

# LITERATURE AND DISSENT IN MILTON'S ENGLAND

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## Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xi
1 Reading Dissent	I
2 Memory	23
3 Prison	59
4 Violence	84
5 Milton	115
6 Enthusiasm	154
7 Poetics	182
8 Hymn	210
<i>Coda: enlightenment</i>	243
<i>Appendix: Milton's burial place</i>	256
<i>Notes</i>	258
<i>Index</i>	298

## Illustrations

1	Title page to David Lloyd, <i>Cabala: Or, The Mystery of Conventicles Unvail'd</i> (1664). By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library	page 13
2	Frontispiece to Benjamin Keach, <i>War with the Devil</i> (1683). Library of Congress	20
3	Frontispiece to Edmund Calamy, <i>The Farewell Sermons of the late London Ministers</i> (1662). By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library	39
4	Title page to Richard Baxter, <i>Christian Directory</i> (1677). By permission of the Huntington Library	92
5	Frontispiece to Richard Baxter, <i>Paraphrase to the New Testament</i> (1695). By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library	95
6	John Bunyan, <i>The Pilgrim's Progress... Second Part</i> (1684), p. 182. Library of Congress	105
7	Title page of John Milton, <i>Paradise Regain'd</i> (1671). By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library	132
8	"The Omissa," John Milton, <i>Paradise Regain'd</i> (1671). By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library	151
9	Frontispiece to Benjamin Keach, <i>The Glorious Lover</i> (1679). By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library	197
10	Frontispiece to Samuel Crossman, <i>The Young Man's Calling</i> (1725). By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library	222
11	Frontispiece and title page to John Bunyan, <i>The Pilgrim's Progress... Second Part</i> (1684). Library of Congress	224

## CHAPTER I

### *Reading Dissent*

Consider the career of Edmund Calamy. A leader of the Presbyterian ministry during the English Revolution, co-author of the anti-episcopal tract, *Smectymnuus*, parliamentary preacher, licenser of the Cromwellian press and called by Anthony à Wood, “a great evangelist of the new way, [who] encouraged the people to rebellion,” he had been indicted by Charles I for high treason in 1642.<sup>1</sup> A reluctant Cromwellian, Calamy vigorously opposed Pride’s Purge and the trial of the king, and he offered his services to the martyr king on the day of his execution. In the 1650s, still licenser of the press, and now President of Sion College, Calamy urged Oliver Cromwell not to accept the crown. After the death of the Protector, he threw his lot in with his son Richard, but with the suspension of Parliament in 1659, turned to George Monck, whose actions helped to bring about the Stuart Restoration, and whose chaplain Calamy became in 1660. Present at negotiations to bring back the king in a delegation to Charles in Holland in May of that year, Calamy was appointed one of the returning king’s chaplains-in-ordinary at the Restoration.

By August 1662, however, Calamy was preaching his farewell sermon at St. Mary Aldermanbury, the congregation he had served since 1639, and by January 1663 he was in prison. Calamy was the first nonconformist to be subject to the penalty of the Act of Uniformity, committed to Newgate under the Lord Mayor’s warrant on 6 January 1663 for having preached illegally on 29 December. To many he was a saint testing the government’s strength of commitment to Uniformity and the king’s resolve; to Clarendon he was seditious. Outside Newgate prison, the street was blocked by the coaches of his visitors, and he was apparently visited by one of the king’s mistresses. A cause célèbre for tolerationists, as Richard Baxter reported, “many daily flocking to visit him,” Calamy attracted contemporary public comment in the press, with the proceedings of the trial recounted in a pamphlet.<sup>2</sup> There was a printed rebuttal by an Anglican minister who accused Calamy and others of conspiring to “inflare and engage the people

unto rebellion.”<sup>3</sup> Much comment and poetry appeared as a result of the affair.<sup>4</sup> Calamy’s preaching was taken as part of a broad conspiracy of non-conformists to topple the government.<sup>5</sup> An anonymous satire was published under the name *Hudibras*, the title of Samuel Butler’s enormously successful mock-heroic poem caricaturing Presbyterians and sectaries. The would-be *Hudibras* complained that “’Tis He who taught the *Pulpit* and the *Press* To mask *Rebellion* in a *Gospel-dress*.”<sup>6</sup> A competing poem praising Calamy was written by the Presbyterian Robert Wild, perhaps the most widely read topical Dissenting poet, his works repeatedly attracting satirical response and also surviving in commonplace books of verse miscellanies of the period.<sup>7</sup> Wryly noting that the figure of the unjustly incarcerated was now a cliché, still Wild had sympathy for the victim:

*Newgate* or *Hell* were *Heav'n*, if Christ were there,  
He made the *Stable* so, and *Sepulcher*.  
Indeed the place did for your presence call;  
Prisons do want perfuming most of all.  
Thanks to the *Bishop*, and his good *Lord Mayor*,  
Who turn'd the *Den of Thieves* into a *House of Prayer*:  
And may some *Thief* by you converted be,  
Like him who suffer'd in *Christs company*.<sup>8</sup>

On Calamy’s behalf, Baxter interceded with the king to obtain a release, which was granted on 13 January 1663 on the grounds that Calamy had preached “with the privity of several lords of the Council, and not in contempt of law.”<sup>9</sup> The news journal *Mercurius Publicus* was outraged “to see so high an affront” to king and Parliament offered such clemency. The Commons on 19 February referred it to a committee to inquire further, and addressed the king against toleration.<sup>10</sup> The new Surveyor of the Press, Sir Roger L’Estrange, castigated Calamy’s sermon as highly objectionable.<sup>11</sup> In October 1663, however, there was a neighborhood movement to reinstate Calamy to the pulpit at Aldermanbury, “the good people thire very much desiring him.”<sup>12</sup> Calamy never regained an official ministerial post, though he preached every Sunday evening from his house. He was buried in the fire ruins of his beloved St. Mary Aldermanbury in 1666.

