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Rhetoric and Disguise: Political Language and Political Argument in *Absalom and Achitophel*

STEVEN ZWICKER AND DEREK HIRST

"There was never more need, never greater occasion for the exercise of Moderation, than now in our Age. It's much in the common talk, and in the wishes of all sorts of men, all seem to desire and court it; and yet I believe it was never less understood, less practised."

John Evans, *Moderation Stated*, 1682.

The ironic fate of *Absalom and Achitophel* is to be fully appreciated as one of the great political poems of the language and only partially comprehended as political argument. Recent criticism of the poem is marked by a widening discrepancy between the ways in which it is understood as verbal and as political artifact. Metaphor and allusion have been carefully and often subtly charted, yet the poem's political rhetoric and its political argument are assumed to be simple coordinates. The tensions, indeed the contradictions, between explicit language and implicit argument are not only unexamined but largely unperceived. The conventional reading, which has become an almost fixed critical response, argues that the poem rises above partisan politics, that it derives from a political intelligence committed to a conservative ideology but indifferent to, indeed contemptuous of, the "party color'd mind."¹

This essay developed from discussions during a jointly taught seminar which was part of the Literature and History program at Washington University, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The ranking of the authors' names was determined by lot.

¹See, for example, George deF. Lord, "Absalom and Achitophel and Dryden's Political Cosmos," *John Dryden*, ed. Earl Miner (London, 1972): "Yet if we would understand Dryden's moderation it is important for us to see how closely it resembles in principle the moderation of Marvell, a chief spokesman for the opposition. 'God send us moderation and agreement,' Marvell wrote in 1671, and this prayer 'may stand as an epigraph to all his efforts during the last years of his life.' But the prayer might equally well represent Dryden's political position at the time of writing *Absalom and Achitophel* . . . He shared with Marvell a deep aversion to the 'party color'd mind,'" 182-83. Lord's statement of the poet's political moderation represents the explicit claims or implicit assumptions of much recent criticism of *Absalom and Achitophel*, including Schilling's lengthy study of the poem, *Dryden and the Conservative Myth* (New Haven, 1961). Although Schilling describes Dryden as a political conservative, his reading of the poem's corrective dialectic implies that Dryden's politics were an ideological middle ground, a belief in order that transcended party. Similar notions can be found in William Frost's introduction to the Rhinehart edition, *Selected Works of John Dryden* (New York, 1971), 12; Isabel Rivers's general characterization of Dryden's politics in *The Poetry of Con-*

Generalities about Dryden's temper, the poet as philosophical sceptic, as disinterested critic of extremes,² together with the seemingly ingenuous and repeated claims of moderation and balance in the *Preface* have led a number of critics to understand the narrator's espoused moderation as Dryden's political stance³—a judgment which Dryden's contemporaries certainly did not allow. The anonymous publication of the poem was followed in a matter of weeks by a torrent of political outrage and personal abuse.⁴ What, we might wonder, were Dryden's contemporaries responding to if the political argument of the poem, like much of its language, was conciliatory? If rhetoric is understood as intent, never has a poem been so misread by contemporaries. But men who spoke the language of politics as Dryden must have heard it spoken perceived in his use of that language neither mildness nor moderation. *Absalom and Achitophel* is a sophisticated compound of memories and alterations of Virgil, Shakespeare, and

servatism (Cambridge, 1973) 134-35; Sanford Budick's analysis of the poem's opening lines in *Poetry of Civilization* (New Haven, 1974), 88-89; David Farley-Hills in *The Benevolence of Laughter* (London, 1974), 114-31; and in the exchange between A. E. Dyson and Julian Lovelock, *Masterful Images* (London, 1976), 71-97. These readings share an assumption that the poem moves from the lamentable real (opening lines) to the supposed ideal (closing fiat) and that this dialectical quest itself represents Dryden's real beliefs, moderate and nearly apolitical, essentially honest in their inability to subvert the truth of history to party needs. An older generation of scholars, as, for example, Keith Feiling in the *History of the Tory Party* (Oxford, 1924), tacitly assumed the partisan nature of Dryden's argument in *Absalom and Achitophel* although they, in turn, paid little attention to the rhetoric of moderation in the poem.

²Two recent books, however, have significantly challenged the traditional understanding of Dryden as philosophical sceptic and political moderate; see Phillip Harth, *Contexts of Dryden's Thought* (Chicago, 1968), and Michael McKeon's *Poetry and Politics in Restoration England: The Case of Dryden's Annus Mirabilis* (Cambridge, Mass. 1975). Harth and McKeon argue that scepticism and moderation are rhetorical techniques rather than themselves characteristics of Dryden's beliefs. In more recent work, Harth has placed *Absalom and Achitophel* in the very specific context of Shaftesbury's treason trial, correcting the notion that Dryden was prompted to write the poem in an effort to sway judicial opinion, see "Legends no Histories," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, vol. 4, ed. H. Pagliaro (Madison, 1975), 13-31.

³The boldest of such confusions between political language and political convictions can be found in William Myers's recent study, *Dryden* (London, 1973). Myers identifies the narrator's claims of independence with his own notion of Dryden's political beliefs: "He is too ready to identify integrity with balanced ironic truth-telling to be a great propagandist . . . even in this overtly propagandist poem his approach is a carefully balanced one." In Myers's reading David is "An ageing, bribable adulterer [who] is every bit as disgusting as a bankrupt, toiling politician. With thoroughly un-Burkean coldness, Dryden shows 'Royal' manners to be as inconsistent and blasphemous as the temptation speeches of Achitophel." And of the poem's conclusion, this critic observes, "Dryden is asserting once again that political success is almost inevitably based on unprincipled nastiness." *ibid.* pp. 86, 92, 94.

