THE POLITICS OF ESCHATOLOGICAL PROPHECY
AND DRYDEN'S 1700 THE SECULAR MASQUE

Lisa Zunshine

Momus: All, all of a piece throughout;
        Thy chase had a beast in view; [pointing to Diana
        Thy wars brought nothing about; [To Mars
        Thy lovers were all untrue. [To Venus

Janus: 'Tis well an old age is out,

Chronos: And time to begin a new.

Chorus of all:

All, all of a piece throughout;
Thy chase had a beast in view;
Thy wars brought nothing about;
Thy lovers were all untrue.
'Tis well an old age is out,
And time to begin a new.

From Bruce Dearing’s admission that he is "always slightly uneasy" with the metaphor of the chase that "had a beast in view" to Steven Zwicker’s fascination with "that enigmatic lyric," Dryden’s The Secular Masque continues to puzzle its readers. The "canonical" interpretation of the Masque, offered by Walter Scott in 1808 and often evoked by modern scholars, is problematic. Scott suggests that Diana is the hunt-loving James I, links Mars to the stormy reign of Charles I, and Venus to the libidinous excesses of the post-Restoration Stuart courts. Such an explication of Dryden’s deities is not at all historically obvious; as Alan Roper points out, "Charles I was also a hunter, Charles II engaged in the Dutch war, and James II’s unhappy rule was hardly peaceful." Still, Scott’s identification has never been explicitly challenged by critics; Roper continues to rely on it in his 1962 article, and James Winn, referring to Scott via Roper in his important 1988 biography of the poet observes that "the main lines of historical allegory in this masque are clear." Not convinced by Scott’s exegesis, I suggest that its longevity is due to a peculiar confluence of private and public circumstances surrounding the genesis of the Masque. Dryden
died upon finishing it in the spring of 1700—the coincidence that encourages interpretations that conjure up an image of the expiring poet summing up the passing century and coming to terms with his life and times. Commenting on Janus’s “Tis well an old age is out,” Winn points out that “Dryden’s own age was out” and sees the Masque as “Dryden’s farewell to the century.” Zwicker thinks that in the closing of the Masque, Dryden “reflects on the particulars of his age but he also rises above them to see in the futility and change and disappointment of his own life a pattern more beautiful than its frustrations,” and notes that “it would be pleasant” to hope that these lines express “the reconciliation to which Dryden had come in this last year.”

Douglas Canfield suggests that in the final stanza of the Masque, bidding farewell to the Old Age, one “can hear the voice of the ex-laureate himself in the year of his death.” The spell of “1700” continues to influence the contemporary analysis of the Masque.

My reading of The Secular Masque is also informed by its millennial context, though I do not see it as representing a tidying-up of Dryden’s imaginative universe, an articulation of a personal closure through the transcendence of the particulars of his age. I posit that the Masque is steeped in the eschatological iconography of the second part of the seventeenth century and that its politics hinge on Dryden’s ambiguous use of this iconography and not on his review of the English kings of the past. For most of his career as a poet, Dryden mobilized the imagery of the eschaton to promote the case of the Stuarts; after 1688, it meant interpreting the “signs of the times” as pointing toward a hoped-for removal of William III from the throne of England and the restoration of James II. The ostensibly public character of The Secular Masque—it was written to be performed at Drury Lane as part of the newly mounted revision of John Fletcher’s play The Pilgrim—made it inadvisable for Dryden to flaunt his animosity toward William by spelling out the political meaning of its millenarian gestures. The Masque is still full of such gestures, but because their interpretation is consciously muffled, the resulting imagery is often contradictory and ambiguous. The Masque thus emerges as not a measured leave-taking of the passing century, but rather as a controversial rhetorical piece informed by Dryden’s antipathy toward William, the subversive potential of eschatological iconography, and the theatrical politics of the late 1690s.

I have divided my argument into four parts, each of which “rereads” the Masque from a particular angle. The first part problematizes the tradition of seeing one of its deities—usually either Momus or Chronos—as expressions of the poet’s own thoughts and feelings. This tradition fits well with the view of the piece as Dryden’s dignified farewell to the century, but it does not take into account ambiguities inherent in Dryden’s conceptualization of these characters, i.e., the portrayal of Momus as a malicious theatrical critic, or the double position of Chronos as both the founder of the Golden Age and a parricide. The second part questions the presumed reconciliatory tone of the Masque by demonstrating that in spite of the illusion of consensus achieved at its end, Dryden never resolves the conflict between the teleological view of history and the critique of such a view contained in the piece. In the central part of my essay, I trace the allusions to millenarian doctrine through Dryden’s œuvre, show their recurrence in the Masque, and then relate the rhetorical contradictions of the Masque—discussed in the opening parts of my argument—to Dryden’s refusal to provide clear political explication of his eschatological imagery. Because I posit as a possible reason for such a refusal Dryden’s reluctance to jeopardize the political footing of his friends at Drury Lane—particularly of John Vanbrugh who was revising The Pilgrim for its 1700 production—I end by questioning the wisdom of the long tradition of seeing the Masque as fully independent from the play for which it was written.