Whether he was considered a dangerous rebel or a sober Protestant martyr, the Restoration Dissenter was caught between two opposing representations. Yet Calamy’s case shows the complexity of reducing religious positions to political factions. Royalist yet willing to test his king, Calamy remained true to his convictions regarding church ceremony in times when differing political leaders made varying political demands; he was willing

to go to gaol for his beliefs. Writers took up Calamy's case as a means to discuss the nature and scope of community; through him they represented powerful conflicts within the polity over how to accept religious difference. A symbol of political energies which were dangerous to unity, Calamy embodied a threat to the social order. An emblem of the steadfast nature of the godly, Calamy was a martyr in the dissident press; as one commentator remarked on his case, "But precious in the sight of the Lord, is the Blood of his holy ones."<sup>13</sup> Blood was, after all, recently washed from the battlefields of the English civil war. Although there was no actual blood in Calamy's imprisonment, the stakes seemed just as high.

This is a book about Milton's England, that is, about the cultural, religious, and political currents in England that gave rise to Milton's great, lasting works of poetry, *Paradise Lost*, *Samson Agonistes*, and *Paradise Regain'd*, all published in the Restoration when Milton was a political outcast. I use the title *Milton's England* rather than *Restoration England* or *Dryden's England*, in order to challenge how we perceive this period in literary history, and to bring Dissent (with its English Revolutionary past) to the fore. The book shows how Milton's England was also Calamy's England; how through works of literature, the defeated and excluded produced a vibrant culture, made sense of their experience of loss, and how their literature was embedded in significant social action. For many Dissenters, Calamy and Milton included, the prime challenge was to maintain commitment to God despite persecution. In Dissenting literature, these outcasts constructed shared memories, a powerful force in the service of this task of faith. We will see Dissenting ministers' funerals as sites for the performances of survival of an endangered community; hymns as a means of sharing in social practice; and poetry as a means to reconcile self and world.

This book has two central aims. First, it observes how, as a community and a political concept, dissent was created through cultural forms arising from an experience of social exclusion. Beyond "The Age of Dryden," it will be shown, the period 1660–1700 encompassed a range of writing that has been largely, and unjustly, neglected. Dissenters' literary and cultural legacies helped to assure the vitality and coherence of their invented tradition.<sup>14</sup> Milton, it will be shown, was no mere holdover from the Renaissance. Rather, his preoccupations were absolutely in tune with his contemporary Dissenting writers. Their distinctive, Dissenting cultural contribution challenges the current periodization's conceptions of literary history, aesthetic value, and the relation between literature and politics. The literary historian Neil Keeble has investigated how "literary creativity, composition and reading were vital not merely to the survival of nonconformity

but to its very nature."<sup>15</sup> For Dissenters, writing was a critical means to withstand the pressures of oppression, to communicate across time and space, especially since public, communicative roles – speaking, assembling, officiating, ministering, teaching – had been denied them. Whether they whispered private lyrics to God, their souls pierced with the tones of the lamentations of Jeremiah; imitated the great divine lyricist George Herbert; staved off despair; composed hymns to be sung aloud by a chorus of their fellow-sufferers; presented theological truths; challenged the contemporary libertine modes; or created a political legacy through eulogy and epic, reading and writing were central activities in defining, and defending, Dissent. The construction of a literary legacy of Dissent, moreover, compels us to observe the political stakes in the writing of literary history, as we perceive how the binary opposition – the uncivil radical against the polite man of letters – serves a persecuting interest. The stakes of these partisan, binary views are worth investigating, since they underpin the broader story of which this study is a part: the process of how more people became participants in political culture, whether through overt means such as toleration or through implicit means such as literacy, media access, and the wider social bases for cultural activity as well as political and religious decisions.

Second, the book observes the changing nature of religious radicalism on the eve of the Enlightenment, specifically with respect to religiously motivated violence. I ask how Dissenting Christian and biblical vocations to violence might intersect with religious conceptions of human voluntarism and divine impulsion. I seek answers in the dominant discourse through which early modern people thought through this matter: theology. Across the early modern period, theological explanations of divine and human action were undergoing change and revision, and there would be consequences for conceptions of rationality, the relations between church and state, and toleration. Recent scholarship has often emphasized ecclesiology at the expense of real theological difference. In the period 1660–1700, both from within the Dissenting tradition, as well as outside it, however, disputes over the doctrine and practice of religion were concerned slowly, and sporadically, with the disentanglement of saving souls from the business of politics – an accomplishment that permitted domestic concord and limited toleration (Catholics and Jews were ever excluded) at home and an end to confessional conflict abroad. Since Dissenting literature from the later seventeenth century leaves many testaments of violence – vindications against injustice; revenge for persecutors; liberation or punishment of the godly through divine destruction – it is a good place to observe the complicated ways this change took place. Milton's drama *Samson Agonistes*



poses the question of divinely inspired violence. How did other Dissenters understand such impulses? How did they understand the annunciation to violence in relation to their political radicalism? Were their violent imaginings strictly imaginary? Or were they blueprints for continued radical action? These tensions between literal violence and figural violence, between active and passive disobedience, involved questions of how the self could act autonomously, how it could mediate God's presence, and how God's will could be read. The book tells a story of change over time, changes in deep structures of thinking about the relation between action and expression, knowledge and performance. If a central story about modernity is the withdrawal of God-centered arguments from politics, the subjects under investigation here supply a complex instance through which to explore the psychic, cultural, and social stakes of that transformation.