⁴The partisan response can be followed in Hugh Macdonald's "The Attacks on Dryden," *Essays and Studies by the Members of the English Association* 21 (1936), pp. 41-74, and in the "Drydeniana" section of Macdonald's *John Dryden: a Bibliography of Early Editions and of Drydeniana* (Oxford, 1939).

Milton, yet it is also persuasive speech. As such it very much entered the fray of political debate, was perceived as part of that debate, and in important ways behaved like other such contributions. Understood as a poem of brilliant but submerged rhetorical strategies and read in the context of a political crisis that demanded the appearance of moderation regardless of the incendiary beliefs masked by such a rhetoric, the poem emerges not as a plea for toleration but as a bold and vindictive claim for executive vengeance. The ways in which moderation masks vengeance form the subject of this paper.

The reasons why moderation has come to be regarded as the political theme of *Absalom and Achitophel* are not of course difficult to understand. Such a reading takes David's lengthy final speech appealing to the supremacy of the law and asserting its applicability to all, king and rebellious subjects alike, as the keynote of the poem. Backed by assorted *obiter dicta* of the narrator, by the presence of veiled and at times daring criticism of a promiscuous king, and by praise of Achitophel the judge, a case is easily made for the poem as manifesto of evenhandedness and reasoned moderation. The poet, identified as the narrator, is thus seen as the classic seventeenth-century moderate, fully in the mainstream of near-universal appeals to an "ancient constitution." And indeed the overwhelming majority of the political nation would have agreed with the narrator's assertion that "Innovation is the Blow of Fate," that "To change Foundations" is tantamount to rebellion (11. 800, 805).⁵ To remove old landmarks, even the most unsightly and insignificant, was to risk running the body politic into chaos and the wilderness.⁶ Yet to identify the conventional character of such opinions is neither to describe the politics of the poem as a whole nor to account for their presence in what we are suggesting as a text of sharply partisan argument. Their presence can best be understood as requisite gestures, the natural covering of any Englishman addressing himself to political themes in the later seventeenth century.

The public commitment to ancient ways of harmony and balance in the early part of the century needs no demonstration. Fear of "innovation" is a theme which runs through the parliamentary debates and through the great constitutional set-pieces—the Petition of Right, the Ship Money case, the Grand Remonstrance. The events at midcentury merely confirmed what everyone knew, that reform, being change, is the inevitable forerunner of decay and dissolution. The fact that political change so obviously and dramatically did occur in the seventeenth century paradoxically induced a strengthened denial of the idea of change: Charles II's reign was dated from 1649, the records of the intervening years were expunged, and the Commonwealth was refuted as determinedly as was 1066. The vitality of this intellectual conservatism is remarkable, and so

⁵Throughout, citations are to James Kinsley's text, *The Poems of John Dryden*, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1968).

⁶See, for example, the debate on minor matters of electoral reform surveyed in J. Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform 1640-1832* (Cambridge, 1972), 27.

equally is its political extent. That the laws had to be sovereign and unbroken was eagerly acknowledged not only by those who might be called political conservatives, the men for whom L'Estrange was a spokesman in the Exclusion Crisis and to whom Filmer's *Patriarcha* appealed, but also by their opponents, who were just as much the beneficiaries of the structure of property and place which had been threatened by the Crown in the 1630s and by the radicals in the Interregnum.

Throughout the seventeenth century, commitment to party had been characteristic of only a small minority of the political nation, and activists had to bid for support in terms which would allay any fears of polarization. Neutralism had been the response of the bulk of the gentry in 1642, and defactoism its counterpart after 1649. And in 1688, whatever the discontents of the political nation, the vast majority of the aristocracy and gentry remained passive, and change was wrought by an outsider, William of Orange, ready to impose his will. The nation was equally slow to polarize in the reign of Charles II, despite the prospect of a Catholic succession, especially disturbing in the context of Louis XIV's repressions in France. In such an atmosphere, to avow positive goals that went beyond mere affirmations of the past could lead to disastrous isolation. The later seventeenth century provides several object lessons on the fate of writers who did probe into fundamentals, who were not content to remain in the complacent mainstream of adulation of the ancient constitution. Professor J.P. Kenyon has recently shown just how shunned and how uninfluential in their own time were those whom we regard as the great Whig writers, Locke and Sidney. Dryden could hardly have known of this, yet he must have known of the "hunting" of Leviathan, the execration to which Hobbes's work was subject for daring to indulge in radical political theorizing.⁷ The signs were clear, both in the world of practical politics and in the fate of Hobbes or the examples of the Whig pamphleteers; political persuasion had to be clothed in the unexceptionable garb of the ancient constitution. Partisans were obliged both to condemn innovation and to praise the balance of the true and ancient ways.

