

Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*: A Poet's Semiotic Appeal to Non-reason

Jackie MacLelland

Many studies dealing with Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* note the significance of the political situation that gave impetus to the writing of the poem. None acknowledges the importance or even the presence of the semiotic coding that Dryden uses in his strategies to influence his reader--the society in which he lived and worked, the society that considered itself, above all, a reasonable, moderate society. To miss the significance of Dryden's understanding of the culture in which he lived or to miss the significance of his knowledge of the power of language and the implications for its underlying semiotic value, is to limit the possibilities of this poem for its readers.

In *The Role of the Reader*, Umberto Eco notes the interrelatedness of the author, the text, and the reader. In order to organize a text, he says that an author "has to rely upon a series of codes that assign given contents to the expressions he uses." Eco insists that "To make his text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by the possible reader (7)."

Eco also points out the importance of the experience that any reader brings to a text. He notes the importance of "common frames," those stereotypical data systems that can be called upon within a work to elicit, through the reader's unconscious cooperation, various connections between the text itself and the reader's stored knowledge (2). And, of course, any reader also brings to the reading of any text not only this frame of reference but his experience of other texts as well

(2). Though Dryden may not have expressed a knowledge of such a sophisticated theory as that put forth by Eco, his text illustrates an understanding of this very basic tenet about the human psyche, a basic tenet that seems to have been ignored in previous studies.

Perhaps many studies have overlooked the importance of semiotic coding in *Absalom and Achitophel* because Dryden is so often accepted as the acknowledged father of Neoclassical literature in England. Because of his ethos, one might easily assume (Dryden perhaps depended on this kind of assumption) that the persuasive intent of *Absalom and Achitophel* would be based on an appeal to reason, that significant characteristic of Neoclassical literature. And, indeed, Dryden encourages his reader to assume that his appeal will focus on moderation or the golden mean. He informs his reader in the poem's preface that he is appealing to a moderate audience: "If I [Dryden] happen to please the more moderate sort, I shall be sure of an honest part." Significantly he continues, "And, I confess, I have laid in for those, by rebating the satire (where justice would allow it) from carrying too sharp an edge (Noyes 109)."

These remarks have the ring of reason; they suggest an appeal to moderation. *Moderation*, after all, would have had the same application in seventeenth-century usage as it does in the twentieth century. It would have been used in association with people who avoided extremes, people whose actions were characterized by temperance in their conduct and expression (*OED*). The use of such a word coupled with Dryden's confession of filing the satiric barb, alludes certainly, to the use of, and an appeal to, reason.

In addition to this verbal play, Dryden's biblical allusions, documented by a large number of critics (Lewalski, Guilhamet, McHenry, and others), further assert his knowledge and command of

language and societal codes. This is a knowledge that he employs in linking the poem and its message to his audience's concept of reason. Dryden accomplishes this reference to reason through the employment of both the David/Charles analogy and the biblical associations of the Miltonic imagery (Brodwin, Crawford) contained within the poem. Even a superficial reading of the poem reveals these.

The means, which are not so obvious, by which Dryden attempts to control his audience are the allusions in the poem to witchcraft and the appeal to the underlying superstitions and hatreds of seventeenth-century society. In truth, Dryden attempts to unite, in the service of propaganda, the non-reason of religious hatred, and the superstitions that still lingered within not only the society at large but the moderate society as well.

The culture was a society, it must be remembered which, highly superstitious, was still hunting witches in the late 1600s (qtd. in Davies 167). It was a society which was still putting witches to death in the 1680s (200). It was a society that Hobbes, writing in 1651, understood to be superstitious and easily gulled, one that, as the following passage suggests, was easily controlled through its superstitions. Hobbes declares that "for fairies and walking ghosts, the opinion of them has, I think, been on purpose, either taught or not confuted (qtd. in Davies 202)". Hobbes asserts that "If this superstitious fear of spirits were taken away, and with it, prognostics from dreams, false prophecies, and many other things depending thereon, by which crafty ambitious persons abuse the simple people, men would be much more fitted than they are for civil obedience (qtd. in Davies 202)."