The arc of the book is roughly chronological. I begin with that emblematic moment for the invention of a Dissenting tradition, the exclusion of nonconforming ministers from their pulpits; visit them in prison and hear their mournful lyrics; try to understand the complicated ways their social experience of denial led to a revaluation of action, performance, and violence; investigate some major Dissenting authors; understand their literary values as challenging the dominant modes; and close with the progress of Dissent into the eighteenth century. I hope to introduce some unjustly neglected authors, such as Mary Mollineux and Elizabeth Rowe, and to shed light on some familiar ones, Richard Baxter, John Bunyan, and John Milton, whose precise relation to Dissenting culture demands further attention.

Since the Act of Toleration of 1689 has rightly been taken as a celebrated landmark in the history of human rights, early modern England is a good place to think about the social experiences of religious minorities. My ongoing interest in dissident cultures and the ethics and politics of toleration has led me to investigate writing under the name of Dissent. I have long wondered about the necessary ground for a liberal state, and was led to the Dissenters out of sympathy for their plight as an excluded minority. Though they suffered for their beliefs, however, Dissenters were not good at supplying the theological ground for an ethics of toleration. Their otherworldliness; their commitment to a "true religion"; their notions of political agency: all these elements of belief made many of them particularly incapable of extending tolerance to others quite unlike themselves, whether to other Protestants, Jews, Catholics, New World natives, "Turks," or African slaves. Further, their commitment to doctrines of the Holy Spirit approved religiously motivated violence. My interest in this past moment arises from hindsight, sparked by an ethical attachment, and

has been driven by my observing intolerance and religious fundamentalism restored around the globe today. I began this book well before the dramatic events of September 2001, and yet its completion I hope might shed some light on a quite different cultural moment where religious violence was both feared and welcomed.

In the United States, the country of my birth, I have long worried over the degree to which religious arguments undergird political life, seeking to understand the origins of the possible violent subtext of some theocratic world views in England's Puritan past. On the one hand, I see the noble tradition of conscientious religious activism in the United States, its importance in struggles to confirm the rights of oppressed minorities when civil laws were unjust; on the other hand, I have also worried about the violent antinomian or "enthusiastic" elements of an outlook that prizes the hereafter rather than the worldly here and now, its tendency towards intolerance in the name of Truth. Seventeenth-century Dissenters make a powerful case for the workings of the spirit in the world and speak most sympathetically for a higher justice. Just so, the Enlightenment confrontation with Enthusiasm is an important legacy to recover in order to understand the dangers and benefits of the intertwining of religious authority with political action.

#### POLITICAL MEANINGS

Restoration Dissent came into existence by an act of state, though not with the return of the monarchy. Many nonconformists, like Edmund Calamy, were heart-felt royalists, and it is a mistake simply to equate anti-royalism with Dissent. Although Charles' installation as monarch after the English Revolution had brought hopes for wider latitude for religious practices, these were undermined by the Anglican royalist Parliaments, which pursued instead a policy of religious persecution in order to secure their goal of uniformity of religious belief and worship. Beginning in 1662, with the Act of Uniformity Parliament legislated a strict penal code, and followed this with other legislation of increasing severity over the next decade. The Book of Common Prayer, in abeyance during the Cromwellian era, was reinstated, and repressive laws passed in the 1660s and 1670s defined those who provided or attended services outside established churches as nonconformists and therefore criminals.

Persecution of Dissent, moreover, was discontinuous across the period. There were several bursts of punitive activity: at the beginning of Charles' reign; following the passage of the Second Conventicle Act in 1670; during

the Tory reaction and the defeat of exclusion (1681–86), especially in the aftermath of the Duke of Monmouth's rebellion against James II in 1685.<sup>16</sup> Charles II signed a Declaration of Indulgence in 1672, and within ten months more than 2,500 licenses for nonconformist preachers were issued. The declaration was soon revoked, however, and nonconformists once again met in private houses or in secret. Bringing an awkward alliance between some Dissenters and Catholics, James II suspended all laws against nonconformists and Catholics in 1687 and issued a second Declaration of Indulgence in 1688. The Quaker William Penn welcomed James II's toleration, while many other Dissenters hated it.<sup>17</sup> The Toleration Act of 1689 came with William III, still excluding Catholics, but permitting varieties of nonconformist worship if not office holding. During the period 1662–89, then, Dissenters' resistance to the state church varied according to politics, no less than theology and status. There were significant differences between, for example, the Presbyterians' search for an accommodation within the Anglican orthodoxy and the Quakers' flagrant rejection of it. All nonconformists, however, raised significant theological and practical challenges to the normative state church, and many maintained unorthodox and outlawed practices of worship, whether surreptitiously, privately, or by skirting technicalities of the law in these uneven periods.

