

The paper is entitled 'Examine the literary presentation of political/religious events in John Dryden's *Amboyna*' and was produced in May 2004 for a module convened by Dr. Elizabeth Clarke in the second year of study as part of my English Literature (BA) degree course. Students were required to select from a list of EEBO texts and conduct research into the chosen work in order to produce a paper with a historicist focus, which demanded a detailed insight into the history of the period, combined with an acute appreciation of the literature. I embarked upon a study of John Dryden's 'Amboyna' (1673), created just after the Declaration of Indulgence (1672) and in the midst of the Third Dutch War, to investigate the ways in which this volatile period transposed itself onto Dryden's contemporary literature and also to ascertain the extent to which his position in Charles II's court shaped his work. The play has been largely ignored by critics due to its perceived lack of literary merit and this has led to a failure to assess its relevance as a piece of seventeenth century political propaganda. In an era in which politics and religion were inseparable from literature, the text serves as a blatant example of the way in which drama was used as a persuasive tool and was elevated to a central position in the contemporary society.

Early English Books Online provided access to Dryden's *Amboyna*, the primary material for the paper and also to John Skinner's 1624 pamphlet which Dryden used as a source. These are relatively obscure texts which are rarely published and would have been virtually inaccessible had it not been for this database.

As my paper is a rare commentary on this play it is of significant value to others in this field of study. It elucidates the religious and political emphasis of the play and highlights the relationship between monarchical sovereignty and the theatre in one of the most politically charged and exciting periods of English history. The conclusions reached in the paper have additional importance in terms of reinforcing the strict adherence to nationalist ideology practised by Dryden in his role as Poet Laureate and Historiographer Royal.

Examine the literary presentation of political/ religious events in John Dryden's *Amboyna*.

According to Scott, the English stage 'absolutely foamed with politics' during Charles II's reign (qtd. in Myers 78) and this fusion of politics and drama is flagrant in Dryden's *Amboyna* of 1673, a tragedy which derives its title and focus from the massacre of the English by the Dutch in this location in February 1623. The carnage that occurred at the hands of the Dutch was well documented throughout the seventeenth century, 'since the story was continually being revived and retailed, particularly at such periods when war seemed imminent (or to the politicians desirable) between Great Britain and the States-General.' (Summers 345) Dryden's awareness of the event was heightened by a range of contemporary pamphlets, and in particular that of John Skinner, published in 1624; providing him with a model with which to create 'a crude piece of political propaganda' (Myers 32) written in response to the beginning of the Third Dutch War. This 'patriotic exhortation' (Ward 'The Dates of Two Dryden Plays' 790) was produced in his official role of Historiographer Royal, and as such he was required to 'serve and defend his Majesty's honour' (Evelyn, qtd. in Ward *The Life of John Dryden* 72), reflecting the King's own views and presenting a persuasive account of the massacre at Amboyna in order to popularise the war. The Prologue is self-consciously propagandist, with Dryden acknowledging that the play has been written 'in haste' (Prologue Image 6) and he uses this as a justification for its style, warning the audience that they should 'hope not [for] either Language, Plot, or Art' (Prologue Image 6). The play is therefore immediately established as a political document, serving to expose the vices of the Dutch and to encourage domestic support for the war.

The reaction of the English to the Third Dutch War was hostile and anti-war sentiment pervaded all aspects of society. In contrast to its predecessor, which had been fought on the premise of commercial interests and had therefore elicited substantial public backing, the war excited minimal support as Charles' motives seemed elusive. Whereas a parliamentary committee report produced in 1664 indicated the support of the merchant community for the Second Dutch War, in the hope that trade would be retrieved from the Dutch (Mc Keon 102), no such parliamentary support was evident for the third war. Dryden is therefore