Not only were the simple or immoderate folk superstitious, but so also were Dryden's contemporary, John Milton, and Dryden's predecessor, Francis Bacon, both of whom were said to have subscribed

to a belief in witchcraft (Davies 170, Briggs 43). Witchcraft was also acknowledged by Joseph Glanvill, who in addition to being a contemporary of Dryden's was also a member of the Royal Society (Davison 31). And though there is no concrete evidence that Dryden in fact believed in witchcraft, it seems obvious that he would have been aware of the extent of such a belief in the society in which he lived and that he would have been aware of the possibilities for propaganda inherent in that society's fears and superstitions.

Dryden, it must be remembered, was writing the poem at the possible urgings of Charles II (Winn 208-09); he was writing a poem that had a specific political intent, one that though ostensibly calculated to discredit Lord Shaftsbury, was at the same time calculated to discredit subtly others who were Charles' opponents.

The Roman Catholics would have been a specific group that Dryden would have felt it necessary to discredit. They would have been a group particularly marked for political exploitation. The term "Roman Catholic" was, it was said, a good stick with which to whip a dog (Davison 31). It seems reasonable to assume that Dryden, still an Anglican himself in 1681, might attack the Catholic faith since public sentiment was extremely high against Catholicism at that moment. It seemed quite probable at the moment and, indeed, the people feared that Charles II, who had no legitimate heir, would, on his death be replaced on the throne by his avowedly Catholic brother, James, a man who because of his Catholicism, was hated by the English people (Frost 8). Additionally, there was an alleged popish plot afoot, a plot in which the Catholics, it was said, intended to kill Charles II and replace him with his pro-Catholic brother, James (Winn 322). Such an attack by Dryden on Catholicism, however, calculated to enlist the sympathy of a predominately Protestant society, would have had to be couched in a

manner which, while accomplishing this goal, did not at the same time alienate either Charles II, who was himself suspected of having Catholic leanings (Verral 51), or his pro-Catholic heir-apparent, James. It seems entirely possible that Dryden, searching for ways in which to garner the people's support for the king, might have seen in their superstitions and in their hatred of Catholics, the most expedient means by which to attain his goals.

Dryden's subtle use of words to color the perceptions of his audience begins in the poem's first line in which he calls the rituals of the priests, "priestcraft" (Noyes 109). This term does not seem to refer to organized religion in general, nor does it seem to refer to all clerics at large; it seems instead to refer specifically to the priesthood--the Roman Catholic priesthood.

As is immediately apparent, the word *priestcraft* has as its extremely close parallel, the word *witchcraft*. But because the compounding of the two words *witch* and *craft* would have been much more commonly used and seen than the very unlikely compounding of *priest* and *craft*, there is a subconscious insistence in a reader's mind to perceive automatically the natural association of the former while visually and consciously reading the unusual combining of the latter; on a subconscious level, a reader would probably accept the interchangeability of these terms and thus associate the two words and (*priest* and *witch*) with the two entities which they represent.

Using the conscious artistry of this associative device, Dryden demonstrates that he understands the way in which correspondences are made, though neither he nor his contemporaries are likely to have ever considered giving definition to this kind of artifice. But even without definition, the device would have worked in the seventeenth century, just as it does in the twentieth-century--which has given it

definition.