Who were the Dissenters? This general nominative includes such a range as the self-educated Baptist preacher John Bunyan, with his long-suffering in prison, his poor-man's ardent Calvinism, his robust apocalypticism, and the Cambridge-educated Latin Secretary to Oliver Cromwell John Milton, whose friends procured his release from prison, a figure who moved towards Arminianism in belief, of whose public worship we have no record, and whose declining years were spent composing a poem meant to outshine all other poems before it, and who was buried in an Anglican parish church. Dissenters after the Restoration were a heterogeneous lot, radical Quakers as well as conservative Presbyterians, sometimes royalists like Calamy, with antimonarchist Independents (Congregationalists) and Baptists in between.<sup>18</sup> Children of the great religious upheaval of the early modern period, Restoration Dissenters were heirs to Puritanism, a movement within the Elizabethan church that sought to reconstitute the national form of religion, and that had reworked the relationship between God and man and the shape and scope of a national church.<sup>19</sup> During the English civil war period, a range of experiments in ecclesiastical organization was undertaken by the new regimes; during this period sectarian activity flourished.<sup>20</sup> Honed by civil war violence and apocalypticism, Restoration Dissenters comprise the remnants of the radical wing of the Reformation.

In 1660 the returning monarchists sought to eliminate this complex legacy of religious and political activism. With the noise of the recent civil wars still echoing in their ears, many Anglican royalists vigilantly opposed religious diversity, and, amidst rising fears of international popery and domestic sedition, they hardened religious nonconformists into the political figures of Dissenters. Their policies of religious uniformity led to the expulsion of over 2,000 ministers, clergy, and lecturers – at least one in five – from livings between 1660 and 1662 for refusing to conform to the newly defined orthodoxy, pushing even moderate Presbyterians, who would have supported a national church, into separation.<sup>21</sup> The nonconformists' resistance was warranted by a fundamental perception of Christian liberty that was at once belief and action.<sup>22</sup> The Act of Uniformity was followed by a series of laws, enforced to a greater or lesser degree over the next decades, which diminished civil liberties and due process of law for Dissenters on a massive scale. A thorny problem was "occasional conformity," which was taken by the authorities as dissent, apathy, or irreligion, seen in a census of 1676 as a threat to the Anglican interest.<sup>23</sup> Numbering something over 340,000, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Dissenters made up about six percent of the population as a whole.<sup>24</sup> Despite the 1689 Toleration Act, when the Anglican church turned away from outright persecution of nonconformists, England suffered resurgent crises over theology and loyalty, with Test and Corporation Acts, not rescinded until 1828–29, signs of Dissent's ongoing political volatility.<sup>25</sup> From the Restoration until the Reform Bill period then, over one hundred and fifty years in English social life, those who remained outside of the Anglican church were Dissenters, officially excluded from office and university, denied legitimate burial in parish churchyards and marriage in their own meeting houses, even though many found ways of bending the rules. Nonetheless, Dissenters carried on a tradition of freedom of thought, self-government, and political radicalism, and, in their literature, sought to transform the world and to find a place in it.<sup>26</sup>

After the massive failure of political and godly reform in the English Revolution in the mid-seventeenth century, the English Dissenters, the subjects of my study, found themselves excluded from political society and subject to religious persecution.<sup>27</sup> With the challenges to royal succession during repeated crises, many nonconformists assisted in formal political opposition to the Crown.<sup>28</sup> But the majority of nonconformists were not willing to participate in seditious plotting; after 1660, Quakers abjured violent uprising, and, from prison, the Baptist John Bunyan counseled patience to his frustrated and persecuted parishioners. Presbyterians hoped for a comprehensive church settlement which would widen the scope of

religious practice; in calling for this political solution they eschewed rebellious uprising. This majority of peaceful souls nonetheless resisted state authority by refusing to come into a state church.

This book understands radical action not simply as overt or covert political intention, then, but also through the social settings in which Dissenters produced their resistance; in the theologies that underscored the role of God in human action; and in the imaginative resources from which they built schemes of apocalyptic revenge. The social meaning of the nonconformist funeral, for instance, went far beyond the stated political content of those preaching the sermons, as those in attendance found themselves gathered in an assembly that challenged the state's ban on nonconformist worship. Likewise, we may search in vain for radical political content in the many hymns produced by Dissenting writers; instead, we must look to the situation of the hymn in nonconformist worship, its coded references to anterior biblical moments, to understand how it flaunted the Anglican service and organized people to express solidarity and protest. How did religious commitment give birth to political activism and redefine it?

Indeed from an experience of dispossession and social exclusion, many nonconformists who gave up on earthly political solutions expressed their radicalism through imaginative writing filled with dreams of apocalyptic revenge. In their political counsel, even as some Dissenters refused outright rebellion against the state, still they recused themselves from the uniform church, and embraced hopes for apocalyptic change. In revaluing violence, they also raised theological questions about the role of the Holy Spirit. Though this may have seemed like a political withdrawal into a "paradise within," ruminations on divine agency through doctrines of the Holy Spirit, such as those of the Independent John Owen, who devoted a lengthy treatise to the subject, can be seen as a strategic reevaluation of the nature of human action.

