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King Arthur expos'd: a lesson in anatomy

ANDREW PINNOCK

We must admit that they are dead. . . They have in no case been adopted into the professional repertory, and it is not likely that they will ever appeal to the professional mind – at any rate in their own country.

On that dispiriting note Edward J. Dent concluded *Foundations of English Opera* sixty-five years ago.¹ And not much has happened since to prove him wrong: more student revivals; elaborate professional performances of *The Fairy Queen* in Aix-en-Provence, Lisbon more recently; but still in Great Britain no sign of a fully staged professional production faithful to the letter or even to the spirit of 1690s semi-opera. But things are stirring. Tercentenary incentives have stimulated a professional interest in our hero which is quite without precedent. With the storm breaking in 1995 – with feature writers huffing and puffing, the air-waves crackling and CD showers pouring down on reviewers' heads, with luck we shall harness some of that elemental energy and succeed where Dent had given up hope: raising the dead body of early English opera Frankenstein fashion.

This essay is to warn against Frankenstein's errors – the Frankenstein of the film, who stitched a lot of ill-matched parts together and made a monster. We run the same risk with *King Arthur*. His scattered remains have been painstakingly re-assembled; but some bits are missing, some corrupt; and it is not clear where some should go.² Understanding the royal anatomy is a necessary first step before one attempts any reconstructive surgery. There are physiological issues to consider too. An orderly display of musico-dramatic structures is all very well, but one also needs to understand their function. And what does Dryden's libretto 'mean'? In his recent book *Dryden in Revolutionary England*, David Bywaters was

¹ *Foundations of English Opera*, 1928 (repr. New York, 1965), p. 234.

² Hence the swollen appendix to *The Works of Henry Purcell*, vol. XXVI, rev. A. M. Laurie.

forced to begin by making a number of assumptions the validity of which is now often contested – that language can refer to something outside itself, that the meaning a careful reader draws from a text may approximate that which a careful writer embodied in it, that we may escape the habits of thought and expression that prevail in our own age sufficiently to understand those that prevailed in another.³

Bywaters includes a level-headed half chapter on *King Arthur* drawing on Curtis Price's earlier work – though, being a professor of English, he goes further down the literary-critical path.

Such assumptions about meaning are implicit in any attempt to explain Dryden's satirical or allegorical 'intentions'. I would add a couple more. The meaning which a careful writer thinks is embodied in his text will change as he grows older and the world moves on. (This is especially true of political material.) And, where a number of careful readers agree on a meaning unimagined – dare I say 'unintended'? – by the author, it is there really and truly; no use the author denying it, or those who claim to speak on his behalf. A text may invite different interpretations at different times; or several interpretations at once. In *King Arthur* Price finds a double meaning running throughout. Dryden

transformed what was originally a heartfelt parable of royal reconciliation into a backhanded compliment to a king for whom he did not much care. . . *King Arthur* had to be ambiguous in tone, because Dryden chose to interweave a laudatory allegory with a seditious one.⁴

The Dryden biographer James Anderson Winn goes further:

readers of either political persuasion could interpret these lines as they pleased. . . [Dryden's] skill in recasting the opera to make it open to either a Williamite or a Jacobite reading has a beauty all of its own.⁵

I would not disagree, but there is more to say.

'King Arthur conquering the Saxons' appealed to Dryden as a subject he could write about 'for the honour of [his] native country' without having to follow historical authorities very closely. King Arthur, 'being further distant in time, gives the greater scope to my invention'.⁶ He was free to make most of it up: free to draw on non-Arthurian sources for details of the plot, and for

³ Dryden in Revolutionary England (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991), p. x

⁴ Henry Purcell and the London Stage (Cambridge, 1984), p. 318; 'Political Allegory in Late-Seventeenth-Century English Opera', in *Music and Theatre Essays in honour of Winton Dean*, ed. Nigel Fortune (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 1–29

⁵ John Dryden and His World (New Haven and London, 1987), p. 449.