required to present the Dutch threat as potentially destructive on a national scale; indicating that the enemy's hatred is aimed not solely at the English merchants, but at the entire English population. This is achieved by exposing the audience to the rebelliousness of the Dutch protagonists, who are willing to bypass legal institutions in order to secure their own satisfaction. Following the civil wars in England, Dryden's audience would have recognised the dangers of lawlessness and the need to keep rebels in check. Fiscal chides Harman Junior for not murdering Ysabinda after he rapes her, stating, 'Pray, what makes any thing a sin but Law; and, What Law is there here against it?' (4.1. Image 27) The character's disregard for socially accepted regulations is suggestive of their baseness and indicates the extent to which they will subvert moral practice. This disrespect for the practice of law is reinforced through the Dutch use of torture as a means of extracting false confessions from the captive English. The monstrous cruelty exercised by the Dutch, highlighted through Towerson's cry of 'These Tortures ne're were hatch'd in Humane Breasts' (5.1. Image 37), emphasises the enemy's unashamed use of physical force and serves as a horrific reminder to Dryden's audience of their barbarous capabilities and of its own perilous position. Dryden arouses a feeling of fear in his audience, but couples this with a sense of pride, based on the determination and stoicism of the English; a combination with which Dryden aims to incite the audience to action. The intended response is suggested through the self-consciously theatrical rhetoric attributed to Towerson, who states 'We have friends in England who would weep to see/ This acted on a Theatre, which here/ You make your pastime' (5.1. Image 38), which elucidates Dryden's desire to present a dramatisation of the Amboyna massacre which highlights the greatness of the Dutch threat and the necessity of the English to support the war.

In addition to nationalising the Dutch threat, Dryden also exploits English stereotypes of the enemy with a particular focus being ascribed to Dutch lack of appreciation for English aid. According to Mc Keon, this was a chief criticism of the Dutch in this era and 'A sense of their irritating ingratitude to England pervades anti-Dutch polemics.' (99) Dryden reinforces the idea that the Dutch are indebted to the English, whilst simultaneously highlighting the fact that they demonstrate disloyalty and plot against their ally in order to secure its demise. Significantly, the English acts of favour to the Dutch are related to the audience

by the Dutch themselves, enabling Dryden to protect the former from criticisms of immodesty and boastfulness, whilst revealing the openness of the latter's ingratitude. The English assistance pervades every aspect of Dutch affairs and extends from the individual, with Harman Junior relating that Towerson has 'reliev'd' him 'from the Pirats' (1.1. Image 10), to the national, with England having both facilitated the Dutch victory against the Spanish and ameliorated their trading business. Dryden includes a plethora of references to each of these incidences of aid, beginning with Van Herring, who acknowledges that "'tis so Notoriously known in Christendom, that [the English] have preserv'd ours [throats] from being cut by the Spaniards' (1.1. Image 8) and also that it was the English merchants who 'were first discoverers of this Isle, [and who] first Traded hither, and show'd us the way.' (1.1. Image 8) Despite this military and economic support however, the Dutch pledge to implicate the English in a false conspiracy, with Fiscal stating 'we must put on a seeming kindness, call 'em our Benfactors, and....pipe 'em within the danger of our Net' (1.1. Image 9). This dichotomy between appearance and reality highlights the devious way in which they hope to disguise their inner evil with a veil of feigned gratitude. The Dutch lack of appreciation extends into an anticipation that their ally will be punished for its gullibility, using the proverb 'save a Thief from the Gallows' (1.1. Image 8) [and you should expect to be robbed], to demonstrate the precariousness of the English situation and the unreserved ruthlessness of the dangerous enemy.

Dryden's focus on the nation targeted by a foreign threat somewhat alleviated the problematic issue of England's ambivalence towards a seemingly unwarranted war, but he was required to tackle a greater hindrance to public support than the English uncertainty regarding the King's motivation. The major obstacle to widespread support for the war was based on religious grounds, as the Dutch and the English were bound by the common religion of Protestantism; a unifying force which had encouraged English participation in the Dutch-Spanish war. In order to promote the war, Dryden is required to dispel any religious allegiances which the contemporary audience would have harboured, and this is achieved through the presentation of the Dutch as mercenary, murderous individuals; indicating their subversion of Protestant religious values. Dryden highlights the fact that the Dutch are co-religionists by label only, and use this