After the return of monarchy in 1660, many of the Puritan godly retreated from the radical activism of their Revolution experiences, forsaking the quest for the reign of King Jesus in this world. And yet beliefs in radical millenarianism, the hopes that end-time was near, were hardly quiet.<sup>29</sup> Out of their experience of political defeat, nonconformist writers sought in withdrawal a construction of a radical political identity. We might think of these consequences not solely in terms of a tremendous outpouring of writing – and superb writing at that (*Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regain'd*, *Samson Agonistes*, *Pilgrim's Progress*) – but also in terms of poetics. The theological and political radicalism of the Revolutionary years as well as the failure of political hopes with the advent of Uniformity in 1662 gave new urgency to Dissenting writers. They wrestled with authority in their

concern over imitation and originality; they experimented with poetic form, voice, figuration, genre, and metaphor; and they politicized the aesthetic categories of inspiration and the sublime. These are consequences of the experience of Puritanism in the seventeenth century, in short, a legacy of the English Revolution.

Just as the Restoration state did, however, by using the term Dissenter, so do we risk reducing an important complexity, a range of positions, to a singular nominative. As Neil Keeble, the foremost scholar of the literary culture of nonconformity, points out, the effect of persecuting laws "was to forge the corporate identity of dissent."<sup>30</sup> There is a risk in overstressing the variance of Dissent from Anglicanism at a time when the practice of "occasional conformity" was common, when many nonconformists were hard at work to find reconciliation with the state church through policies of "Comprehension," and when Anglicanism itself was undergoing significant transformation.<sup>31</sup> It is true that some nonconformists and Anglicans were often not far apart in belief, politics, and worship; nonetheless the often sharp polemical divides do tell us an important story of perceptions and cultural meanings. Doctrinal differences within English Protestantism during the early modern period were indeed significant motors for conflicts over ceremony and ecclesiology. This book is not a study of the denominational differences between various groups of nonconformists, nor a literary history of particular theological or sectarian traditions. I have not separated the various strands within Dissent to tell a history of the changes within various sects over time. Those kinds of histories are available, and more are needed.<sup>32</sup> In order to assess the broad meanings of religious opposition in a society just newly washed of the blood of civil war, here I am more interested in the common characteristics of the "unorthodox" than in their differences. Dissenter, in short, is the loose way I designate what can be generalized in habits from those who embraced many different themes, but who all lived out variations on these two: a Protestant belief in the immediate apprehension of the divine; and a refusal to partake in compelled religious ceremonialism, exemplified by unwillingness to join the English state-sponsored church after the Restoration government's legislation of 1662.

#### CONSTRUCTING DISSENT

The stories told about Dissent are multiple, and contradictory. To those outside the tradition, Dissenters were dangerous radicals who resisted not simply the state religion, but politeness and civility *tout court*. This is the

point of view still tacitly adopted by the literary periodization of the era as the “Age of Dryden.” Conventional literary history has observed that the Restoration period brought with it a search for poetic order and decorum, a revival of classical modes in a bid to leap over recent history in appeal to a shared – allegedly neutral – past, one remote in time and place. In the realms of architecture and urban design, with the splendors of Christopher Wren, the efflorescence of the London stage, in painting, the decorative arts, and in the shapely music of Handel and Purcell, English cultural production after the civil wars exalted the values of the ancients, rewritten as imperial order, balance, openness, cosmopolitanism, and publicity. This Restoration mode was a public, sociable mode, with the lashings of satire’s whip leaving lasting marks on the literary imagination. Even the heroic couplet, rising to a prominence it would hold until Coleridge and Wordsworth’s dismantling, marks that balance, harmony, and hoped-for reconciliation of opposites.<sup>33</sup> This literary characterization of the period leaves the writing of Dissent invisible.

To accept that invisibility, I suggest, is to concede that the English Revolution was indeed a failure. It is a main objective of this book to show how the writing by and about Dissenters was – and is – politically motivated and still doing important cultural work. Reformed religion had produced an iconoclastic sensibility, and with it forms of literary expression, which did not go away. Indeed, both Anglican and nonconformist poets continued a devotional literary tradition that was at odds with both the decorous neo-classicism and the libertinism of the Stuart court.<sup>34</sup> The poetry of writers such as George Wither and George Herbert gave to English writers a lasting interest in recording the multitude of inner states, whether contemplation, repose, or chastisement. A literary tradition, just as had a radical political tradition, vaunted the workings of conscience – a conscience that could only be observed in the inward reflection of God and the individual soul.<sup>35</sup> As they resisted mandated church forms in their religious practice, so too their literary practice was one of devotional iconoclasm. In objection to and in dialogue with the public modes of satirical poetry as well as with the libertinism of courtly verse, the Dissenting muse after the Restoration seemed to live in the shadows, perpetually wedded to the dark notes of elegy, fastidiously cultivating an almost-impossible otherworldliness.

Even if orthodoxy sought to silence them, Dissenters were nonetheless all too visible in the imaginations of their enemies. The conservative Anglican apologist Samuel Parker called Dissenters “Brain-sick People,” “morose,” repeatedly contrasting their irrational or “fanatique tempers” to his own “sober,” “rational,” and “civil” approach to religion. Nonconformists’