From these political conditions followed certain strictures on the language of public debate. Commitment to political balance was a standard aggressively asserted in the later seventeenth century, one that demanded near uniformity of political expression. Especially in times of crisis, when a political majority was needed to sanction acts which might raise the fear of civil war, both the court and its critics necessarily laid claim to the same moderate goals and pressed these claims in very similar language.⁸ In both the Exclusion Crisis and the Glorious Revolution radical action was con-

⁷J. P. Kenyon, "The Revolution of 1688: Resistance and Contract," in N. McKendrick, ed., *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society in Honour of J. H. Plumb* (London, 1974), pp. 43-69; S. I. Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan* (Cambridge, 1962).

⁸See Evans's sermon To the Lord Mayor and Alderman cited in the epigraph to this paper, *Moderation Stated* (London, 1682), p. 8.

cealed under the necessary rhetoric of political moderation. The inevitable consequence of such uniformity was a distrust of political language and a heightened sensitivity to covert partisanship, a sensitivity harder now to cultivate, but essential if we are to comprehend not only the face value of words, but also to recognize their role as camouflage. The disclosures of the Popish Plot in particular heightened a susceptibility constantly present during this century of plots and alarms to the use of conspiracy as historical explanation. The literature of the crisis is filled with claims of moderate politics and with charges and countercharges of conspiracy and dissimulation. It is a striking paradox that men at the same time proclaimed moderation and yet raised their voices in strident denunciation of all those they identified as enemies of moderation, men whom it was not so convenient to identify as enemies to private positions and interests. Dialogues, broadsides, letters from “gentlemen of quality” became instruments to reveal the true character of rebellion, of a Romish successor, of Tory, Whig, Jesuit, and fanatic.⁹ Tract after tract lay claim to the rubric “sober and impartial” only to engage in outrageously partisan tactics and smears.¹⁰ Even at the height of the pamphlet war over Exclusion, when the air was filled with charges of deceit, covertness, and masquerade, the claim to impartiality was never suspended. The distrust of other men’s motives, a psychology raised to national paranoia by the experience of the civil wars, became endemic.

Those who adhered to the king, to the divinity of monarchy and the sanctity of lineal descent, saw behind the Whig guise of claims to protect the nation from popery and arbitrary government—to defend religion, liberty, and property—the spectre of republican extremism. And on the other side, Exclusionists used the whole arsenal of scare tactics to whip up fear of a prospective Catholic king. Behind the Tory claims of loyalty and legitimacy lay the appalling reality of a Romish succession, of the expropriation of property, of Jesuit tortures, murder, rape, and destruction. In

⁹See, for example, *Philanax a Misopappas. The Tory Plot: Or, a farther Discovery of a Design to alter the constitution of the Government* (London, 1682); John Nelson, *The Complaint of Liberty and Property against Arbitrary Government* (London, 1681); *The Phanatick in his Colours: Being a Full and Final Character of a Whig; in a Dialogue between Tory and Tantivy* (London, 1681); Francis Gregory, *The Religious Villain* (London, 1679); *The Character of Rebellion* (London, 1681); *The Parallel: Or, the New Specious Association an Old Rebellious Covenant. Closing with a disparity between a true Patriot, and a factious Associator* (London, 1682); *The Character of a Disbanded Courtier. By a Person of Quality* (London, 1682); *A Protestant Plot No Paradox: Or, Phanaticks under that name Plotting against the King and Government* (London, 1682).

¹⁰See, for example, Fabian Phillips, *Ursa Major & Minor: Or a Sober and Impartial Enquiry Into those Pretended Fears and Jealousies of Popery and Arbitrary Power* (London, 1681); *An Impartial Account of the Nature and Tendency of the Late Addresses, in a Letter to a Gentleman in the Country* (London, 1681); *A Gentle reflection on the modest account, and a vindication of the loyal abhorrrers, from the calumnies of a factious pen* (London, 1682); *An Impartial Account of Richard Duke of York’s Treasons* (London, 1682).

the manner that Clarendon brought to such perfection in *The History of the Rebellion*, partisan writing became exegesis, a searching of the scripture of political tracts and actions for the concealed intentions and true meaning of the opposition. The logic and convenience of Dryden's pose as impartial historian and scripture exegete should now be obvious. Impartiality and clairvoyance, like moderation, were the calling cards of this debate.

Of course, not all claims of moderation were specious. The nearest to a truly moderate response to Exclusion was Halifax's advocacy of limitations on a future Catholic king and reconciliation with those who had supported Exclusion, a policy which Charles appeared to follow in the early months of the Crisis. But as the Crisis lengthened and deepened, the voice of true moderation grew fainter. Bloody cries were heard from the notoriously loyalist Cornish gentry that they would confirm in a "red" letter the words of their declarations of devotion.¹¹ While the vow was atypically explicit, the advice to unsheath the sword was not unusual in the later months of 1681. It is, furthermore, advice not incongruent with the recommendation of Dryden's poem. Dryden's studied impartiality and apparently moderate argument must be seen in this political setting. The very diversity of his audience, composed of unhappy moderates shading in both directions towards extremists with arms, explains why the poem's bold terminal recommendation can only emerge after the reasoned exposition of political alternatives in the midst of the crisis.