The First Reading: Who Speaks for John Dryden?

The Secular Masque opens with the two-faced god Janus encouraging the “weary” Chronos to let go of the “load of humankind” by putting down the “great globe” that he has been carrying on his back. Joined by the laughing god Momus, Janus and Momus then watch the “show” featuring Diana, Mars, and Venus, who present the “changes” that have taken place over the century: from Diana’s clamorous hunting parties to Mars’s gory wars and to Venus’s rule of love. Momus punctuates Diana’s and Mars’s performances with caustic remarks about the foolishness of their respective pursuits and closes the scene with a methodical putdown of all three deities: “All, all of a piece throughout . . . .”

Thus, paraphrased, the narrative of the Masque seems straightforward, but even on this level it presents the reader with interpretive problems. Traditionally, Momus has been identified by critics with Dryden himself. Winn suggests that it is “Momus who sings Dryden’s farewell to the century.” Canfield persuasively reads the laughing god of the Masque as an extension of the authorial self first introduced by the poet in his 1692 play Cleomenes, in which “Dryden seems to offer something of a self-portrait as a stoic satirist more given to raillery than railing, more Momus than Juvenal.” Note, however, that Momus’s role in the Masque is rather equivocal because his reaction to what he sees can be compared to that of a malicious theatrical critic. Dryden’s piece invites such a reading by emphasizing the division
between those who put on the “show” and those who watch. When Momus makes his first appearance, Janus notes to Chronos that
“Momus comes to laugh below,” bringing to mind an image of the
opinionated spectator commenting on the stage proceedings from
the pit. Janus then commands Chronos to “begin the show, / That he
[Momus] may see, in every scene, / What changes in this age have been”
(my emphasis). Chronos, thereby accepting his role of a theatrical
director, calls on one of his actresses to “begin,” and we are treated to a
description of Diana putting on her costume, i.e., transforming herself
into a proper iconic “Diana”: “I tug up my robe, and am buskin’d
soon, / And tie to my forehead a waxing moon.”12 Similarly, Mars
behooves like an orchestra conductor anxious about the correct aural
ambience of the performance; he enters with, “Inspire the vocal brass,
inspire,” and closes his speech with, “Sound the trumpet, beat the
rum; / Through all the world around, / Sound a reveille, sound,
sound.” Momus’s uncharitable response to the “show” brings to mind
the behavior of the “brother poets [who] damn the play, / And roar the
loudest, tho’ they never pay” from the Prologue to The Pilgrim which
Dryden wrote simultaneously with The Secular Masque.13 The figure of
Momus thus encourages two different interpretations: can he be an alter
ego of the world-weary Dryden resigned to laughing at the human folly
in all its guises (“This better to laugh than to cry”), or is he a projection
of the poet’s theatrical enemies—the critics “baiting”14 from “below”?

Momus is not the only character in the Masque whose role is uncertain.
Chronos, as drawn by Dryden, also resists a settled interpretation.
Roper notes that “with omission of the second letter, Chronos was also
Saturn” and suggests that Dryden here follows closely a Hesiodic tra
dition of the “five ages,” using the Saturnian Golden Age as a point of
reference to comment harshly on the contemporary “iron age” of Wil-
liam III: “clearly, the load of Human-Kind will be the greatest in the
iron age of unlimited crime, and since William III succeeded James II,
Dryden’s hint must have been sufficient for the audience.”15 A sympa-
thetic and topical reading of Chronos in the Masque fits well with the
characterization of Saturn (a.k.a. Chronos) in Dryden’s 1697 transla-
tion of the Book VIII of Virgil’s Aeneid. Here he describes the Golden
Age instituted by Saturn in Italy after being deposed by his son, Jove.
Saturn flies

the Pow’r of Jove,
Robb’d of his Realms, and banish’d from above.
The Men dispers’d on Hills, to Towns he brought;
And Laws ordain’d, and Civil Customs taught:
And Latium call’d the Land where safe he lay,
From his Undeorous Son, and his Usurping Sway.
deep indeed."'21 The figures of Momus, Chronos, and—fittingly—the double-faced Janus remain elusive and open to conflicting interpretations; we will not discover Dryden's earnest face behind any of the painted visages of his Masque.