irrationality extended to their writing style, as Parker accused them of “hiding themselves in a maze of Words . . . rowling up and down in canting and ambiguous Expressions.”<sup>36</sup> Parker linked these communicative failures with unstable politics, stressing “the natural tendency of Enthusiasm and Superstition to public disturbance.”<sup>37</sup> Thomas Hobbes, writing in *Behemoth* in 1668 of the causes and consequences of the civil wars, faulted crafty preachers: the people “admire nothing but what they understand not”; and were “cozened” with “words not intelligible.”<sup>38</sup> For Samuel Parker, the source of all this muddle was Dissenters’ emphasis on individual conscience: “their Consciences are seized on by such morose and surly Principles, as make them the rudest and most barbarous People in the World; and that in comparison of them, the most insolent of the Pharisees were Gentlemen, and the most salvage of the *Americans* Philosophers.”<sup>39</sup> Their reliance on conscience rendered nonconformists no better than savages, unreliable as preachers, teachers, office-holders, and citizens. The printed frontispiece to the anti-Dissenter pamphlet, *Cabala: Or, The Mystery of Conventicles Unvail'd* (1664) shows the powerful connection between nonconformist religious worship and feared violent insurrection (see Figure 1). In the upper half of the diptych an armed band cries “No Bishops.” The lower part depicts the discovery of their “conventicle,” where knives, swords, and pistols are laid on the table whilst the leader of prayer presides over a sectarian congregation including women and men. Dissenting religion is one and the same as rebellion.<sup>40</sup>

To many Anglican royalists, Dissent also became the sign of the unlawful and unlicensed dispersal of information and ideas to the wrong sorts of people. For instance, in his portrait of Dissent, John Dryden offers a special case of the worry, present since the Reformation, about scriptural exegesis by the all and many. Dryden offers perhaps the most brilliant portrait of the Dissenter as the dangerous and uncivil subject, and his ideas help us see how Dissenters posed serious threats not simply to political and religious stability, but how their social practices heralded a major shift in English cultural life as well. Dryden repeatedly took digs at nonconformists through the 1660s and 1670s from the perspective of an Anglican Tory. Even when turned Catholic, Dryden barely withheld his contempt. In *The Hind and the Panther*, the sectarian radicals are the lowest of the low; as “A slimy-born and sun-begotten tribe,” they are barely discernible as creatures vested with God’s care. To figure his human concerns in bestial form, in fable, is to denote their degradation. But these fanatics are beyond artistic representation, “nor will the Muse describe” them, he writes of these “Gross, half-animated lumps.”<sup>41</sup>





Figure 1 Title page to David Lloyd, *Cabala: Or, The Mystery of Conventicles Unvail'd* (1664).

Dryden's opposition to the swarm of interpreters newly empowered by Protestant bibliolatry is often confused with antipopulism: yet his is not antipopulism in any simple sense. Rather, Dryden's terror of the Many-Headed Reader is linked to a cluster of associations in the economic register which evoke the dangers of fungibility, interchangeability, and, in short, warn against commodity consumption. Dryden's strategy of distinguishing authority from its opposite governs the prospect of social order in his poems, and his political ideas take the specific form of an observation on the excess of social mobility advanced by a particular historical mode of religion, for which Dissent becomes the sign.

Dryden is right in seeing that Dissenters' reading and writing habits did sap authority from elites in power. In *Religio Laici*, Dryden uses economic metaphors to narrate the history of how people wrested religious authority away from the priests: "That what they thought the *Priests'*, was *Their* estate," Dryden writes in evoking the specter of the great transfer of church wealth into private hands. He describes the motive to consume directly what had before been mediated by authorized figures: "every man who saw the Title fair/ Claim'd a Child's part, and put in for a Share."<sup>42</sup> The people's assuming an economic agency does not represent a triumph of right, however; rather, it is Dryden's nightmare of unbounded consumption. Again, *Religio Laici*: "The Book thus put in every vulgar hand,/ Which each presum'd he best cou'd understand,/ The *Common Rule* was made the *common Prey*/ And at the mercy of the Rabble lay" (400–03). The "common rule," perhaps the "Golden rule" of the Bible, that doctrine of the reversibility of good acts, has disintegrated into a terrifying fantasy of social leveling. The double sense of the word "common" articulates a double threat: that of accessibility through dissemination, and that which is low or vulgar. With the pun on "common prey," or common prayer, the language of predatory relation depicts reading in all its brutal carnality. If the language is that of commodity consumption, then indeed the voracious, hungry, physical need-driven acts classify the consumers as rank sensualists "preying" on their victims:

The tender page with horney Fists was gaul'd;  
 And he was gifted most that loudest baul'd:  
 The *Spirit* gave the *Doctoral Degree*:  
 And every member of a Company  
 Was of *his Trade* and of the *Bible free*.  
 Plain *Truths* enough for needfull *use* they found;  
 But men wou'd still be itching to *expound* . . .

This was the Fruit the *private Spirit* brought;  
 Occasion'd by *great Zeal* and little *Thought*.  
 While crouds unlearn'd, with rude Devotion warm,  
 About the Sacred Viands buzz and swarm,  
 The *Fly-Blown Text* creates a *crawling Brood*;  
 And turns to *Maggots* what was meant for *Food*.  
*A Thousand daily sects rise up and dye;*  
*A Thousand more the perish'd race supply.*

(*Religio Laici*, 404–22)

These class attacks resolve into a quotable aphorism, a linguistic normalization, impersonally marking an allegedly universal truth to which all can assent. By comparing this disturbing social arrangement to corrupted nature, Dryden makes the rejection of dissenting bibliophilia, with its “private reason,” seem inevitable. Likewise, Samuel Butler’s *Hudibras*, in attacking radical sectaries and Presbyterians, gives a similar image of texts and maggots:

Religion spawn'd a various Rout,  
 Of Petulant Capricious Sects,  
 The Maggots of Corrupted Texts,  
 That first Run all Religion down,  
 And after every swarm its own.  
 For as the *Persian Magi* once,  
 Upon their *Mothers*, got their *Sons*,  
 That were incapable t' enjoy,  
 That Empire any other way;  
 So *Presbyter* begot the other,  
 Upon the *Good Old Cause* his Mother.<sup>43</sup>

There, the accusation is corrupt genealogy and incestuous generation, twin problems of the Stuart succession after the execution of Charles and the installation of Commonwealth and Protectorate regimes.