religion as a guise beneath which they can conceal their malevolent characters. This idea is immediately introduced in the Prologue to the play, in which Dryden criticises those Englishmen who ‘fawn on those who ruin them’ (Prologue Image 5), thereby foolishly allowing the Dutch to ‘Cuckold’ and ‘Cheat’ (Prologue Image 5) them, ‘rather than make a War/ With those who of the same Religion are.’ (Prologue Image 5) The English anxiety to protect the Dutch due to religious loyalty is undermined by the suggestion that the foreigners have ‘no more Religion faith’ (Prologue Image 5) and worship the God of ‘Interest’ (Prologue Image 6), suggested primitively by the name Fiscal. The nation itself is ungodly, with Dryden claiming that the States-General ‘are Atheists in their very frame’ (Prologue Image 6). Later, the Dutch protagonists themselves expose the hypocrisy which permeates through the ranks of their hierarchical society, with Harmon stating that their ‘Superiors... may give the King of *Great Brittain* a Verbal satisfaction.....but interest is their God as well as ours’ (1.1. Image 9). This narrow materialism overcomes Christian moral reservations, with Van Herring excusing his misgivings about ‘cutting [English] Throats’ (1.1. Image 8) by stating, ‘’twas but a qualme of conscience, which profit will dispel’ (1.1. Image 9). The irreligious, deceitful nature of the Dutch is reinforced through the oath sworn by Harman Senior on his beard, which is disliked by Beamont, who comments, ‘there’s treachery in that *Judas* colour’d Beard.’ (1.1. Image 11) The reference to Judas is suggestive of the imminent betrayal of the English merchants at the hands of the disloyal Dutch, as Judas succumbed to the temptations of greed and was bribed with thirty bags of silver in exchange for his infidelity to Jesus. In addition, the comparison also enables Dryden to emphasise the goodness of the English, as by associating the Dutch with Judas the betrayer, he allies the English with Jesus the betrayed, highlighting the gluttony and immorality of the former and the innocence and religious purity of the latter.

Religion provides Dryden with an additional motivation for constructing *Amboyna*. Religious tensions were exacerbated under Charles II, as Protestants feared that the series of measures taken to liberate non-Conformists, and in particular Catholic subjects, indicated his Papist sympathies. Indeed, his ‘intentions in religious matters were regarded with distrust by both his Anglican and his dissenting subjects’ (Zwicker

11), a cautiousness which was justified, as Charles was planning to assert his adherence to Catholicism following his secret negotiations with King Louis XIV of France. This conversion was fuelled, not by religious conviction, but by the need to obtain sums of money which had been denied to him by ‘a suspicious and often hostile Parliament’ (Ward *The Life of John Dryden* 77) and would be granted to him by the French monarch. Charles signed the Treaty of Dover in 1670, and whilst he attempted to divert attention away from his actual ambition and mollify Parliament by proclaiming measures designed to target non-conformists, such as requiring all Jesuits and Romish priests to leave England by May 1 of that year (Ward *The Life of John Dryden* 78), his critics continued to question his objectives and underlying Papist sympathies. Charles’ apparent lenience towards dissenters culminated in the Declaration of Indulgence issued in March of 1672. The declaration was timed to correspond with the war against the Dutch; a ‘neat coincidence’ (Zwicker 17) which arguably enabled Charles to veil his true religious intentions behind the guise of English uniformity and the hope of ‘securing Peace at Home’ (Charles II, qtd. in Zwicker 18). Charles argued that the laws were passed in order to ease domestic tensions in England during the climate of war, but his opponents remained unconvinced. Dryden, aware of these tensions, responded by producing the propagandist play ‘in haste’ (Prologue Image 5) in order to deflect attention away from the domestic conflict and heighten support for the war, which would have won him favour with Charles.

Dryden addresses the religious anxieties in England by including a Catholic Spanish character called Perez and attempts to appease both the Protestant audience and the King. The opening of Act 3, scene 1 feeds Protestant preconceptions regarding Catholics, presenting the Spaniard as ‘a bounteous friend’ of Satan (3.1. Image 19). The devious, cruel nature of the intended murder of Towerson is highlighted through its juxtaposition with the honest, noble actions of the Englishman, who has detailed his wish to reward Perez for his services. The discovery of this note however, enables Dryden to placate Charles II by introducing the possibility of Catholic redemption, as by following the calls of his conscience and neglecting his promise to murder Towerson, Perez indicates his potential for good. This more accommodating depiction of the Catholic protagonist is a response to the Test Act of 1673, which was passed by the Anglican Commons and

