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Review of Steven N. Zwicker, ed., *John Dryden: Selected Writings*

Ryan Hackenbracht, Texas Tech University, US ryan.hackenbracht@ttu.edu

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Steven N. Zwicker, ed., *John Dryden: Selected Writings*. 21st-Century Oxford Authors. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 881; Hardback \$145.00 (£110).

This edition of Dryden's selected works, edited by a distinguished Dryden scholar, appears in the 21st-Century Oxford Authors series edited by Seamus Perry. *John Dryden: Selected Writings* is an indispensable tool and a must-have text for any university library and for scholars and students of Renaissance literature, the Restoration court, satire, and the English stage. Steven Zwicker has done an admirable job of pulling together a combination of popular and less common texts by Dryden, and readers will benefit from Zwicker's scrupulous attention to detail on every page.

Emphasizing Dryden's status as an early modern celebrity, the introduction draws attention to the man's polymathic abilities and situates his literary accomplishments within a historical moment rocked by religious and political change. "Two paradoxes," Zwicker asserts, govern the interpretation of the author and his works, and the first is that "Dryden was visible in many ways, but not very knowable" (xx). Like Ben Jonson before him, Dryden had a keen sense of his image in English society and a desire to control that image. Also like Jonson, he had a thin skin for criticism (Zwicker recounts Dryden's complaint, "More Libels have been written against me, than almost any Man now living" [xix]). The second paradox, notes Zwicker, is "how close [Dryden] came, how close he allowed himself to approach, almost to admire, qualities and conditions that he abused in others and for which in his own turn he was abused" (xx). Dryden, then, was quite a complicated artist, whose awareness of his many successes was tempered by the gnawing knowledge that detractors had—however unjustly—found fault with his work or his person.

Reading Dryden through Restoration contexts, the introduction gives a brisk overview of the author's life and times. This is followed, at the end, by a chronology of major events in Dryden's life and in English history. The introduction discusses Dryden's early career ("Starting out"); interactions with the Caroline court ("Politics"); defenses of Anglicanism and later conversion to Roman Catholicism ("Religions"); the raciness of his political satires and polemics ("Steering too near the sands"); artistic and entrepreneurial collaborations with John Wilmot and Jacob Tonson ("Collaborating"); status as England's poet laureate, alongside the greats of earlier generations, Shakespeare and Milton ("Among his literary peers"); his reception among Restoration readers ("Among readers"); and Dryden at the end of life ("Last words"). Beautifully reproduced images of title pages—Dryden's *Three Poems* (1682) and *The Reasons of Mr. Bays Changing his Religion* (1688)—draw the eye, along with

a contemporary reader's cheat sheet of who's who in *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681). Zwicker rightly emphasizes Dryden's concern not only for intervening in the politico-religious issues of the day, but for how posterity would interpret such interventions. "He had an eye on readers beyond his own time," Zwicker reminds us, "beyond those catching his drift in particular and contemporary ways" (xxxvii). Immensely helpful, especially for newcomers to Dryden, the introduction offers a pointed yet expansive account of Dryden's world and the artistic proclivities and preoccupations of this intriguing man who wrote, not just for his age, but for all the ages to come.

One advantage this edition of Dryden's works has over competitors is the extensive amount of poetic and epistolary material it contains. Certainly, important prose and dramatic works such as *Marriage A-la-Mode*, *All for Love*, and *Religio Laici* all make an appearance, but where the volume really shines is in its impressive collection of poems and letters—some major, some not, but all quite interesting and useful. What Zwicker has created, in other words, is an edition of great value to scholars working on any aspect of Dryden's works, but which is particularly expedient for those focusing on poetry. *Astræa Redux*, *Annus Mirabilis*, *Mac Flecknoe*, *Absalom and Achitophel*, the *Hind and the Panther*, and excerpts from Dryden's translations of Virgil are all included, as one would expect them to be, but the welcome treat of Zwicker's edition is the abundance of "minor" poems also included—"To the Memory of Mr. Oldham," excerpts from Dryden's translations of Lucretius, "An Ode, on the Death of Mr. Henry Purcell," "To Sir Godfrey Kneller," "Alexander's Feast," and "Lines on Tonson," to name a few. Coupled with a healthy smattering of Dryden's letters to friends and acquaintances—Tonson, Wilmot, Walsh, Dennis, Steward, the duchess of Ormond, and others—this edition offers scholars and students an exciting glimpse into the mental machinery behind some of Dryden's wonderful literary creations.

Dryden's text is itself superbly represented. Zwicker's scholarship in this regard is impeccable, almost inimitable. Original spelling has been retained, and most of Dryden's letters have been reproduced from holographs. Zwicker's painstaking attention to detail is evident everywhere: comparing page 89 of this edition, for instance, against the original text of Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1668, sigs. D2^v–D3^v, ESTC R233) nouns such as "Wickedness," "Piety," and "Virtue" are all capitalized, as in the original; verbs such as "fail'd," "err'd," and "ravish'd" are faithfully reproduced with elision; "Æschylus" and "Phædria" retain both the ash and their italicization; and quoted lines from Horace use the italic ampersand of Dryden's text, instead of the Latin "et" this ligature signifies. The result of such editorial decisions is that readers

are presented with a truly authentic version of Dryden's works that retains all the grammatical and syntactical nuances of the original.

Zwicker's scholia at the back of the book (685–862) is a delight to read, packed as it is with a wealth of historical and literary knowledge intended to guide interpretation. This apparatus is an invaluable tool that any student of Dryden—young or old, green or seasoned—will greatly enjoy. The commentary (712–3) on Dryden's letter to John Wilmot, earl of Rochester (dated April–May 1673), begins by laying out the crucial contextual background: "in the likely sequence of texts and events," Zwicker explains, Dryden had sent Rochester the manuscript of *Marriage A-la-Mode* sometime during or before the summer of 1671; Rochester liked the play so much he passed it along to King Charles II, and the King's Company performed it "sometime toward the end of November 1671" (712). Dryden later praised the earl in his dedication to the play and sent Rochester a manuscript copy, to which Rochester "responded to Dryden, flatteringly, in a letter now lost" (712). What we have here, in the current OUP edition, is Dryden's response to that lost letter. Yet Zwicker goes further, not simply leaving the reader to connect the dots, but instead laying out the significance of Dryden's letter, which is "an example of Dryden's ability to manoeuvre in the complex terrain of Restoration literary and social culture [...] [the letter is] a wonderful performance of politesse, wrapping his pleasure and embarrassment over Rochester's attention in syntax that curls over itself with self-consciousness" (712). Zwicker's commentary and notes are riddled with hermeneutic gems such as this and—ever mindful of readers' needs—the edition concludes with a helpful biographical appendix of major figures in Restoration history, as well as an index of titles of Dryden's many works.

In conclusion, *John Dryden: Selected Writings* is a masterful assemblage of major and minor works by an established Dryden scholar. It should be in the library of every North American and European university, not to mention the personal libraries of Dryden scholars and Restoration historians. Zwicker's fidelity to Dryden's text, no less his illuminating insight into the poet's life and works, will ensure the edition's usefulness for decades to come.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