Dryden’s accusation, as the contrast with Butler makes clear, is very much a reflection upon private zeal and public access. Dryden charges that the unlearned were coming to see themselves as possessing authority, here authority to interpret the Bible. This is felt as repulsive; the reader is called upon to alter that situation, to defend that precious victim, the “tender page,” from such a rude assault, rude in its class origins, rude in its mannerless and disgusting corporeality (itching, horny fists, warm devotion), and corrupt in its effects, turning into maggots – putrefied meat – what was before good food (in a twist on the traditional meaning of the eucharist). The Anglican royalist Robert Whitehall, celebrating the

coronation of Charles II, ridiculed the spiritual and political usurpation of the lower orders during the civil war period:

See, and admire, this Fellow laying down  
His Awl and Stirrup, is no longer clowne;  
But sit's upon the Bench, and winks and nods,  
As gravely, as if sent us by the Gods.<sup>44</sup>

Dryden and Whitehall are thinking of the ideas and social position of a writer like the self-educated Baptist Samuel How, who was a cobbler by trade, and who published his *Sufficiencie of the Spirits Teaching without Human Learning* in 1640, admired for "The *Spirits teaching* in a *Coblers shop*."<sup>45</sup> This book became a runaway bestseller, reprinted seven times through the seventeenth century, and nine times in the eighteenth.

The promises of freedom; of equality of interpretation; of claims to innate authority; and of the rule of conscience, are all axioms of democratic ideology, including the belief that anyone, including Dryden, can read, or change places, or succeed. But these axioms are also the age's chief sources of social anxiety. Dryden's nightmare of biblical access reveals the functional instability of social hierarchy in his time. His condemnation of dispersed authority is at every moment dependent upon the resources of literacy and education, forms of cultural capital, as John Guillory has called it, which are paradoxically the enabling condition of Dryden's poem. Early modern Puritans had been great endowers and patrons of educational institutions, and with their loss of power, there was a loss of such charitable bequests. With suspicion of popular education, there was also a sharp decline in the growth of basic literacy after 1680, a marked slowing in classical secondary and university education, closing routes to advancement following those means. "In quantitative terms," the historian Lawrence Stone has written, "English higher education did not get back to the level of the 1630s until after the first World War." That educational depression began in the second half of the seventeenth century.<sup>46</sup> Enough education, but not too much, will hold the precarious social order in balance.

As his *Religio Laici* makes clear, Dryden acutely saw that education had caused destabilizing social effects, particularly education of the wrong sort; these are, after all, "crouds unlearn'd" for whom "The *Spirit* gave the *Doctoral Degree*." If non-institutionalized learning had created opportunities for social mobility, then Dryden synecdochally indicts the wider processes of communication and dissemination of cultural authority in his own time. Those would include a public eager for a nontraditional, lay, education: coffeehouse culture; formal evening lectures by leading

nonconformists: other non-orthodox sites of education were Dissenting grammar schools and vocational academies.<sup>47</sup> The wide availability of printed matter was a process from which Dryden himself benefited, but it also created and responded to an uncontrollable audience for that literature. All these are forms against which his defense of the established church in *Religio Laici* is meant to be braced.

By blaming the mid-century civil war on radical religion, Restoration apologists such as Dryden and Butler discounted the idea that private spiritual authority had any kind of role in political legitimation. The success of Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*, running to three parts, and provoking many imitators and an execrable literary legacy, tells us how much those having lived through the civil war period wanted easy targets: but he hit upon the right target. As we shall see, doctrines of the Holy Spirit did indeed challenge civil and ecclesiastical authority; further, they authorized violence. Butler's poem saw how irrational forces, ridiculed as spasms of popular revolt, humans' foolish adherence to their spiritual hunger, and power-lust, were the causes of civil war. At heart what the poem recoils against is the danger of fanaticism. Ralph, *Hudibras*' squire, is of the company of those who "speak by this *new Light*" (497): with a charismatic authority, "A Light that falls down from on high,/ For Spiritual Trades to couden by";

For Spiritual Men are too Transcendent,  
That mount their Banks, for Independent.  
To hang like Mahomet, in th'Air,  
Or St. Ignatius, at his Prayer,  
By Pure Geometry, and hate  
Dependence, upon Church, or State.<sup>48</sup>

The problem with inspiration was not only that it spoke from within the individual, but that it heralded its authority as coming from the realm of the divine. Recognizing the political dangers of this transcendent view, Dryden likewise repeatedly represented sectarians' prophetic utterances as dangerous misapplications of individual intention. In his satire against the Whigs, "The Medall" (1681–82), Dryden persistently sought to devalue the Dissenters' authoritative claims from the Bible:

'Twas fram'd, at first, our Oracle t'enquire;  
But, since our Sects in prophecy grow higher,  
The Text inspires not them; but they the Text inspire.<sup>49</sup>

In a similar vein, the conservative Anglican minister Benjamin Laney, preaching to King Charles in 1664, rejected the claims of those defending liberty of conscience. Like Dryden and Butler, Laney adopts a language

of mistaken perception, false illumination, and here we can see how the critique of religious enthusiasm is also a critique of antisociality:

Let loose to the prejudices and fancies of every man; for then it will fall out, as with those that look in a Glass, in which every one sees his own face, though not anothers; the reason is because he brings his face to the *Glass*, not because it was there before. So every Sect sees the face of his own Religion in the Scripture, not because it was there before, but because his strong fancy and prejudice brought it thither; he thinks he sees that in the Scripture, which in truth is only in his own imagination.<sup>50</sup>

To Laney, to refuse mediation of the professional priesthood is to indulge in a dangerous solipsism. Those defending the Restoration state and church found themselves, like Laney, reaching for principles of communicative rationality, a secular alternative to the individualistic, charismatic authority of the prophet.