‘required all civilian and military office-holders.... to be communicants in the Church of England.’ (Myers 78) The Act was unpopular with the King and led to the resignation of the Treasurer Lord Clifford, to whom Dryden ‘promptly dedicated Amboyna’ (Myers 78), an indication of his willingness to please Charles II. The audience and the King would appreciate the fact that Perez’s decision not to murder Towerson is based, not purely on the fact that he will receive his payment, but on a recognition of English goodness, which forces him to accept his own callous nature, stating ‘oh base degenerate Spaniard’ (3.1. Image 19). Perez is transformed by this incident, which exposes him to the positive values of the ‘Honourable *Englishman*’ (3.1. Image 19), and enables him to embrace these virtues, later risking his own life in order to save Towerson, embarking on ‘an action as brave as theirs is base’ (4.1. Image 25). In attributing the Catholic Perez with these merits and enabling him to recognise the worth of the English, Dryden detracts from the religious divisions and encourages a depiction of England as a ‘national homogeneity’ (Mc Keon 69) and a presentation of the English as a principled and moral people.

The conversion of Perez also enables Dryden to transpose Protestant criticisms of Catholics onto the Dutch, highlighting the idea that the religious enemies at home must unite against the foreign power. The fact that a man hailing from a nation with a turbulent history with England, including the contemporary Anglo-Spanish War (1655-1659), has the ability to redeem himself, indicates the baseness of the Dutch; displaying vices which are inferior to those of the Catholic Spanish. The Dutch are criticised by Beamont for accepting religion on the grounds of mercenary self interest, saying ‘ye tolerate all Worships, in them who can pay for it’, and are revealed to have made sacrifices to the ‘Idols’ of the heathen ‘Emperor of Pegu’ (2.1. Image 18). This portrayal of the enemy as worshippers of false idols and irreligious murderers driven by economic considerations would have initially associated them with the Protestant religious rivals, but Dryden broadens the dichotomy between them, suggesting that the Dutch are not akin to, but worse than, the Catholics; a damning depiction which positions the Dutch as England’s arch-enemy.

Dryden ends the play on a defiant note, with Towerson prophesising the fall of Holland at the hands of ‘an English Monarch’ (5.1. Image 39), a reference to Charles II’s ability to lead the English to victory over

their enemy. This aggressive tone differs from that of Skinner's pamphlet, in which the English 'prayed [to] God to forgive [the] blood-thirstiness [of the Dutch]' (Image 19). In Dryden's *Amboyna* Towerson ignites vengeance, hoping that 'With damps of Waters shall [Dutch] heads be swol'n' (5.1. Image 39) in order to repay the way in which the Dutch have tortured the English with water. The inclusion of the Epilogue exacerbates the rebellious closing of the play. Dryden compares himself to Tyrtæus, a poet sent by the Athenians to the Spartans, who 'led' this nation 'to fight' (Epilogue Image 40), reflecting his valued position as Poet Laureate and his ability to incite 'All Loyal English' (Epilogue Image 40) to war. He uses classical imagery to ennoble the conflict, associating England with glorious Rome and Holland with defeated Carthage, a technique used in his propagandist work *Annus Mirabilis* in which he presents 'the victor and the vanquished in a war to secure absolute supremacy of the known world.' (Wykes 163) As Cato displayed fine figs in the senate in order to persuade it that Carthage was worth invading, Dryden presents England's 'tortur'd Fathers' (Epilogue Image 40) to convince his countrymen of the need to combat the Dutch and repay 'that blood which [the Dutch] have shed' (5.1. Image 39). The bold closing line, which derives from Cato's 'Carthago delenda est' and is translated by Dryden as 'Let Carthage be subdu'd' (Epilogue Image 40), serves as a defiant call to arms and a glorious indication of Dryden's envisaged English triumph.

Thus, it can be concluded that the contemporary Dutch War directly affected Dryden's subject matter; using *Amboyna* as a political vehicle to enhance the English response to the war. The political environment informed his presentation of the Dutch as an irreligious, mercenary race driven by greed and lacking in moral reservations; a description which enables him to dispel the religious qualms of his audience. Dryden attempts to overcome domestic religious boundaries by appealing to the 'English Heart' (Prologue Image 5), emphasising the need to unite against the foreign threat in order to defeat it. By depicting this real and actual threat, *Amboyna* fulfils its 'definite purpose of exciting the hatred of the English for the Dutch' (Ward 'The Dates of Two Dryden Plays' 788) to encourage support for the war of 1672.

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