The Second Reading: The Dialogue Which is Not

The Masque's internal contradictions do not end with the ambiguous characterization of Chronos, Momus, and, by default, Janus: they are further amplified by the piece's spurious dialogue. In his recent study of the musical contexts of Dryden's poetry, Winn points out that "Dryden rarely gives music the last word or allows it to resolve conflicts."'22 Indeed, the harmony implied by the Masque's fetching musical and dancing numbers (some of its tunes remained popular well into the eighteenth century'23) fails to make up for the unsettled argument between Momus on the one hand and Chronos and Janus on the other. Janus's opening speech,

Chronos, Chronos, mend thy pace,
A hundred times the rolling sun
Around the radiant belt has run
In his revolving race.
Behold, behold, the goal in sight,
Spread thy fans, and wing thy flight,

echoes Dryden's translation of the beginning of the Book III of Virgil's Georgics: "New ways I must attempt, my groveling name / To raise aloft, and wing my flight to fame."'24 In both cases, the "flight" is construed as breaking with an established tradition. The image is particularly suggestive in the Masque, where Chronos's "goal" lies outside of the orbit (the "radiant belt") of the Sun, and to reach it he has to transform the circular movement of time into linear, goal-oriented motion. This "teleological" reading of the end of the century—the "goal" toward which Chronos has presumably been striving for the last hundred years—is complicated by Momus's reaction to Chronos's "setting down" his "great globe," i.e., stopping time. Momus does not believe in progress—"the world was a fool, e'er since it begun"—and neither he, nor Janus, nor Chronos can change anything for the best. Thus whereas Janus asks Chronos to stop the time, because the "goal" is "in sight," Momus implies that Chronos may as well do so because there is no goal, and one may "lighten [his] back" and get some rest before returning to his circular drudgery. Janus disagrees and, to convince Momus that the end of the century may be the "goal" to aspire to—because the passing of time spells historical changes—he asks Chronos to represent the past age as a sequence of staged vignettes. Chronos obliges and calls in his noisy troupe, but Momus remains unconvinced by the "show" and insists on the futility of all hunting, military, and amorous enterprises. Janus and Chronos respond with non sequiturs. Janus observes that "tis well an old age is out," and Chronos adds that it is "time to begin a new." If Momus is correct and the time moves in a circular fashion, the "goals" are illusory, and nothing ever changes (particularly for the best), then what is the point of welcoming the "new" age so enthusiastically? Have Chronos and Janus been paying attention to what Momus has been saying? It seems that they have not; and Dryden swiftly glosses over this glaring instance of failed communication by letting the Chorus burst in and repeat the last stanza and a half (see the epigraph to this essay) without discriminating between the two different opinions that it contains, thus creating an appealing illusion that a conversation has taken place, opinions exchanged, and consensus established.

The conflict between the teleological outlook on history (expressed by Janus and Chronos) and the critique of such an outlook (advanced by Momus) is symptomatic of Dryden's vexed political position at the close of the century. In her new book on Dryden's translation of Virgil, Tanya Caldwell points out that by the late 1690s, he had departed from his "former emphasis on the teleology of history ... and his confidence that God is working all actions to the secret end he has ordained them."'25 Caldwell argues persuasively that, unable to reconcile the hated rule of William III with the tradition of the glorious English past, Dryden registers the "demise of the heroic and the world in which it reigned" in his "distinctly unheroic" translation of Virgil's epic.'26 Similarly, the Masque, whose generic affiliation implies the celebration of the political present, disappoints such celebratory expectations by barely glossing over the cynical view of history as going "nowhere."

The Masque's illusion of reconciled differences is only too representative, of course, of Dryden's general tendency to brilliantly exploit the rhetorical possibilities of misrepresentation. Robert Markley points out that in his prose Dryden sometimes uses the conjunctions associated with "logical coordination" to smuggle in "disruptions that question or undercut what has just been said."'27 Similarly, Zwicker observes that the double-edged rhetoric of Absalom and Achitophel has kept many a reader under the pleasant impression that this poem is an epitome of "evenhandedness and reasoned moderation" and not a vicious partisan satire. Zwicker grounds Dryden's style in the political instability of the century torn by civil wars and succession crises and
argues that "disguise was an essential condition of this culture."28 Dying or not, Dryden remained true to this "cultural strategy of plausible deniability,"29 and his last work manifests his ongoing investment in the verbal masquerade of his time.

The Third Reading: The Masque and Eschatological Prophecy

What is at stake in uncovering the "duplicity" of The Secular Masque? First it shows that neither its multivalent characters nor its vaudevillian "consensus" qualify it for the honorary office of the solemn last word of the mellowed-down bard. Second, it alerts us to the ultimate inadequacy of Scott's interpretation and prompts us to reconsider the sociocultural provenance of the Masque's imagery. So whereas I perceive as problematic the critical tendency to read the Masque in the light of its "binding" position at the close of the century and the close of the poet's life, I also think that it is important that this piece was written in 1700, because it embodied in many subtle ways the eschatological tension of the second part of the century. In other words, I differentiate between assigning the Masque—with the benefit of hindsight—a quasi-confessional/quasi-prophetic status and approaching it as implicated in the millenarian zeal of the period. In what follows, I will trace some of the eschatological allusions in Dryden's work and show that he frequently used them to promote the case of the Stuarts. I will further argue that The Secular Masque recycled many of these allusions and tacitly prodded its spectators toward their "default" (i.e., pro-Stuart) political interpretation even as it ostensibly refused to supply such interpretations.