In delineating his audience, Dryden recognized that there were indeed committed Whigs and Tories, but claimed that they were few. The poem's reference to the need for the Plot to stampede men behind Shaftesbury's banner accurately reflects the lack of any widespread and deeply held antimonarchism; similarly, the difficulties Charles faced in dealing with a parliament of erstwhile Cavaliers in the 1670s, and the slowness of the evolution of a Tory party in the Crisis are the political realities suggested by the poem's "virtuous few." As Dryden stresses, the king had very few allies at the height of the Crisis; the tardy alignment of the bulk of the political nation suggested that they might be recoverable. Such reclamation is the aim of the poem as a whole. Despite the apparent dismissal of the partisan Whigs and Tories as an audience in the *Preface*, there is a message for them, and it is contained in David's concluding oration. That speech's emphasis on blood must have seemed a gratifying rallying cry to those high-flying Tories who were by late 1681 openly declaring their readiness to go to war in the name of the crown and succession; and on the other hand the speech served as a dire warning to the malcontent Whigs of their impending fate. But of course there is far more to the poem than David's speech.

The narrator's constitutional address, harping as it does on the inevitability of absolutism once the continuity of the immemorial constitution has been broken, is clearly pitched to those estranged from Charles by the

¹¹Feiling, *History of the Tory Party*, pp. 199-200.

spectre of absolutism they had seen in the king's domestic and foreign policies in the decade before the Crisis. On the one hand, a case is being argued to constitutionalist readers that stern and perhaps startling measures are imperative if the absolutism they had feared was to be averted.¹² On the other hand, in the handling of the Absalom and Archithophel legend, with its clear emphasis on questions of legitimacy, primogeniture, and title, Dryden addresses himself to fallen but redeemable Whigs. These may be shown that legitimacy, because of its implications for property and the laws (doubly sacred because God-given to an England identified as Old Testament Israel) as well as the crown, is infinitely more important than the personal characteristics of the king, whether they be the sexual proclivities of David or the significantly undefined propensities of his brother. Moreover, the very conflation of England and Israel plays to a Protestant certainty of national election and thus serves to preempt the contention that the accession of James spells the death of Protestantism. James is as much a part of Israel as are the self-proclaimed Protestant guardians of true religion; furthermore the English Catholics, so carefully identified as mere Jebusites, are not Egyptian slaves. The detailed portrait of these Jebusites, Dryden's careful separation of native from Egyptian rites, the vulgar jibing at French Roman Catholic tastes, like the insistent claim that native Catholics are submissive and powerless, all contrive to combat the Exclusionist charge that a French invasion is imminent and will find the welcome and support of a native Catholic fifth column. But Dryden's subject here is not only Jebusite impotence. He must also take on the knowledge of Charles's alliance to Louis XIV and the telling and accurate rumors of French sympathizers at court, disastrously confirmed by the disclosure that James's secretary Coleman had been in treasonous correspondence with France. His only resort in this case is a desperate joking at the gullibility of a nation more fit for conversion than conquest, a joking that belittles the Catholic threat by exposing the folly of all converts, even their chief. How else are we to understand the peculiar coupling of "court and stews" (126-28)?

Although Dryden is appealing to disparate groups, the poem is not constructed as a series of clearly defined addresses to easily identifiable segments of its audience; its mode of address is of course both more complex and covert. The narrator is one of the instruments of this approach, for he adopts a stance which is variously ingenuous, disinterested, and evenhanded. This rhetorical complexity is set in a structure which reveals the poem's bold endorsement of a Tory solution only after the studied and apparently impartial weighing and discarding of alternatives. Dryden's *Preface to Absalom and Achitophel* serves as an example of this rhetorical mode and as a model for the poem as a whole, moving as it does from an elaborate show of moderation and impartiality

¹²R. Willman, "The Origins of 'Whig' and 'Tory' in English Political Language," *Historical Journal* 17 (1974), 263-64.

to an advocacy of the block. What Dryden stresses at the opening of the *Preface* are his aims as poet rather than as party instrument: honesty of design and the sweetness of good verse. His stance is the independence of satire: to laugh at folly, commend virtue, and tax crime without prejudice. Steering the middle course, aiming disinterestedly at the amendment of vice, he is physician to the patient, historian and not inventor, moderate poised between the violent of both sides. The strategy is both elaborate and subtle, and nowhere more so than in the poet's engagingly open acknowledgement of vulnerability. Dryden aims to capture the moderates of both parties by making allowance for their reluctance to proceed to extremes: satire is abated, and at the same time commendation is balanced by the taxing of crimes. Dryden is aware that such attempts at moderation may be specious devices, as in the case of his calumniators, those Commonwealthsmen who cry "King and Country." But there is an implicit distinction between such wholesale fraudulence and the narrator's acknowledged softening of divisive truths. He claims the middle ground not, as opponents might suggest, to cover vindictive aims; he rebates the satire not as a ploy but as a genuine effort to gain the support of the moderate sort, the honest party, with the ultimate intention of healing the body politic. But the strategy is a double bluff: covering vindictiveness with moderation while at the same time disarming the attack by confessing vulnerability to it.

