

Abstract

Title: Examine the Literary Presentation of Political Events In Sir Thomas Durfey's *Sir Barnaby Whigg*

Background: This essay was written between April and May 2004 as part of the assessment for an undergraduate module entitled *Seventeenth Century Literature and Culture* convened by Professor Elizabeth Clarke at the University of Warwick. The essay was conceived as a research project into a text from the Seventeenth Century that had been almost entirely neglected by modern critics. The task was thus to illuminate the text through the use of historical research and examination of contemporary sources.

Thesis: The paper argues that the play *Sir Barnaby Whigg* by Thomas Durfey profoundly influenced by being written at a key point in the exclusion crisis of the Restoration. It argues that the play is literally written at the very moment when the Whigs lose power and the Royalist backlash begins. It shows how this political turning point is mirrored in the theatres of London. Finally, it argues that the play indicates a growth in the abilities of Royalist authors to use the medium of print for propaganda purposes- a skill previously associated with the Whigs.

EEBO sources: EEBO offers me, as an undergraduate, unprecedented access to source materials usually unavailable or difficult to obtain. Many of these materials (e.g. John Dryden's *Prologue*) remain unpublished in spite of their value for researchers interested in the period. The paper uses a variety of sources from EEBO to illuminate the central text. The most important of these links is the relationship that is shown between the Whig playwright Thomas Shadwell's *The Lancashire Witches*, and Durfey's play, clearly showing Durfey to be parodying the work of his rival. The essay also uses EEBO sources from John Dryden and Aphra Behn to show the growth of a Tory literary culture. The relationship with Dryden is particularly illuminating as both writers can be shown to be referring to each other's work in a combined attack on their mutual enemy, Shadwell. EEBO thus makes it possible to perform detailed research into the literature of the Seventeenth Century with reference to the original texts and without recourse to secondary criticism in a way that would not normally be possible for undergraduate students.

Conclusions: This paper offers several important points of use to those interested in researching similar areas. The paper shows that 1681 was the turning point in Royalist literary culture- the point at which Tory writers found a voice on stage; gained a degree of organisation and coordination with each other; and discovered the full power of the press for propaganda purposes. *Sir Barnaby Whigg*, through the conditions of its performance and publication, was a play uniquely written and exploited with the aim of justifying Royal policy

Examine the Literary Presentation of Political Events

In Sir Thomas Durfey's *Sir Barnaby Whigg*

Sir Barnaby Whigg or *No Wit Like a Women*, by Thomas Durfey, began performance at the Theatre-Royal in October 1681, and was one of the first plays in the theatrical season of 1681-1682. The play is deeply involved in the political schism between Whigs and Tories that opened up during the Popish Plot and Exclusion Crisis of the preceding years, and the characters reflect the way that this political debate spilled over into popular culture. Durfey's sympathies are clearly Tory and the play does much to satirise the Whig culture, but I intend to show that the play is the product of a very specific point in the political climate of the times. Firstly, that the play was performed and published at a turning point in the political fortunes of the two parties, marking a waning of Whig power and a corresponding Tory backlash. The play does not merely reflect this change in fortune; it revels in it. Secondly, the play is symptomatic of that way that the theatrical climate of the time mirrored this shift in political power. It can be shown to be an attack on the Whig dramatist Thomas Shadwell and his play *The Lancashire Witches*, and there are clear textual clues to indicate a growth in organisation of Tory literary culture at the time. Third and finally, the play was carefully exploited as a piece of Royalist propaganda in a manner that shows a growth in sophistication on the part of the Royalists in their attitudes towards print that moves beyond mere satire of the Whigs and into a defence of Royal policy. There are strong suggestions that Durfey strengthened the force of his attack for publication and for the performance of the play for a royal audience.

These three factors locate Durfey's work in a very specific period of the Exclusion Crisis, a fact which Durfey is keen to emphasise.

The power of the Whigs as a political force was rooted in Parliament and it was in this arena that they had caused so much trouble for the King in the preceding years. In January of 1681 the King dissolved Parliament, recalling it only in March in Oxford (A Royalist town) for a week before dissolving it again and refusing to summon it until 1685. Whig power collapsed without the ability to exert pressure on the King and a Royalist backlash ensued.