In his study of politics and poetry in Restoration England, Michael McKeon considers ideological implications of the belief that the year of 1666 would mark... the end of the old order or series of time and the beginning of the new. He justifies the inclusion of "this kind of prophecy within the general category of eschatology by arguing that although the events predicted for 1666 seldom embrace the Day of Judgement or the destruction of all terrestrial life, they always bear a close relation to developments which ancient prophetic works and their exegetes traditionally have associated with the final stages of history—the recollection and conversion of the Jews, the Second Coming of Christ, the thousand-year reign of the saints upon earth, the destruction of the Antichrist, and apocalyptic anticipations of Judgement."30 The crux of McKeon's argument is that Dryden's 1667 Annus Mirabilis should not be read as simply a response to the specific anti-royalist tracts of the 1660s (such as the 1661 Mirabilis Annum or the 1662 Mirabilis Annus Secundus) that borrows and subverts the eschatological rhetoric of its opponents, but rather as a product of a culture saturated with eschatological iconography. "Prophecy and eschatology were linguistic and epistemological properties of the generality of Dryden's contemporaries,"31 and as such could be and were appropriated for a wide spectrum of ideological agendas. McKeon also points out that the imagery of the eschaton was not limited to the 1660s. Bookended between 1666—the "year of the Beast"—and 1700—the projected date of the inauguration of Christ's thousand-year reign upon Earth—British men and women, even those not sharing in the literal millenarian outlook, were particularly sensitive to the events that could be interpreted as "signs of the times"32 and to the literary representations mobilizing these chiliasmic notions.

Whereas McKeon's study is primarily concerned with Annus Mirabilis, it provides a useful framework for approaching the references to millenarian prophecy scattered through Dryden's work. Dryden's literary and epistolary œuvre contains a surprising number of such references, ranging from a rather casual evocation of the apocalypse in his 1689 Don Sebastian to a pointedly political deployment of the eschatological iconography in his epistle "To the Duchess of Ormonde" from the Preface to his 1700 Fables Ancient and Modern. In Don Sebastian, a brief reference to the "lands third part" that the "fatal beauty" of Almyda "drew" to her brother Mahumet was read by Dryden's first audiences as implicating the exotic royal court of Muley-Moluch, the "Emperor of Barbary,"33 in the eschatological worries of the late seventeenth-century Britishmen. The concept of a "third part" comes from the Book of Revelation's description of a "wonder in heaven... a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads... [whose] tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth,"34 often read as a reference to the Antichrist. On another occasion, in a personal letter written in the late 1690s, Dryden draws on Virgil's imagery of natural prodigies heralding political turnabouts to express hope that perhaps in their own times natural wonders (or phenomena construed as such) would presage certain desired political changes. Virgil observes in his I Georgius (via Dryden's translation) that before the fall of Caesar, "Earth, air, and seas, with prodigies were signed" and "rising in his might, the king of floods / Rushed through the forests, tore the lofty woods."35 Dryden reports to Mrs. Elizabeth Steward in February 1699 that "on Tuesday Night, we had a violent wind, which blew down three of my chimneys and dismantled all the side of my House, by throwing down the tiles. My Neighbours, and indeed all the Town, suffered more or less, and some were killed. The Great Trees in St. James's Park, are many of them torn up from the roots; as they were before Oliver
Cromwell's death; and the late Queens: but your father had no damage" (italics mine). Virgil's surn woods foreshadow the demise of Caesar; the surn trees in St. James's Park already portended once the restoration of Stuarts to the throne of England; what if a "violent wind on Tuesday night" in 1699—so close to the millenarian notch of 1700—would also bring a wished-for dynastic reversal?

The 1700 "To the Duchess of Ormonde" contains perhaps one of the most suggestive instances of Dryden's incorporating eschatological imagery in his lyrics. Here Dryden conflates pagan and Christian imagery in a playful reinterpretation of the millennium prophecy. Mary Somerset, the Duchess of Ormonde, is first represented as "Venus," whose aroial to the land ravaged by the civil wars (Ireland) makes its inhabitants forget the "towns destroyed" and "pales unhonoured." "Blood, rapines, massacres, were cheaply bought, / So mightily recompense your beauty brought." In a mock-blasphemous gesture, Dryden then foretells "that millenary year" that will see the "second coming" of the ravishing Duchess and the ensuing Saturnian Golden Age, when "the sharpened share shall vex the soil no more, / But earth unhidden shall produce her store."37

