again carry them to the extremes of civil war, yet the return of the exiled court brought a renewal of vindictiveness.[16] The lesson of the past was that such convictions must now appear tempered; the implication of such a lesson was that wary politicians would not be alone in concealing forbidden convictions. From the beginning of the Restoration, accusations of covertness and disguise were rife. Clarendon early sniped at the morose manners of the godly, their affected austerity in looks, taking outward signs of godliness as mere affectation;[17] and Venner's rising in 1661 alarmed a nation that knew the word religion to cover a variety of motives. In the same year the king issued a proclamation against "all unlawfull and seditious meetings and conventicles under the pretence of religious worship,"[18] and the lord chancellor, in proroguing parliament in May 1662, warned against the political consequences of pretense and convertness:

> Remember how your peace hath been formerly disturbed, by what contrivance and artifices the people have been alarmed with unreasonable and unnatural Fears and Jealousies. . . . Remember how near monarchy hath been dissolved, and the law subverted, under pretence of reforming and supporting government. . . . There is an enemy amongst us . . . in comparison of whom we may reasonably undervalue all other enemies; that is the Republicans and Commonwealth's Men, who are every day calling in aid of the law, that they may overthrow and abolish the law, which they know to be their irreconcileable enemy. Indeed, my lords and gentlemen, there is a very great party of those men in every faction of religion, who truly have no religion but as the pretence serves to advance that faction.[19]

Nor, of course, were all accusations of deceit and all suspicion of motives directed against those sectaries who would use conscience to mask sedition. From near the beginning of his reign, Charles's intentions in religious matters were regarded with suspicion by both his Anglican and his dissenting subjects; his efforts at religious toleration were assumed by many to be attempts at masking indulgence for papists under the more acceptable guise of toleration for Protestant dissent. Nor can we doubt Charles's awareness of the need for disguise if he intended indulgence or ease for his Roman Catholic subjects. Such indulgence would have to be flanked on all sides by assertions of Protestant zeal. And the king's efforts at such indulgence were repeatedly couched in terms whose ambiguity would allow the blurring of intentions and the conflation of religious conscience of all sorts. The Declaration of Breda (1660) promised, with neat ambiguity, a "liberty to tender consciences, and that no man shall be disquieted or called in question for differences of opinion in matter of religion which do not disturb the peace of the kingdom."[20] And in the Worcester House Declaration (1660), the king reaffirmed his intention to grant such a liberty; but now he felt the need to surround such a declaration with affirmations of his own zealously Protestant convictions, "neither the unkindness of those of the same faith towards us, nor the civilities and obligations from those of a contrary profession (of both which we have had abundant evidence) could, in the least degree, startle us, or make us swerve from it; and that nothing can be proposed to manifest our zeal and affection for it, to which we will not readily consent."[21] Yet ready consent from the king was not forthcoming for the Act of Uniformity (1662); indeed that repressive measure was tempered at the king's own request for provisions and dispensations that favored English Catholics. Moreover, while the king assured the nation of his Protestant zeal, there is evidence that he signaled Catholic listening posts of intended leniency in the enforcement of laws against the Catholics. Indeed, Charles's whole effort to establish "supreme power and authority in ecclesiastical affairs" was aimed at freeing his hand to deal with penal laws and exclusions from the Uniformity Act at his own discretion. While Charles maneuvered to achieve toleration for Catholics, he acted defensively against those who saw in such maneuvering the old specter of popery and arbitrary government. The suspicion that the king himself was a Roman Catholic and aimed to introduce popery was directly combatted by parliamentary decree that made it an offense to charge the king with popery and by the king's repeated assertions of Protestant zeal, "As to the most pernicious and injurious scandel so artificially spread and fomented, of our favour to Papists, as it is but a repetition of the same detestable arts by which all the late calamities have been brought upon this kingdom in the time of our royal father of blessed memory, we conceive all our subjects should be sufficiently prepared against that poison by memory of those disasters, especially since nothing is more evident than the wicked authors of this scandel are such as seek to involve all good Protestants under the odious name of Papists or popishly affected."[22]

It is as difficult now as it seems to have been in the 1660s to know exactly what degree of disinterestedness or sincerity to attach to Charles's plea for liberty of tender conscience; yet the consistent efforts during the early 1660s and the renewed campaign for Catholic toleration later in the decade, the rumor of the deathbed confession, and the reign of James II provide some evidence that the charges of "popish affectation" were not entirely misplaced. Charles understood the difficulty of his position, and it is hardly surprising to find evidence of double dealing in his handling of religious toleration. What I should like to emphasize here and what becomes quite evident during the renewed efforts at toleration in the early 1670s (and, of course, in the Exclusion Crisis) is that concealment and masquerade were fundamentals of political discourse and political action, and that they were perceived as such. The most spectacular example of such disguise is the Popish Plot, a fabrication so complex, used to so many ends, compounded of such an assortment of truths, half-truths, and falsehoods that it seems improbable that we shall ever be able to sift the legitimate from the imposture. But that baroque fabrication is not an isolated incident, no accidental and inexplicable madness; it is the fulfillment of a political mentality at once credulous, susceptible to seemingly any suggestion of conspiracy, hysterical in its response to the Roman Catholic presence in the nation, and at the same time well practiced in the arts and management of political disguise.

The Great Fire of London forms its own chapter in the history of conspiracy mentality, anticipating many of the charges of Jesuit deceit and treachery elaborated at such length during the unveiling of the Popish Plot. And the Dutch Wars that began in 1664 produced a virulent climate of suspicion, compounded by the humiliating reverses and defeats suffered by the English navy, the plague that first struck London in 1665, the heavy tax burden created by the war, and the fact of the fire itself. Although the king was not the direct target of much of the criticism leveled at the court and ministries, as early as November of 1664 he was on the defensive against charges of financial mismanagement and fraud. Before parliament, Charles attempted to remove a vile jealousy "which some ill Men scatter abroad . . . that when you have given Me a noble and proportionable Supply for the Support of a War, I may be induced by some evil Counsellors to make a sudden Peace, and get all that Money for my own private Occasions."[23] As the war continued such vile jealousies naturally increased and touched all who might be implicated: the king himself, the lord chancellor, Carteret, Coventry, the duchess of York, indeed any who were perceived to have profited by diverting money from its intended course. More than once the king complained of parliamentary distrust, and more than once he felt impelled to assure parliament that "no part of those Monies that you gave me for the war have been diverted to other uses."[24]

But accusations of greed and corruption were neither the only nor the most serious charges raised by critics of the court. The war itself was seen by some as a device of Clarendon to divert attention from Bristol's efforts at impeachment,[25] and to promote his own dynastic ambitions; more tellingly, the war was perceived as an instrument in the court's program to crush dissent, manage and intimidate parliament, and raise a standing army. A catalogue of such charges appears at the close of the *Second Advice to a Painter*, where the narrator shrewdly mixes the improbable and the grotesque, musing on a war fought "we know not why, as yet, / We've done we know not what nor what we get."[26] Not only is suspicion rife that the war is a blind, a decoy to cover an assortment of nasty personal and political intentions, but such charges of deceit and masquerade are themselves mounted by an opposition that busily displays its own high-minded loyalty, its plain-dealing commitment to king and country. Vitriolic satire is presented as virtue and disinterestedness. The powerful assault on the court that closes the *Second Advice* and the charges of cowardice and dissimulation leveled at the ministry in the *Third Ad-*