⁶ From the preface to the playbook (1691)

'more poetical' flesh to cover the plot's bare bones. Source hunting is an interest few will admit to these days. Still, I do think it helps to know the background reading that Dryden may have done to prepare himself and the sort of reading that will have coloured other people's reactions to his work when it first appeared publicly, either in print or on stage. Searching for *King Arthur* cribs, I have made some interesting finds.

Margaret Laurie's preface to the revised edition of *The Works of Henry Purcell*, vol. XXVI, pointed the way: 'Dryden wrote . . . *King Arthur* in 1684, to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Restoration, which would take place the following year.' Now the Restoration was a process spread out over months: more convenient to celebrate would be the event in which it culminated – Charles II's coronation on 23 April 1661 – St George's Day. On Charles II's coronation medal the king is pictured shepherding his flock (a suggestive image, if one considers the fifth-act masque in *King Arthur*). The date 23 April 1661 was fixed indelibly in the popular consciousness. The saintly connection supplied a patriotic theme for dozens of third-rate poets and ballad-mongers. Coronation Day was marked each year in towns up and down the country with bell-ringing and bonfires. James II was crowned on 23 April 1685, following his brother's shrewd example – unlike William and Mary, who chose 11 April.

Let us consider the very beginning of the opera:

ACT I. SCENE I.

Enter CONON, AURELIUS, ALBANACT.

CON. Then this is the deciding Day, to fix
Great Britain's Scepter in great Arthur's Hand.
AUR. Or put it in the bold Invaders gripe. . .
AUR. Well have we chose a Happy day, for Fight; . . .
CON. Because this day
Is Sacred to the Patron of our Isle;
A Christian, and a Soldiers Annual Feast.
ALB. Oh, now I understand you, This is
St. George of Cappadocia's Day. . .

St George's Day – 'Sacred to the Patron of our Isle' and, as it happened, 'Sacred to the Coronation of his Majesty Charles the II'. At the very beginning Dryden nails his colours firmly to the mast. Act 3, scene 2, where Emmeline, blind from birth, is miraculously cured and looks for the first time on Arthur her true love, refers unambiguously to the Restoration.⁷

⁷ The keywords are in boldface type.

MER[LIN]. My *Philidel*; go Meritorious on . . .
 and with these **Sovereign** Drops
 Restore her Sight.

Exit MERLIN giving a Vial to PHILIDEL. . . .

PHILIDEL *approaches EMMELINE, sprinkling some of the
 Water over her Eyes, out of the Vial.*

PHIL. *Thus, thus I infuse
 These Sovereign Dews. . .*

Compare Edmund Waller's poem 'To the King upon his Majesty's Happy Return':

Great Britain, like blind Polypheme, of late,
 In a wild rage, became the scorn and hate
 Of her proud neighbours . . .
 But you are come, and all their hopes are vain;
 This giant isle has got her eye again.

On to Act 5, scene 1, where Arthur and the Saxon king Oswald face each other in single combat. Perhaps that refers to the complex negotiations between King and Parliament to effect the Restoration Settlement. One should note that Abraham Cowley, in his unfinished epic treatment of *The Civil War*, 'associated the struggle of the British and Saxons with the conflict between the King and Parliament . . . a very natural parallel since the Stuarts had emphasized their British descent, and Parliament was basing its claim to power upon the ancient rights of the Saxons'.⁸ Dryden broadly hinted that he made the same association when he chose the name Oswald for his Saxon hero. Oswald had appeared before, in Sir William Davenant's unfinished heroic poem *Gondibert* (publ. 1651, repr. 1673), as a prince of the Lombard royal line, second only to Duke Gondibert in point of valour, dangerously ambitious and without his rival's statesmanlike qualities. Davenant compares the two much as Dryden does his Saxon Oswald and King Arthur. King Aribert – lacking a male heir – chooses Gondibert to wed his daughter Rhodalind and so, in due course, to inherit the crown; whereupon Oswald, urged on by his advisers, takes up arms to press his rival suit. The same happens in *King Arthur*. After some discussion, Oswald and Gondibert agree to settle the matter in a hand-to-hand fight – so do Arthur and Oswald in *King Arthur*. Both Oswalds are defeated. Oswald in the Davenant poem is killed outright (the hero goes on to further adventures); Dryden's King

⁸ Roberta Florence Brinkley, *Arthurian Legend in the Seventeenth Century* (Baltimore, 1932), pp. 102–3.