The return to the Golden Age is foreshadowed earlier in the poem by the reference to the Platonic year. The ancient tradition of the Platonic year holds that as the stars and planets return to their original positions after going through all of their revolutions, so events on Earth happen again in the same order as before (to Plato belongs the idea that the cycle repeats itself every 49,000 years). The concept of the Platonic year was very popular in the second part of the seventeenth century, as royal propaganda construed the 1660 Restoration as a sign that "England was moving in a circular motion, continuing forward and returning back, progressing into the restored Golden Age of the future. ... The idea of restoration combines the apotheosis of absolute eschatology and the revitalization of an end which is only relative, which is simultaneously a renewal, the dawn of a new age, which has shed all the bitterness and evil of the old."38 Writing in 1700, Dryden evokes the 1660 rhetoric of the "true" succession to comment on the present state of royal affairs; he portrays Maria Somerset—a reincarnation of Joan of Plantagenet—having returned on Earth as an embodied reflection of the cyclical movement of the heavenly bodies:

Like her, of equal kindred to the throne,
You keep her conquests, and extend your own:
As when the stars, in their ethereal race,
At length have rolled around the liquid space,
At certain periods they resume their place,
From the same point of heaven their course advance.

The image of the "stars, in their ethereal race [having] at length . . . rolled around the liquid space" is the same we find in the opening of The Secular Masque: "A hundred times the rolling sun / Around the radiant belt has run / In his revolting race. ... In fact, the eschatological iconography of the kind that I have discussed so far pervades The Secular Masque. So its closing, "Tis well an old age is out / and time to begin a new," is not, as several critics have suggested, Dryden's personal heartfelt farewell to his age but a rather formulaic eschatological sentiment deeply embedded in the imagery of the Platonic year that crops up again and again in the seventeenth-century printed discourse. Witness John Corbet writing that "this Restauracion is as it were life from the dead, and we are in some sort beginning the world anew" and George Rust gushing, "By this time the Wheel of Providence brought about the King's happy Restauracion, and there began a new World" (italics mine).41 Following the fashion of his times, Dryden evokes the eschatological circularity in his hopes for a "new age" in Astraea Redux: "And now times whiter Series is begun / Which in soft Centuries shall smoothly run,"42 and in Absalom and Achitophel: "Henceforth a Series of new time began."43

Similarly, Momus's concluding remark to Diana, "All, all of a piece throughout, / Thy chase had a beast in view," makes more sense when read as part of the Masque's eschatological framework than as a critique—according to Scott—of James I's hunting practices. I have mentioned earlier that Dryden evokes the Beast of Apocalypse in his Don Sebastian (via the "third part" reference), with the casualness that shows the familiarity of this imagery to late-seventeenth-century audiences. Sanford Budick argues convincingly that the language of "horns and beasts" in the writings of Dryden and other seventeenth-century authors is informed by the "almost obsessive desire to identify the Antichrist, which (according to New Testament parallels) was forecast in the Little Horn of Daniel 7:8 and 8:9."44 Budick points out that in 1693 Dryden suggested that poets "should search for materials in the prophesy of Daniel, ... accommodating what there they find with the principles of Platonic philosophy as it is now Christianized."45—an observation that sheds new light at the above discussed amalgamation of Christian, Old Roman, and Platonic iconography in the epistle to the Duchess of Ormonde. Budick's study focuses primarily on Religio Laici
and The Hind and the Panther, and he does not mention The Secular Masque; nevertheless, his analysis of seventeenth-century explications of Daniel's propheesy is profoundly illuminating for our understanding of Dryden's last work. Diana's "chase" of the "beast" conducted "with horns and with hounds" echoes the Restoration interpretations of Daniel, such as the one where the Beast is portrayed as surprisingly sympathetic and "driven into banishment ... leaving [his] wonted haunts, [running] hither and thither, when the hounds and hunters do pursue [him] in the mountains." Like McKeon, who points out that "eschatological propheesy was compatible with more than one ideology," Budick notes that a "symbolic language of beasts and horns—based largely on Daniel—was applied to [many different] churches and sects." As the Beast of Apocalypse was often associated in the popular mind with the Pope himself or the Catholic Church as such, Momus's rebuke to Diana could possibly be read as a sharp comment on Protestant religious intolerance and—returning once more to Scott's identification—a comment on the political situation at hand rather than on James I's passion for hunting.