His hand is shown in the final paragraph. The true end of satire is the exposure and correction of folly through laughter; the aim of this poet is to urge the king to the work of an "*ense rescindendum*," to excise a faction from the body politic. Dryden observes that in a case of serious illness amputation can only be avoided by the prescription of harsh remedies rather than opiates. He then deploys a variant of the traditional analogy between the natural body and the body politic. In conventional body politic imagery the king is the head, and thus a part of the body. Here, in the implied analogy with the surgeon (l. 60), he stands outside the nation ministering to its needs; the tactic here, as throughout the poem, is subtly but thoroughly to distance the king from the illness and corruption of the nation. The satirist as physician (ll. 58-59) averts amputation by prescribing harsh measures, not opiates, in a fever. Nevertheless an opiate had been given to the body politic in 1660 in the form of an Act of Oblivion (l. 63). Now the fever rages; poets must turn satirists and the surgeon's knife—the king's sword of justice—becomes a necessity. The harsh remedy (l. 59) that this poem prescribes is the block for Whig leaders; only such action could avert the wholesale proscription then being advocated by some of the king's more vengeful supporters, a proscription ominously paralleled by Louis XIV's persecution of Calvinist dissenters in France. The narrator's protestation that he would not urge the knife even for his enemies ought to be put in the same category as his equally pious hope that the Devil will be saved. A detailed consideration of the poem's political argument reveals the hardness of the line the narrator first draws in the *Preface*.

The poem itself begins with a witty and daring portrait of the king in sexual excess, which, together with the praise of Achitophel as judge,¹³ is often taken as the supreme instance of the poet's evenhandedness. Dryden admits the king's sexual indulgence, but answers the criticism by asserting that in David sexual excess is evidence of God's creative bounty. In so doing, he averts the moralist charge that the king's indulgence in private pleasures has been the source of the constitutional crisis. Further, by dwelling on a peccadillo, on sexual excess as prime example of the king's indulgence, and conveniently ignoring other, more serious charges—financial extravagance and the political implications of a Catholic successor—Dryden can deftly argue that the failure to beget a legitimate heir and thus, ultimately, the political crisis, is a result of Michal's ingratitude rather than David's tillage (12). The isolation of political error as sexual excess allows Dryden to address the king's critics on the one issue he can most conveniently refute. The critique of the king's behavior usually discovered in these lines is hardly evidence of evenhandedness; it is in fact rhetorical bluff, for Dryden criticizes here only what he can excuse. While raising the issue of sexual excess and answering the charge in his own terms. Dryden introduces his real theme: ingratitude.

Michal's ingratitude implies the political argument of the poem as a whole. David the man is characterized by indulgence, a failing (if it is such) after God's own heart (7). David the king is also indulgent, and the endeavors of both man and king are met with ingratitude. In the bed-chamber ingratitude is infertility and perhaps even frigidity; in the state it is godless rebellion. And ingratitude forms the subject of Dryden's lengthy portrait of the Jews, a portrait which begins with epithets, with insults and sneers (45-7). But the argument that ingratitude not only names the Jews but reveals their political and theological characteristics is conducted not simply as slander. Ingratitude is a history that begins with the Fall, marks the nation in desert exile, and concludes in this passage with the inconstancy of Israel under both Ishbosheth and David, protectorate and kingdom (57-60). As impartial rhetorician, Dryden defines ingratitude not as a party issue but as the permanent and lamentable condition of graceless man. Despite this disclaimer, Dryden's stress on political ingratitude can only be aimed in one direction. Shortly before the poem was written, the extremely influential Tory propagandist Roger L'Estrange had provided the original and seminal definition of a Whig: a man who "must never Remember Benefits."¹⁴

Ingratitude is common not just to the governed, the collective nation, but also to the best, for men like Shaftesbury, Holles, and Delamere, elevated

¹³H. T. Swedenberg argues the interesting point that the praise of Achitophel as judge might well have been taken ironically by Dryden's seventeenth-century reader, *The Works of John Dryden*, vol. 2, ed. H. T. Swedenberg, Jr. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1972), pp. 250-51.

¹⁴Willman, "Origins of 'Whig' and 'Tory,'" p. 262.

and given place by Charles at the Restoration, showed themselves incapable of gratitude:

Some by their Monarch's fatal mercy grown,
From Pardon'd Rebels, Kinsmen to the Throne;
Were rais'd in Power and publick office high:
Strong Bands, if Bands ungratefull men could tye. (146-9)

Moreover, defined as niggardliness, meanness, and closeness, the term ingratitude covers a whole range of disloyal political behavior (587-9, 591-2, 596, 599, 613-22). The strong and suggestive undertow of greed links Achitophel with the lowest of the rebels; and against their parsimony stands the generosity of allies.¹⁵ Barzillai, Zadock, and Hushai are not only bound by loyalty but linked through generosity (826, 867, 892-3). The counterpointing of rebel and ally is particularly marked in the cases of Zimri and Barzillai where Zimri's indiscriminate squandering is contrasted with Barzillai's judicious use of wealth; the contrast begins as verbal echo:

In squandring Wealth was his peculiar Art:
Nothing went unrewarded, but Desert. (599-60)

The Court he practis'd, not the Courtier's art:
Large was his Wealth, but larger was his Heart:
Which, well the Noblest Objects knew to choose (825-7)

But the juxtaposition serves ends larger than personal praise and blame, for it was on the proper distribution and reception of favors, the correct exercise of patronage, that the health of the early-modern body politic depended. Greed and ambition are thus political traits linked with rebellion; all are subsumed in the common theme of ingratitude. And the particular genius of Dryden's large metaphor—England as Israel—is to allow the suggestion, by recording English political ingratitude as Israelite murmuring, that the execution of Charles I recapitulates the supreme ingratitude of Jewish deicide, and to imply that Charles II's generosity to the nation—conveniently not itemized—expresses God's munificence. The conflation of God's bounty and the king's largesse is