Collins and Loftus, twentieth-century psychologists working with semantic memory, explain this kind of semantic phenomena through their Spreading Activation Theory which, briefly explained, operates on the theory of an association of existing concepts, a system of semantic relatedness. Using this theory on which to base the associations an audience might make between the words *priestcraft* and *witchcraft*, one might look first at the word that is common to both compounds--*craft*. The word *craft* in sixteenth-century usage was associated with strength, power, and force (*OED*). By the seventeenth century, it was used in association with intellect, art, and skill, but it was still used in association with the word *power* (*OED*). A seventeenth-century society probably would have associated both witches and priests with the word *power*. But both *priest* and *witch* would have had other parallels in the semantic memory of the people of the age. The entities related to these two words could have been associated in the public mind not only through their possession and use of power but also through their common use of rituals, chantings, recitations, and incantations and through their use of a similar organizational structures.

Dryden makes further associations between these same two groups in other areas of the poem. In lines 49 and 50, for instance, gods are said to have been *devised* by god-smiths and priests. The use of the words *god-smiths* and *devised* in association with the word *priests* seems significant. *Devised* was used in the seventeenth century to indicate a contrivance of the mind (*OED*), and the word *god-smiths* seems to imply the supernatural manufacture or creation of dieties. The association of the words *devised*, *god-smiths*, and *priests*, implies a subtle attempt to stain the office of the Catholic priesthood with the taint of

supernatural practices. It indicates, again, the correspondence between magic and superstition with that of the office of the Catholic priesthood. This subtle attempt on Dryden's part to connect Catholicism and witchcraft as well as his subtle attempt to control, through the non-reason of hatred and superstition, the perceptions and emotions of his public, exemplifies his conscious artistry.

In line 55, Dryden also subtly draws parallels between those of the broader English society who opposed Charles' rule and those who practiced ecstatic rites. Charles' opponents (shown by the following passage to have been immoderate men) are said to have led "their 'wild' desires [for freedom] to woods, and caves." Such carefully chosen and carefully linked words as *wild*, *woods*, and *caves* have reverberations of the ecstatic rites and orgies generally thought to have been practiced by witches during sabbats and black masses (Gleadow 137). Even the word *debauched*, used in line 47 in speaking of those who would oppose Charles, is used in conjunction with the practice of witchcraft (Kittredge 243). A correspondence might thereby be evoked in a reader's mind which linked Charles' opposition (immoderate men) with the cult and the disparity of the practice of witchcraft.

Dryden's use of such words as *idol* in line 64, *create* in line 65, and *golden calf* in line 66, associates these same people, Charles' opponents, with heathen worship and magic. These carefully chosen words were intended to evoke not only unpleasant associations but dangerous ones as well. After all, what kind of power would one have to possess in order to *create* a monarch whose rights were still closely associated with divine affirmation? Dryden was writing in the service of the king, writing to gain support for the royal cause; Dryden, "a man who had shown himself an able propagandist" (Winn 209), was writing to control public perception, sympathy, and opinion.

In yet another instance, Dryden yokes the devil with those plotters who would ruin the king.

The careful Devil is still at hand with means
And providently pimps for ill desires:
The Good Old Cause revived, a plot requires.
Plots, true or false, are necessary things,
To raise up commonwealths and ruin kings.
(80-84)

Because the devil was thought to be in league with witches in the seventeenth century (Kittredge 242), there exists a subtle semiotic correspondence between the plotters (who, of course, were said to have been Catholics) and the witches, a symbiotic relationship that discredits the plotters through the use of the non-reason of hatred and superstition.

The section of the poem contained within lines 85 through 149 reveals several other references to superstition and witchcraft. In this section, the Jebusites (who W. K. Thomas asserts refer to Roman Catholics or *Papists* [216] and who submit to the king's reign only under duress) and their *heathen* priests are discussed. *Heathen*, according to the *OED*, was a word applied to pagan rites, pagan ceremonies, and pagan people in the seventeenth century. This was a word used to designate those outside the Christian faith and persuasion. Applied to priests, as it is here, it connects the rites of pagan ritual and the ceremonies of the Catholic priesthood.

In this same section, Dryden, while appearing to have had doubts as to the authenticity of an actual Catholic plot, subtly indicts the Catholic priesthood.