On the whole, however, Dryden keeps the political charge of the Masque ambiguous. In this the Masque differs from Dryden's other works which rely strongly on the imagery of the eschaton, such as Annum Mirabilis and "To the Duchess of Ormonde." Both of these poems openly espouse the Stuarts' case; the former by interpreting the "wonders" of 1666 in the favor of the ruling king, the latter by mobilizing the rhetoric of the Platonic year to dream about the return of the lawful monarch, James II. The Masque, by contrast, does not supply any direct or indirect political exegesis of its eschatological gestures, which can be explained by the ostensibly "public" nature of this piece. "To the Duchess of Ormonde" was couched as a private expression of admiration, and its audience, though broad, remained rather selected: weeded out in part by the subscription process. The Masque, on the other hand, was written to be performed in front of throngs of virtual strangers not necessarily sympathetic toward the cause of James II, and Dryden might not want to endanger his friend, John Vanbrugh's and the Drury-Lane theater's standing with those in power by infusing his diversion with clear anti-Williamite sentiments. At the same time, it is possible that, familiar with Dryden's life-long tendency to use the eschatological iconography to promote the Stuarts, the Masque's viewers could articulate to themselves its "default" political message.

I suggest, thus, that the ambivalent characterization of Momus and Chronos as well as the Masque's glossed-over disagreement about the possibility and integrity of historical changes are grounded in Dryden's difficult position as a "private" (long deprived of his laurel, his political clout, and politically discontented author writing for a "public" occasion. Not willing to thus publish his discontent, Dryden was nevertheless aware that, as throughout the century the eschatological iconography came to be inextricably bound to ideology (serving sundry ideological agendas), his piece would be scoured on the subject of its political meaning. With this in mind, he might want to forestall his spectators/readers' desire to inscribe him and his politics into the Masque, and as such made sure that, first, none of his characters can be read unequivocally as "standing for" the Author, and, second, that neither of the Masque's two perspectives on the movement of time (i.e., the change-and-goal-oriented linear one and the anti-teleological circular one) is privileged over another. The Masque thus remains opaque and contradictory in its imagery because Dryden could not or would not be explicit in its politics.

The Fourth Reading: Dryden, Motteux, and Vanbrugh

To give a better sense of what it meant for the author to fail to supply a clear political interpretation of his eschatological references, I will now consider Dryden's last piece in the context of two other theatrical productions of the late 1690s: Peter Motteux's masque Europe's Revels for the Peace and Fletcher-Vanbrugh's The Pilgrim. I will argue that Europe's Revels provided an important (and hitherto overlooked) source for Dryden's Masque and contrast Motteux's treatment of his millenarian allusions to Dryden's. I will further show that the last scene of Vanbrugh's The Pilgrim—the scene which features the performance of The Secular Masque—contains a disproportionate (compared to the rest of the play) number of corrections aimed at glorifying William, and I will suggest that these corrections might have worked to counterbalance the Masque's own apparent lack of enthusiasm for the current political regime.

Europe's Revels for the Peace, and His Majestys Happy Return, written by Dryden's friend, Peter Motteux, first performed in Lincoln's-Inn Fields to the music of John Eccles in 1697, and then printed by Jacob Tonson (who brought out most of Dryden's work as well), celebrates William's martial exploits and advances a somewhat awkward argument that the "Peace" can be "engender'd" only "on War." Read side by side with the Revels, Dryden's Masque starts to look like a conscious parody of that patriotic extravaganza. Europe's Revels opens with an English officer entering to the sound of a "Warlike Symphony, an Alarm with Trumpets and Drums" and calling the "Britons" to "Glory!"
William Thunders, Armies tremble,  
Death or Conquest is the Cry,  
Now we sally;  
Now we fly;  
Now they rally,  
Charge and dye.  
Canons roaring,  
Squadrons pouring;  
Shouting,  
Routing,  
We pursue 'em,  
We Subdue 'em,  
Rage and Horror, Groans and Fear,  
Blood and Slaughter ev'ry where,  
with an obligatory Chorus repeating “Rage and Horror, Groans and Fear,” etc.66 Note that Dryden’s Mars echoes Motteux’s “roaring” and “pouring” by his series of alliterations:

Arms and honour,  
Arms and honour,  
Set the martial mind on fire,  
And kindle manly rage...  
Sound the trumpet, beat the drum...

After a brief comic interlude involving the “English Clown” (compare to Dryden’s Momus), Motteux introduces a series of amorous encounters between a French Officer and an English Lady, a French Officer and a French Lady (guess which Lady is more cooperative), and a Country Lass (admirably aware of her humble social standing) and a Soldier. Again, this movement from “war” to “love” is closely followed by Dryden’s introducing Venus who comes to “repair” what Mars has destroyed: “Calm appear, when storms are past; / Love will have his hour at last... / Take me, take me while you may. / Venus comes not every day.”