Sir Barnaby Whigg satirises contemporary Whig society in London showing it to be less a threat to the country than a farce through the figures of the foolish Sir Barnaby and his nephew, the cuckold Sir Walter Wiseacre. Whig society in London was centred around a group of clubs that met in pubs and coffee houses, which they used as a basis for organising their petitions, publications, and political actions. Sir Barnaby is a member of the most notorious of these Whig clubs, the Green Ribbon Club, and it is a fellow member of this club that he boasts of betraying in Act IV.I. Coffee was particularly associated with Whig culture and Melinda Zook notes that "London coffeehouses were commonly seen as dens of sedition"(6). Sir Barnaby is mocked by the "*Loyal and Witty Gentleman*"(Dram. Pers.) Mr Wilding for his reluctance to drink alcohol ("I am in a Milk-Dyet for the Scurvy"(I.I.451)) and his inability to swear oaths (I.I, and IV.I), both of which have been identified as characteristic of oppositional society(Zook 6n; Spurr). In the prologue Durfey rails against "Our City-friends too, that o're Coffee droop"(20) i.e. the Whigs, whom he accuses of concocting "Sham-plots"(16) and of villainising those of

“the Loyal Party”(25), i.e. the Tories. The “Sham-plots” are of course the myriad of conspiracies that comprised the great Popish Plot of the Restoration. By October 1681 the Popish Plot was waning and serious doubts began to be thrown over the credibility of the witnesses called on by the Whigs to support their claims. Even one year earlier it would have been difficult to publicly argue that there was no Catholic plot against the King’s life. Tories were keen to emphasise the identification of themselves with Royalists and the Whigs with Parliamentarians, as Durfey does, thus showing the Whigs to be a kind of Fifth Column of Republicans left over from Cromwell, but the majority of Whigs were merely opponents of absolute monarchy and would go on to support William in the Glorious Revolution. For the mean time the Tory side of the debate had enough Royal backing for us to use the terms virtually interchangeably, but it is not quite so simple to identify the Whigs as anti-Royal. Durfey repeatedly depicts the Whigs as being supremely treacherous and mercenary, and early on Mr Wilding declares that “They of his Tribe say, theirs is the Church-Militant; but I say Money / is both their God and King”(I.I.376-7).

However, Whig society was profoundly affected by the Royalist backlash of 1681, and the loss of Parliamentary power was swiftly followed by a decline in their control over London and particularly its courts. Whigs had held the major political offices in London of Sheriff and Lord Mayor for a number of years and thus controlled the selection of London juries in favour of the Whigs until 1681, making it virtually impossible for Whigs to be prosecuted inside London. Stephen Colledge, the only significant Whig to be executed for sedition in 1681, had to be tried in Oxford after a London jury set him free. October 1681 saw John Moore become Lord Mayor, the first

Tory after a series of Whigs. When the King came to see *Sir Barnaby Whigg* in November 1681 Durfey wrote a special prologue celebrating this event as a major blow to the Whigs. The prologue describes how its reader went to a coffee house and asked for the “Treason-Table?”(2), allowing him to overhear “two hard’ned Brumichan Rascals prate”(4), “A nickname given to supporters of the Exclusion Bill in 1680”(Danchin, 333). These two Whigs complain bitterly that the new Lord Mayor is ‘Loyal’ and will ruin the success of their ‘Jury-men’, clearly referring to the inability of the Whigs to continue to pack juries under a Tory Mayor. The actor announces that he was moved to attack them before concluding declaration “For though Dear Parson TO will play his part, // Caesar will Reign in every honest heart.”(L25-6), referring to the Whigs’ mainstay in the Popish Plot, Titus Oates. Oates’ own credibility had taken a severe turn for the worse in 1681 following his unsuccessful testimony in defence of Colledge. Durfey subtly reminds his audience that the object of the Exclusion Crisis, James Duke of York, served his country patriotically by establishing the character of Captain Porpuss as a veteran of the battle of Sole Bay(I.I.210), where James commanded part of the English fleet. The very fact that Durfey is able to openly criticise Oates and question the veracity of the plots in these two prologues is symptomatic of a significant decline in Whig power.

Sir Barnaby Whigg was one of the first plays of the 1681-2 theatrical season in London and the shift in the political climate was extremely noticeable in the contrast between this and the previous season. Susan J Owen notes that the season of 1680-81 saw a shift towards Whig values in the theatre that reflected “a point in the Exclusion Crisis when many thought the Whigs would win”(87) but during the “reaction from autumn 1681

onwards... in the theatres in this period Whig plays could no longer be performed”(88). There are a number of explicitly Tory plays in the seasons immediately following including Durfey’s *The Royalist* and Aphra Behn’s *The Roundheads*, the prologue to the latter spoken by a Parliamentarian ascending from Hell (Image 4). Owen goes on to note that “Dramatists reverse the Whiggish themes and tropes of the previous season to create an opposite set of political associations as may be illustrated by D’Urfey’s treatment in *Sir Barnaby Whigg* of key tropes in Shadwell’s *The Lancashire Witches*”(88).