¹⁵It is interesting and ironic that the men whom Dryden singles out as not only Charles's staunchest allies but also as ideal patrons should all have, at one point or another in Dryden's career, acted as the poet's patrons. Further, it may be more than coincidental that Amiel, Edward Seymour, who was reported to have commissioned the writing of this call for stern measures (*HMC Ormonde*, new series, vol. VI, 233), should, it is now thought, have been the mastermind of the Court's repressive policy in the aftermath of the Oxford Parliament; J. P. Kenyon, *Stuart England* (London, 1978), p. 222. While Dryden clearly could not have known this in 1681, the link nevertheless raises the interesting question of how closely the poem expresses Court policy.

argued at length and variously in the poem, but its political point in the portrait of the Jews is identical to the blaming of Michal: the king is sinless. The charges laid against the nation and the majority of its leaders recover and give particular point to the seemingly innocuous aside in the opening description of Absalom, "In him alone, 'twas Natural to please." (28).

The political consequence of Jewish ingratitude is recurrent upheaval. Rebellion threatens when the king persists in extending fatherly love to a graceless nation that recognizes only Achitophel's law of self-preservation (458). But the criticism of the king's mildness as political impotence, often construed as the narrator's opinion,¹⁶ is in fact voiced not by the narrator but by Achitophel as he attempts the first corruption of Absalom. Here alone mildness is causally linked with rebellion. David as a weak and friendless figure inviting coercion—indeed, in terms of Achitophel's final analogy (471-4), covertly demanding it—is a case in which credibility is obviously strained by the identity and persuasive intent of the proponent. Yet Achitophel like all clever rhetoricians bases his pleas upon a semblance of reality; and it is a reality that David himself wearily acknowledges in his review of "native mercy":

But now so far my Clemency they slight,
Th'Offenders question my Forgiving Right.
They call my tenderness of Blood, my Fear:
Though Manly tempers can the longest bear. (943-4, 947-8)

At the end of the poem, David regretfully allows that the nation has understood mildness not as generosity and political sagacity, but as weakness and indecision. Mildness can, however, be interpreted in other ways. For the narrator, judicious mildness had managed to keep a semblance of peace in an unruly state (77-78). And Absalom eloquently rehearses the extent and implications of David's mildness and generosity in the speech that begins, "And what Pretence have I / To take up Arms for Publick Liberty." Absalom details at length the king's unstinting generosity and the signs of mercy and mildness that have characterized his father's reign (317-30):

His Favour leaves me nothing to require;
Prevents my Wishes, and outruns Desire. (343-4)

Such mildness and generosity ought to entail gratitude, and this the son realizes:

Why then should I, Encouraging the Bad,
Turn Rebell, and run Popularly Mad?
Were he a Tyrant who, by Lawless Might,

¹⁶See, for example, Frost, *Selected Works of John Dryden*, p. 12.

Oprest the *Jews*, and Rais'd the *Jebusite*,
 Well might I Mourn; but Natures Holy Bands
 Would Curb my Spirits, and Restrain my Hands. (335-40)

The image of hands restrained from rebellion by gratitude and obligation looks ominously forward to the figure of Esau the hunter in David's final speech (982). The king realizes that such hands, unbound by gratitude, can only be restrained through fear.

It is in the latter context, politics in a sinful nation, that we must understand David's reluctant turn from mercy to rigorous justice and the poem's eventual sweeping recommendation of the sword. Both David and the narrator come to an acceptance of this necessary and bloody conclusion only after the poem's lengthy review of the meaning and extent of David's mercy. As in the *Preface*, the rhetorical strategy of the poem as a whole is progressive revelation: a lengthy review of the narrator's impartiality, the nation's repeated ingratitude, the king's fatherly indulgence, the debate over the meaning of mercy, and the final unsheathing of the sword. The image of the surgeon's knife anticipates the sword of justice shedding plotters' blood. The delay in unsheathing the sword is not to be understood as a sign of weakness or indecision, indeed it is the delay itself that reveals the true nature of David's kingship (940-50, 1002-5). Acting the merciful father to Israel is eventually understood to be inappropriate in a fallen world, but such conduct, the poem stresses, is God's beloved attribute. Once again the criticism falls clear of David.

The ill-advisedness of mercy as political behavior is most pointedly seen in the poem's handling of Oblivion. Oblivion is an issue that specifically identifies David's general mercy with a major policy of Charles II, and in so doing firmly reveals Dryden's political bias. The attack on Oblivion as a political course, conducted through allusion and word play, begins in the *Preface* with the unflattering comparison between acts of oblivion and opiates administered in raging fevers. An Act of Oblivion grants pardon to all except those individuals named in the Act. Dryden's condemnation of Oblivion looks both forward and back; when desperate Whigs are now pleading for indemnity¹⁷ it becomes prescription for Charles's actions toward the likes of Nadab and Corah, who, by being named, are thereby excluded from the safety of anonymity:

And Canting *Nadab* let Oblivion damn, (575)
 Yet, *Corah*, thou shalt from Oblivion pass. (633)

More startlingly, Dryden criticizes the near universal forgiveness granted in the Act of Oblivion in 1660. The scope of this criticism is evidenced by

¹⁷R. Jones, *The First Whigs* (London, 1961), p. 196.

the suggestion of incredulity recorded in Absalom's lines, "What Millions has he Pardon'd of his Foes, / Whom Just Revenge did to his Wrath expose" (323-4). The effects of Oblivion are obvious in the bitter reflections on those pardoned rebels who battered on the monarch's "fatal mercy," and turned rebel anew (146-9). The conflation of king and Christ suggested in the phrase "fatal mercy" is part of the larger figure of David as image of the godhead (792). In terms of the poem's insistent identification of David's indulgence with God's bounty and Christ's mercy, the account of David's kingship is as little a criticism of indulgence as it would be of Christ's fatal mercy. That Christ's mercy was impolitic is no sharper an observation than the poem's discovery that indulgence is inappropriate in fallen Israel. The political conclusion that mildness ill suits the stubborn, and can provide no hope of balance and stability, is clear.