This set the heathen priesthood in a flame;
For priest of all religions are the same:
of whatsoe'er descent their godhead be,
Stock, stone, or other homely pedigree,
In his defense his servants are as bold
As if he had been born of beaten gold.
The Jewish rabbins, though their enemies,
In this conclude them honest men and wise;
For 'twas their duty, all the learned think,
To espouse his cause by whom they eat and drink.
From hence began the Plot, the nation's curse
(98-108)

In these lines Dryden indicates that the plot, allegedly Catholic in origin, was instigated by a priesthood grown jealous because of the threat to their power, and that the plot was a theme which exposed Catholic treachery.

A further semiotic association regarding superstition and Catholicism is made in line 118. In this line, Egyptian rites are said to have been embraced by the Jebusites. Thomas observes that *Egypt* referred to France, while *Egyptians* referred to the Roman Catholics (216). Both France and Egypt had associations with magic. Gleadow recalls that Egypt had been regarded as the birthplace of magic for several thousand years (37). He also reveals that Louis XIV's mistress, Mme. de Montespan, practiced witchcraft (137) and that in order to obtain Louis' favor, she even sacrificed an unchristened infant (142-43). And though the seventeenth-century English society to whom this poem was addressed may not have known of Louis' mistress's goings-on, they

undoubtedly made semiotic associations of Egypt with magic and similar associations between the rites mentioned in this passage and the rites of the Catholic church.

The continuation of this passage is also noteworthy. A close reading of lines 118-21 reveals, in addition to the reference to transubstantiation, a possible reference to some kind of ghoulish rite (Kittredge 141, 225), a reference, perhaps, to cannibalism. These references echo the kinds of rites mentioned by Bacon in his *Natural History*: "the mortalest poisons practised by the West Indians have some mixture of the blood or fat or flesh of men; and divers' witches and sorcerers, as well amongst the heathen as amongst the Christians, have fed upon man's flesh (qtd. in Kittredge 141)." Though Bacon was speaking here of West Indians, he was writing a piece that was addressed to an English audience. The piece that he wrote would have been read by the very society to whom Dryden was addressing his poem: the moderate society of seventeenth-century England.

Though many other semiotic associations exist in the poem, one further example will establish Dryden's rhetorical strategy of semiotic correspondences. In these lines, 133-41, his correspondences connect the devil and the Jebusites (the Roman Catholics): "who knows how far the Devil and Jebusites may go?" By closely allying the devil and the Jebusites in not only a simple relationship but one that is also an extremely close partnership, Dryden implies that he is speaking of the possible dangerous consequences of the plot which, because of the associations he has previously established, seem to have been initiated by the combined efforts of these two groups.

Dryden was a master at word play. Again and again, through his diction and his corresponding associations in his poem, he leads the reader to form semiotic nets in which Dryden can manipulate the

perceptions of his audience. Not only did Dryden manipulate his audience successfully in this poem, but he also did this in other aspects of his life. Dryden was a man who understood the power and use of words, and beholden to the king for his esteemed office, understood that he was to practice his mastery and understanding of words in the service of the state.

In this poem, Dryden rediscovered one of the oldest and most effective means for controlling an audience : that societies' fears, superstitions, and hatreds. He narrated his poem within the framework of a specific culture, a culture which would uncover the correspondences and semiotic relationships that he had placed within the text.

His attack upon political opponents through his use of societal fears and hatreds, and his appeal to underlying semiotic codes, have proved effective in this poem. Used by the late Roman Empire in an effort to rid themselves of the politically dangerous Christians (Gardner 1: 248), this was a technique used again in the twentieth century by Adolph Hitler (Allen 210). Dryden's subtle appeal to the non-reason of such societal codes as the cultural fears and hatreds of a society was, indeed, a powerful political weapon in the hands of such an expert word-smith as John Dryden; one that, as has been proven by history, works extremely well, even if only for a short time.

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