The Lancashire Witches was performed in September 1681 at the end of the 1680-1 season, though Shadwell’s introduction to the printed version indicates that Tory critics were aware of the play’s content up to a month before performance (Image 2). Shadwell’s Whig bias is apparent throughout and the play was controversial for its association of the Church of England to Jesuit Catholicism and witchcraft. Durfey clearly reverses Shadwell’s major tropes, as Susan Owen has recorded. Owen notes some of the important parallels between the societies presented in Shadwell and Durfey’s plays, which I have summarised:

<u>Shadwell</u>	<u>Durfey</u>
Lancashire gentry- “constancy, virtue and respect for tradition”	Sir Walter Wiseacre- “An opinionated fool and Cuckold/ A Lancashire Knight”(Dramatis Personae) Sir Barnaby- “hypocrisy, pretension and opportunism”

“Good protestants”	“A Phanatical Rascal, one of Oliver’s Knights” (Dramatis Personae)
“Good patriots”	“Sir Barnaby is ridiculously francophobic”
“Associates popery and credulity”	“Superstition and Whiggery”
“Celebrates married virtue”	“Libertine gallants as heroes”

(Adapted from Owen, 96n)

There are also several specific situations that parody *The Lancashire Witches*. Both plays feature Lancashire heavily as a place of rebellion and John Kenyon notes that “The returns of 1671 list 5,496 convicted recusants for Lancashire, as against 1,855 for the whole of Yorkshire, 678 for Staffordshire (reputed a strong Catholic community), and- for purposes of comparison- 42 in Devon”(26), thus the region was particularly known for avoidance of orthodox worship. Shadwell’s most controversial sections of the play concerned the characters of Smerk, a student of divinity awaiting Anglican ordination, and Tegue O’Dively, an Irish Priest fomenting rebellion. Much of the former’s role was excised by the censor, only to be replaced and strengthened on publication. In a key scene Smerk rapidly concedes a series of key points of theological doctrine to the Catholic Priest, concluding with:

Priest: And dou dosht not believe the Paapists Plot, my Joy?

Smerk: No, But the damn'd Presbyterian Plot I do: I would be a Turk
before I would be a Presbyterian; Rogues, Villains.

(Act III, Image 23)

A point of view that would have been considered absurd at the time. Sir Barnaby is a Presbyterian in Durfey's comedy, but Wilding lures him into converting to Anglicanism, Catholicism, and finally Islam in the latter parts of the play, literally reversing the trope. It would seem that Durfey had Shadwell's satire of Orthodox Anglicanism in mind when he wrote this sub-plot of religious pragmatism. Durfey was keen to stress this element of satire in the published edition of the play, lamenting in the dedication- "for in this Age 'tis not a Poets Merit but his Party that must do his business; so that if his play consists of a Witch, a Devil, or a Broomstick, so we have but a Priest at one end of the Play, and a Faction at 'tother end of the Pit, it shall be fam'd for an excellent piece"(ded.), unmistakably referring to the elaborate stage magic of Shadwell's play

Durfey does not limit his attack to Shadwell's play, but extends it to a personal attack on the Whig dramatist himself. Durfey was famous for his musical pieces and one of the songs in *Sir Barnaby Whigg* clearly satirises Shadwell:

"I got Fame by filching from Poems and Plays,
But my Fidling and Drinking has lost me the Bays;
Like a Fury I rail'd, like a Satyr I writ
Thersites my humour, and Flecknow my Wit."(III.II)

Recent research indicates that Dryden's attack on Shadwell "Mac Flecknoe" (Image 1), associating him with recently deceased second-rate playwright Richard Flecknoe, was in manuscript circulation as early as November 1681 (Borgman, 49n). It seems likely that this song attacking Shadwell ("the Bays" clearly identify the former poet-laureate) is making reference to Dryden's unpublished poem.

Finally, the character of Sir Barnaby can be clearly identified as being a caricature of Shadwell. It is not immediately obvious from the text, but contemporary evidence indicates that the portrayal of Sir Barnaby at the actual performance by experienced King's Company veteran Martin Powell, who also appeared in at least one of Dryden's plays (Lennep), was recognisable as such. Dryden's *Prologue to the King and Queen at the Opening of their Theatre* on the 16 November 1682 refers to the "dull fat Fool sham'd on the Stage for humour" (Image 2) as part of a diatribe against notable Whigs. Dryden is certainly referring to the infamously corpulent Shadwell and this clearly shows a degree of unity within the Tory camp in the print war of the time that was simply not present at the time. The fact that Duffey clearly had access to Dryden's "Mac flecknoe" manuscript indicates that the two men were part of the same literary circles. This is further strengthened by the shared vocabulary of anti-Whiggery that they share, as in Act IV.I when Benedick calls Sir Barnaby his "*quondam Rabbi Achitophel*", a Biblical allusion that Dryden also took up in this period. There seems to be a degree of coordination growing between Tory poets in their attacks on Whigs, with figures like Dryden, Duffey, and Roger L'Estrange coming into the height of their powers.