David's speech reveals his final appreciation that stability and balance can only be secured through fear, a conclusion that had been foreshadowed in the narrator's ominous couplet, "Thus, in pageant-show, a Plot is made; / And Peace itself is War in Masquerade" (751-52). The Whigs belied their protestations of loyalty by the daring show of arms and retinues at the Oxford Parliament, but when men appeared in arms they altered the rules of the legal game. If the Whigs wanted war, then the king too had a sword. There are two separate audiences to whom that message is delivered in the king's closing speech: the fallen, to whom the king speaks in the only language that they will understand; and those zealous Tories, finally gratified by his promise of the blood-letting which they, unlike the narrator, have eagerly urged. For the former, the language should induce not just fear, the natural response of those who believe that self-preservation is nature's eldest law, but also and more importantly a sense of sin. There is an apparent paradox in writing a poem ostensibly aimed at reasoned persuasion and pitching that poem to a nation blackened as endemically corrupt. Perhaps Dryden's awareness of this dilemma helps to explain the repeated emphasis laid on near-universal sin, a tactic that neatly exploits the Calvinist convictions of the king's Dissenter opponents. For it was the central tenet of Protestant casuistry that regeneration could begin only after the individual acknowledged the extent of his own corruption. Both the scriptural metaphor and the rhetoric of moderation provided Dryden with a language which might allow a Tory case to be heard and understood by the fallen nation; only thus could "willing nations know their lawful lord."

That David draws the sword of justice as the last resort is hardly a novel observation. What needs to be remarked is the play of contradictory elements in this scene: the abruptness and harshness of David's language, the steady elevation and indeed mystification of the king, the sentiments of high-minded regretfulness, the not so thinly veiled threats of judicial murder, and finally the relish with which David contemplates and Dryden rehearses the blood-letting as witness turns against witness. From lines 1000 and following, David reveals the power of the law:

Must I at length the Sword of Justice draw?
 Oh curst Effects of necessary Law!
 How ill my Fear they by my Mercy scan,
 Beware the Fury of a Patient Man.
 They could not be content to look on Grace,
 Her hinder parts, but with a daring Eye
 To tempt the terror of her Front, and Dye. (1002-8)

The language manages neatly to combine threat and elevation. While the sword is drawn, the hand wielding that sword emerges emblematically from the heavens, heavens of a distinctly Old Testament character. Furthermore, there is an interesting and strategic gap between Dryden's presentation of David as divine justicer, and the actual bloodletting. At line 1010, as Dryden turns the figure from scriptural analogue to contemporary politics, the deaths imagined issue not from the sword of justice but from the self-inflicted wounds of deceit, betrayal, and rage. This suggestive narrative gap enables the king to hold erect the sword of justice, yet to have the blame for blood fall clear of his hand. As so often in the poem, Dryden's strategy is to acknowledge harsh realities while by sleight of hand completely to distance the king from blame. The "*ense rescindendum*" of the *Preface* finally comes clear in the vivid imagery of this passage, whose bloody particulars seem to argue vindictiveness rather than moderation and even-handedness.

By their own arts 'tis Righteously decreed,
 Those dire Artificers of Death shall bleed.
 Against themselves their Witnesses will Swear,
 Till Viper-like their Mother Plot they tear:
 And suck for Nutriment that bloody gore
 Which was their Principle of Life before. (1010-15).

In this context, the tone of regret with which the narrator contemplates the absence of stern measures in 1660 is especially striking.

Indeed that tone of regret is the key to Dryden's political position at this juncture. It was tactically impossible to proclaim a reactionary creed while writing for an audience which passionately believed in stability. Yet the phrases David uses in his final speech ("A King's at least a part of Government . . . What then is left but with a Jealous Eye/To guard the Small remains of Royalty?") indicate a commitment to an undiminished monarchy, a commitment that can be seen in the repeated and almost Jacobean stress on the divinity of kingship. What then of the narrator's central assertion of the necessity of balanced government, an assertion often understood as a statement of Dryden's political convictions?

There is, as we have seen, a critical problem in assuming that any one passage isolated from the thrust of the whole of the poem serves explicitly to voice Dryden's real beliefs. We ought to be open to the possibility that the persona of the narrator may be as much a fiction and as deliberately so

as any other character in the poem; it violates the rhetorical integrity of the poem to understand one speech verbatim as an expression of Dryden's real beliefs. Those can only be appreciated through a reading of the poem as a whole. The high degree to which the narrator functions as covert as well as overt spokesman is surely obvious in the *Preface*, and we ought to be similarly alert to rhetorical motives in the narrator's lengthy constitutional address. The overt rhetorical function of this avowedly traditionalist speech is to preface David's decisive intervention, and by so doing to define his course as moderation. But the speech is more complex in its purpose than mere definition; its covert function is to put in polar opposition the preservation of the status quo and the Exclusionist cause with its inevitably absolutist consequences. By so doing it rules out any course other than commitment to the king. The studied and reasoned review of constitutional alternatives espouses moderation and paradoxically denies the possibility of treading a middle course.