Writing close to the end of the century, Motteux does not fail to evoke eschatological symbolism; unlike Dryden, however, Motteux immediately supplies the politically straightforward interpretation of his millenarian allusions. So in the Dedication to his Revels, he refers to the “sudden and amazing Wonders... effected in War” and hastens to add that these “Wonders” have “defeated the Hopes of the King’s Enemies at home and abroad, and mightily conduc’d to the Establishment of this glorious Peace.”61

Another reference to the eschaton is contained in the Prologue to the Revels. Motteux conjures up an image of the “Globe” manipulated by God-like monarchs. He notes that “France shook the Globe, but William [compared to Jove and Neptune] humbl’d France.”62 These lines bring to mind a popular 1663 engraving featuring the two-faced god Janus intervening into the endless cycle of intestine strifes by stopping the revolution of time’s globe. One half of Janus’s face is fittingly made to resemble King Charles II; an apparent specimen of royalist propaganda, the engraving thus envisions Charles’s reign as a “return of the Golden Age before the wars.”63 Note that Dryden’s Janus—in a gesture strikingly similar to that captured by the anonymous author of the engraving—also stops time by encouraging the “weary” Chronos to put down his “great globe.” Where the author of the engraving expressed his political allegiances by making Janus look like Charles II, and where Motteux presented William—now likened to Jove, now to Neptune—as moving the Globe through his martial prowess, Dryden refused to furnish his Globe-operating deities with any political personality.

Finally, Europe’s Revels closes with a “single Song on the King’s Return” that invites the King of England to “view his new Creation”—the “World” that he has “freed” and assembled from a “Chaos”64—a nod toward the millenarian rhetoric of the new beginnings. Dryden, as we remember, ends his masque by having the Chorus welcome a “new” age. Considering how closely Dryden follows the pattern of the masque written to glorify the King’s wars, his parody of the blustering martial endeavor and his reliance on the equivocal eschatological imagery, which unlike Motteux he refuses to explicate, must have been perceived by his contemporaries as quite peculiar.

There is no point in speculating whether or not Dryden and Vanbrugh had any sort of an implicit or explicit agreement that the last scene of The Pilgrim—the one leading immediately to the Masque—should feature a fair number of soothing references to the ruling monarch, but the fact is that it does. Vanbrugh’s revision of Fletcher’s original play contains six topical “improvements” explicitly referring to the political regime of the late 1690s. One, located in the beginning of the fifth act, has to do with eliminating an anachronistic reference to the King’s “wedding-day” and is politically neutral.65 Another, found in the fourth act, actually makes fun of William’s penchant for wasteful wars, introducing a patriotic madman (worthily of Motteux’s “British Officer”) who cannot hear the word “beef” without bellowing, “Beef ye Gods! Beef! I’ll have that Ox for Supper—Knock him down—Chines, Surloins, Ribs, and Buttocks.—Lead me to the French Camp—They fly! They fly! They fly! They fly! They fly! Huzzah!”66 Such frolicking notwithstanding, in the last scene Vanbrugh gets his political act together and paves the way for Dryden’s Masque67 with
the following improvements over the original play: The Chorus is made to sing, "Long Live the King; / Prolong ye Powers, Prolong his Sway; / Repeat, repeat this Joyful Day, / Long Live the King,"58 the reformed outlaw Roderigo is made to say, "With Glory bless, and Long preserve / The Prince we do, or ought to serve; / Accept our Offerings we Implore; / The Peace which we have Lost restore,"59 and the main heroine, Alinda, who used to say in the old Fletcher’s play, "Thus we kneel, and thus we pray // A happy honour to this day, // Thus our Sacrifice we bring // Ever happy to the King,"60 now says instead, "Thus we kneel, and thus we pray. // Happiness attend this Day. // Our sacrifice we hither bring. // And sue for Blessings on the King."61 The Masque’s pointed apolitical is offset by the tactful topical framing provided by Vanbrugh.

By leaving the ideological charge of his eschatalogical imagery ambiguous—that is, unless his audiences wanted to supply its "default" (pro-Stuart) political meaning—Dryden "decoupled" eschatology from history. Traditionally, the two were bound together because public references to the eschaton were typically used to condemn or justify a given political development as viewed from a grander historical perspective. By the late 1690s, Dryden could not or was not willing to envision such a perspective; as Caldwell puts it, "after 1688...not only was the disheartened poet personally incapable of pronouncing a glorious future—or any future at all—for England, but the typology on which his former poems of destiny depended could not be employed to celebrate or to castigate a nation where the king was not anointed by God where the course of history was now by no means clear."62

It is ironic then that Walter Scott’s take on the Masque as an energetic future-oriented review of the historical past is still popular with scholars. I suggest that this interpretation should be revised, because it completely leaves out the cultural context in which the Masque was written, particularly its complex engagement with the politics of eschatological prophecy. Similarly, we should be aware of the perils of attributing to the Masque a confessional mode and trying to decide which of its characters expresses the dying poet’s "true" sentiments; ironically, these sentiments (such as "Tis well an old age is out; / And time to begin a new") turn out to be well-known eschatological formulae, and Dryden himself seems to have taken certain precautions to avoid being inscribed into his Masque. Finally, in spite of the long-held view that Dryden’s diversion had "no connection,"63 to the play for which it was written, we ought to consider its relationship with The Pilgrim, because this relationship is complexly factored into the history of the Masque’s composition and reception. Dryden’s last piece can still surprise us. I see my essay as opening rather than presenting the case for its new interpretation: as I have attempted to demonstrate, the Masque improves on rereading.