The Lancashire Witches was performed in September 1681 and was printed in 1682, but Durfey's play was acted in October 1681 and was in print by the end of the year, a remarkably brief period from stage to ink that has caused some to question the October dating for the performance. However, it is clear from the influence of Shadwell's play that an earlier date is not possible. Susan Owen suggests that "a royalist piece, politically useful to the authorities, could be rushed into print faster"(96n), and it seems that this was the case. *Sir Barnaby Whigg* seems to have been carefully exploited for propaganda purposes by a Tory faction that had gained confidence from the loss of Whig administrative power in London, and from the growth in sophistication of Tory press culture. Typically such use of the propaganda press had been an area of Whig supremacy, and Melinda Zook notes that "Whig radicalism propagated its slogans and ideology and answered its opponents through print"(5). Attempts to suppress Whig publishing had been largely unsuccessful due to Whig control over the major positions of power in London. However, Zook notes that a large number of Whig newspapers were suppressed in 1680 with the aid of Tory propagandist Roger L'Estrange(5). It is clear that the Tories seized upon the waning of Whig power to organise a counter attack in the print war via political and literary means. What is even more apparent from this example is that they had the backing of Royal authority.

The dedication in the published piece to Lord Berkeley, one of the King's favourites, focuses on, and adds to the anti-Whig elements and ignores the main plot of cuckoldry in the play indicating that Durfey was strengthening the political weight of his play for print. The King showed his support for Durfey's politics by attending the performance, an occasion that Durfey marked with his special prologue that ignored the

theatrical sphere of the Whig/Tory divide in favour of an increased focus on Tory victories and Whig defeats in London politics. Addison would later recall “King *Charles the Second* leaning on Tom D’Urfey’s Shoulder more than once, and humming over a Song with him.”(161)

The play is also unusual for a different reason. There is a very odd section early on in the first act that involves the major male characters in a discussion over importing French wine. The politics of the main characters are established, and the main cuckold figure of Sir Walter Wiseacre is introduced through this discussion. Sir Walter appears on stage with some mislabelled bottles of bootleg claret and other French wines that he has obtained in spite of a prohibition. The prohibition in question was an addendum to the Poll Bill of 1677-8, as David Ogg explains- “This Act derived additional importance from the fact that it appropriated the proceeds of the tax, with all loans thereon, to a war with France, and prohibited the importation of French wine, brandy, vinegar, linen, and silk for three years from March 20, 1678”(437). As the granting of wine licences and revenue from imports of wine and vinegar were part of King Charles II’s financial prerogative this ban was an attempt by Parliament to reduce the monarch’s financial independence in the maintenance of the standing army that the war would require. Sir Walter, by illegally importing prohibited goods is denying the King money that is his by right, and denying the King’s law (however reluctant he was to pass it). However, this ban ceased to be effective six months before the first performance of *Sir Barnaby Whigg*. We can safely assume that London’s wine merchants would not have let this time pass without restocking their supplies of French claret, brandy, and champagne, and it seems unlikely that Durfey and his audience would have been unaware that the goods that the

characters were having trouble obtaining were fully and legally available again. The fact that Parliament included this addendum at all indicates that there was a market for such goods. I can find no evidence to indicate that the ban was continued, and it seems remarkably unlikely that it would have been given Charles' reliance on French financial aid to rule without Parliament.

What we are faced with is a scene in which the main characters are complaining about a ban that would have been recognisable to Dufey's audience as no longer being in place. I believe that Dufey is deliberately placing the timing of his play before the dissolution of the Oxford Parliament as a means of justifying the King's actions in dealing with the intransigent Whigs. This may also identify the source for Sir Barnaby's mysterious astrologer as William Lilly, who was easily the most prominent astrologer in the country and unusual in that he was a Parliamentarian in a profession that was usually shunned as superstition by non-conformists. Lilly notably predicted the comet that was visible in January 1681 (Jeake) and that Sir Barnaby seems to be referring to in Act I.I, where he follows Lilly's tradition of associating it with revolution and social upheaval (Geneva 89, 195). Lilly died in June 1681, suiting this dating (Parker, 258). However, while this is uncertain, we can be sure that the play was exploited as a propaganda piece.

In conclusion, Dufey was writing at a pivotal moment in Whig fortunes that saw some of the first real Tory victories following years of Whig dominance. Dufey is exemplary of a Royal strategy towards the press that was moving away from the reactionary and defensive excesses of censorship and towards a sophisticated and offensive policy of propaganda. The Whigs, famous for their abilities with the mass distribution of political

print for pamphleteering and petitioning, began to come under organised attack as their power waned with the dissolution of Parliament; the loss of credibility for the Popish Plot; the loss of the Lord Mayorship in London; and the King's financial independence, all of which are reflected directly or indirectly in Durfey's play.

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