The uncivilized prophet vs. civility of rational norms: in these conservative accounts of civil war politics, then, we have an Enlightenment binary pair. Defenders of the Restoration church thus posited communicative norms as a brace against the violence of prophecy or the inner callings of conscience. The Anglican diagnosis of radical prophecy bore a political imprint, transforming the radical opposition between earthly/otherworldly into a neater civil/uncivil binary pair. The binary opposition between ecstatic prophecy and rational conformity was one fiction created to attempt the control of the unruly subject, and to combat an opposition between World and Truth by secular means. But at a deeper level, the Anglican response was an accurate assessment of some of the implications of wide biblical access, antinomianism, and inspired religion.

To those inside Dissent, on the other hand, their story was one of heroic martyrdom, stoical suffering, and patience, relieved by divine providence in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The generation of 1662, those ejected from their posts by the edict of Uniformity, were written about, pictured in frontispiece portraits, had their works reprinted in pirated and official editions, and their sayings excerpted to be hung on household walls for inspiration. The political stakes of the Dissenting martyrologies proliferating in the press were clear. A contemporary squib marked how clichéd the genre of Dissenting martyrology had become: "And whereas Mr. *Fox* that good man hath written the suffering of such as held the Word of God patiently under the great Tryal in Queen *Maries* days... That eminent Patriot Mr *Prynne* hath taken great pains to publish his own and his

Brethrens sufferings in thos elaborate pieces.” The press, it was once again noted, was a chief ally of Dissent, as this observer remarked, “about this time [1 September 1663] Mr. *Baxter* moved, that seeing he and others were silenced, their soul-saving Works might be immediately reprinted,” and the list of reprinted works includes the politically radical civil war period tracts, *Smectymnuus*, *Lex Rex*, *Holy Commonwealth*, “most of *Milton* and Mr. *Goodwyn’s* Papers,” along with works in Protestant hagiography and controversy from the time of Queen Elizabeth.<sup>51</sup> Dissenters to be sure elicited sympathy by casting their experiences in a heroic light, relying upon known habits of interpreting suffering after the model of Christ. Their printing and disseminating such models was recognized as a primary mode of survival.

Dissenters, barred from pulpits and forbidden to assemble in public, sought a means to construct and maintain community through writing, as Neil Keeble has shown. The impact of this culture of publishing and disseminating their material was greater than their particular cause; indeed, Dissenters contributed to a fundamental change in political culture in early modern England. By their repeated appearances in print, Dissenters would simply not go away; and by their commitments to publicity, openness, and generative dispute, they wrote for the many, barely literate included, expanding the culture of political knowledge at a time when there was a general expansion of the public sphere.

From the moment of their exile from the national church, nonconformists thus created an alternative characterization to that of dangerous fanatics by which they were stereotyped by their enemies. Building on the paradigm of heroic martyrdom enshrined in John Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments*, they attracted sympathy for themselves as victims and celebrated their depredations through copious publication. Joseph Besse’s *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People Called Quakers* arouses sympathy by its title.<sup>52</sup> Sympathy was only one intention; creating a tradition was another. Richard Baxter’s autobiography was transformed into a heroic and collective story of many Dissenters by Edmund Calamy, reworked as Samuel Palmer’s list of ejected ministers, *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* (which remains a chief reference tool in the study of Dissent).<sup>53</sup> That title bears a name which fuses the genres of funerary commemoration and history. This cult of heroic victimhood marks later historiography, from the Victorian studies whose sentimentalism about suffering saints helped to push through Reformist legislation, to the primary modernist account, Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which is based upon



Figure 2 Frontispiece to Benjamin Keach, *War with the Devil* (1683).

that magnificent and partisan Victorian historiography.<sup>54</sup> This archetype of a tragic Puritan dissent has made it hard to perceive Dissenters on any other terms.

Dissenters who resisted state persecution on the grounds of conscience during the Restoration period prominently made a structural divide between civil and spiritual, a binary pairing of World and Truth. The two images fronting Benjamin Keach's *War with the Devil* (1683; see Figure 2) offer a striking instance of this habit of mind. There the embattled sixteen year old in his "converted state" combats the devil and an armed band by means of his Book; but he also opposes worldliness, the public standards of civility and taste of a fine doublet and feather cap, ruffles and curls, dancing townspeople, trappings of his former, "naturall" self. Indeed, breaking away from the here and now was at the heart of many Dissenters' experiences, and the phenomenology of conversion illustrated here rigorously asserted this split. Scholars hold that after the return of monarchy in 1660, the Puritan godly turned inward, retreated from the radical activism of their revolution days. The "paradise within thee, happier far" vaunted by *Paradise Lost* defines this post-Restoration quietism. Yet, Puritan rejection