NOTES


4. Referring to the Masque, Scott notes that the "moral of this emblematic representation is sufficiently intelligible. By the introduction of the deities of the chase, of war, and of love, as governing various changes of the seventeenth century, the poet alludes to the sylvan sports of James the First, the bloody wars of his son, and the licentious gallantry which reigned in the courts of Charles II and James, his successor." (The Works of John Dryden. Illustrated with Notes, Historical, Critical, and Explanatory, and a Life of the Author by Sir Walter Scott, Bart. Revised and Corrected by George Saintsbury [Edinburgh, 1864]: VIII: 491.)


7. Winn, 510.


10. Winn, 512.

11. Winn, 512.


14. In his 11 April 1700 letter to Mrs. Steward, Dryden reports that. "Within this month there will be play’d for my profit, an old play of Fletchers, call’d the Pilgrim, corrected by my good friend Mr. Vanbrugh; to which I have added A New Masque, and am to write a New Prologue and Epilogue" (The Letters of John Dryden, collected and edited by Charles E. Ward [New York, 1868], 136).


17. The Works of Virgil: Containing his Pastoral, Georgica, and Aeneis. Translated into English Verse; By Mr. Dryden (London, 1697), viii. II. 425-92.


19. Winn, 511.


23. Scott points out that "the original music of the Masque [sic] was very much approved. It is mentioned in The Travels of John Bunce [sic]. Mr. Malone believes Daniel Purcell to have been the composer. It was set anew by Dr. Boyce, and afterward revived with success at Drury Lane in 1749. The hunting song was long popular." (494).


29. Robert Markley, personal communication.


31. McKeon, 204.

32. McKeon, 208.


34. "Don Sebastian," 518.


36. Letters, 111.


38. McKeon, 236, 256.


40. Compare it with Henry Bold's proclaiming, "Scare hath the lazy Sun his Circuit gone, / But Revolution! Revolution! (St. George's Day sacred to the coronation of his most excellent Majesty Charles II. By the grace of God King of England, Scotland, France and Ireland, defendor of the faith [London, 1661], 1). For a further analysis of Bold's and related works, see McKeon, 237.

41. Quoted in McKeon, 236 and 255. The references to the beginning of the new age were not limited, of course, to the decades between 1660 and 1700; for discussion, see McKeon, 254-249.


45. Budick, 206.

46. Quoted in Budick, 213.

47. McKeon, 221.


51. Motteux, A3 (from the Dedication to Sir Theodore Jassen).

52. Motteux, Prologue (pages unnumbered).


55. In the original play, the Governor of Segovia says, "Use all your sports; / All your solemnities; 'tis the Kings day to morrow, / His birth-day, and his marriage, a glad day, / A day we ought to honour all!" (Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, A Wife for a Month, The Lovers Progress, The Pilgrim, The Captain, The Prodigal, ed. A. R. Waller (Cambridge, 1907)), 218. In the revised version "prepared by Van Brugh," the Governor says, "Use all your sports, good people; all your solemnities; 'tis the King's birth-day, a day we ought to honour" (The Pilgrim, A Comedy as it is Acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane. Written originally by Mr. Fletcher, and now very much alter'd, with several Additions. Likewise a Prologue, Epilogue, Dialogue, and Masque, Written by the late Great Poet Mr. Dryden, just before his Death, being the last of his WORKS [London, 1700], 36).

56. Fletcher's original features a scene in the madhouse where Alphonso is talking to a mad "Englishman." Vanbrugh added to this scene the following exchange:

Alphonso. Oh brave English Man? Wilt thou have any Beef, Boy?

Master. Nay, now, Sir, you have made him stark mad. Lay hold of him there quickly.

Englishman. Beef! ye God! Beef! I'll have that Ox for Supper—Knock him down—Chines, Surloins, Ribs, and Buttocks,—Lead me to the French Camp—They fly! They fly! They fly! They fly! They fly! They fly! They fly! Huzzah! (53).

57. At the end of this scene, the Governor of Segovia invites other characters to share "an Entertainment the late great Poet of our Age prepar'd to Celebrate this Day" (42).

58. Vanbrugh, 30.

59. Vanbrugh, 30.

60. Beaumont and Fletcher, 226.

61. Vanbrugh, 40.


63. See, for example, Roper, who believes that "although the masque was designed to celebrate the happy ending of Fletcher's Pilgrim in the Vanbrugh revision of 1700, it had no relevance to the plot of the play" (29).