While we can allow as sincere Dryden's hostility to innovation and his acceptance of the balance which the narrator lauds, it does seem clear that he was convinced such balance could not be achieved by allowing the good intentions of moderate men free rein, an assumption implicit in the current notion that *Absalom and Achitophel* is an intellectual persuasion to moderation and as such will heal the nation. The poem's insistence on near-universal corruption and the narrator's acknowledgment that David's mildness can bring but temporary relief (77-80) cast doubt from the first on the narrator's moderation as political prescription and on the efficacy of intellectual persuasion as political remedy. The poem's conclusion is that a government of balance can only be achieved by the most rigorous policing. The predominant political motives ascribed to most men in this poem are not natural obligation and gratitude but self-interest and self-preservation. If balance is to be preserved, then the free actions of such men are inadequate to that task; the politics of consensus in a fallen nation can only lead to recurrent crisis.

The events of the years after 1681 showed what an exact sense of politics Dryden possessed. The rhetoric may seem backward-looking and the recommendations have come to seem reactionary in light of a Whiggishness almost universal since the acceptance of Locke after 1700, but neither the language nor the politics were anachronistic. The typology of kingship enjoyed a surprising vogue well into the last decades of the century. Not only had the Restoration itself been welcomed in unabashedly christic and prophetic schemes, but such schemes were again deployed in the propaganda efforts mounted by the court in 1666, and in tracts and sermons condemning Exclusion in the 1680s. Moreover, the Tory resurgence late in the 1690s was accompanied by a remarkable revival of interest in the *Eikon Basilike* and obvious attention to such doctrines as divine right, passive obedience, and hereditary succession.¹⁸ That quintessential

¹⁸See J. P. Kenyon, *Revolution Principles* (Cambridge, 1977), ch. 5.

Anglican Tory John Evelyn contemplated James II as a new Herod, and Tillotson privately hailed the unlikely William and Mary as "two angels in human shape sent down to pluck a whole nation out of Sodom."¹⁹ Dryden's practical politics were equally congruent with contemporary *realpolitik*; his plea for a refurbishment of monarchy was echoed by the response of a purged, now Tory, political nation to Charles's reassertion of authority. An important segment of the political nation rallied eagerly to the monarchy when Charles bid for augmented power; corporations enthusiastically surrendered their borough charters in the early 1680s; and James II's first parliament made a generous grant of supply. Recent historical scholarship has indicated not only the real potential for a restored Stuart absolutism in the 1680s, but also its parallels to widespread and fashionable European development.²⁰

Identifying Dryden's political commitment and demonstrating the significance of specific political issues like Oblivion serves to point a distinction between the rhetoric of moderation which recurs as a political language in *Absalom and Achitophel* and the political meaning of the poem. Such a reading aims not to disengage political particulars from mythic and figural schemes but to demonstrate the integral relation between the political and mythic levels of argument in the poem.²¹ The irrefutably absolute moral and political implications of II Samuel cannot be realized in a reading of the poem as reasoned moderation. If the politics of this poem are moderate, the point of view balanced, if the poet is a disinterested critic of extremes, then the thrust of Scripture in *Absalom and Achitophel* is hard to perceive.²² We are left with the paradox of metaphors that imply the case for anointed absolutism and a rhetoric that proclaims balance and moderation. What, we might wonder, are the practical political implications of the choice of a scriptural fable whose figural meaning is to type

¹⁹Quoted by M. C. Jacob, "Millenarianism and Science in the Late Seventeenth Century," *J. H. I.* 37 (1976): 339-740.

²⁰J. R. Jones, *The Revolution of 1688 in England* (London, 1972); J. R. Western, *Monarchy and Revolution* (London, 1972).

²¹On the significance of scriptural figuralism in *Absalom and Achitophel* see Zwicker, *Dryden's Political Poetry* (Providence, 1972), pp. 83-101.

²²It has been argued by J. M. Wallace, ("'Examples are Best Precepts': Readers and Meanings in Seventeenth-Century Poetry," *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1974): 273-91;

rebellion as primal disobedience and the king as Christ-like healer and God-like lawgiver? This poem emerges not from moderate truisms but from vigorously held partisan positions and reactionary politics whose advocacy demanded care. In Dryden's hands that advocacy became a statement of rhetorical subtlety and metaphoric complexity singular among political poems.

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cf. McKeon, *Poetry and Politics*, 186-8) that seventeenth-century readers could exercise their discretion in choosing to draw parallels between historical examples and the contemporary world. Wallace's reading of *Absalom and Achitophel* requires that in writing about politics in scriptural terms Dryden would have been content to have the metaphor open-ended; this argument also implies that the reader need not have made the contemporary application. But, in fact, the scriptural materials are so shaped, at times so warped, that the application is inescapable, particularly in view of the widespread contemporary identification of Shaftesbury as Achitophel and of Charles II as David. These identifications were immediately asserted and extended in the keys that were eagerly compiled for the poem: see Macdonald, *John Dryden: a Bibliography of Early Editions*.