Arthur disarms Saxon Oswald and magnanimously releases him. Still, Dryden's indebtedness to Davenant is clear. Davenant's modern editor David Gladish links Oswald with Oliver Cromwell in his tentative "key" to the characters in *Gondibert*;⁹ and it seems to me that Dryden's Saxons – another Oswald at their head – may very well represent whiggish parliamentarians: still alive, because of course they were; beaten, but invited by an 'all-forgiving King'¹⁰ to share in the fruits of his victory.

[MERLIN] To Osw. Nor thou, brave Saxon Prince, disdain our Triumphs;
Britains and Saxons shall be once one People;
One Common Tongue, one Common Faith shall bind
Our Jarring Bands, in a perpetual peace.

Here in outline is a Restorer's reading of *King Arthur* to set beside the already familiar Jacobite and Williamite interpretations. In 1952 Samuel Klijger praised the skill with which Dryden 'merges the ideas of Saxon democracy and of the Royalist conceptions . . . attached to the Arthurian tradition . . . Merlin sums up the political significance of the play when he prophesies a combined British and Saxon future.'¹¹

The sacrifice scene, Act 1, scene 2, is difficult to fathom without knowing Dryden's main source. He claimed in the preface to the libretto to have 'employ'd some reading . . . to inform myself out of *Beda, Bochartus*, and other Authors, concerning the Rights and Customs of the Heathen Saxons'. In fact practically all the ritual detail came from a far handier source (which unaccountably Dryden forgot to mention): Aylett Sammes's *Britannia Antiqua Illustrata* (1676). 'The Sculpture representing the Temple of Thor, with whom is placed Woden and Frigga [= Freya].' The gods are seated on a couch – rather a decadent pose, as Sammes concedes, showing their susceptibility to Roman influence in mid-career. Formerly the Saxons 'represented their Idols standing, and set them upon Pillars and Obelisks'; and Woden, father to Thor, occupied the place of honour. Compare Dryden's stage direction: '*The Scene represents a place of Heathen worship; The three Saxon Gods, Woden, Thor, and Freya placed on Pedestals. An Altar.*' More from Sammes:

When they were to consult of matters of weight and importance, besides the inspection of Beasts Intrails they especially observed the neighing of Horses; For this purpose the whitest that could be pickt out were kept at the publick charge in Groves and Parks set apart from them.

⁹ Sir William Davenant's *Gondibert*, ed. D. F. Gladish (Oxford, 1971), p. xv.

¹⁰ *Threnodia Augustalis*, line 257; *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. John Sargeaunt (Oxford, 1910), p. 111.

¹¹ *The Goths in England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), p. 193.

Tanfan was their God of Lots, to whom they addressed themselves to interpret future Events . . . [If a sacrifice] was performed to the honour of *Woden*, according to his own institution, yet the particular determining of the party most acceptable might be the particular office and employment of *Tanfan*.

In the Laws of *Friesland* . . . there is one yet extant concerning the manner of Casting Lots . . .

Most telling of all is Sammes on Valhalden – Valhalla:

they believed that after death they were to go into *Wodens Hall*, and there drink Ale with him, and his Companions, in the Skulls of their Enemies. To this end they imagined a certain Goddess called *DYSER*, employed by *Woden*, to convey the Souls of the Valiant into his drunken Paradice.

Sammes prints the ‘Death Song of Ragnar Lothbrok’ in runic characters, with a rhyming translation.

*We have stood true to Snick and Snee,
And now I laugh to think,
In Wodens Hall there Benches be,
Where we may sit and drink.
There we shall Tope our bellies-full
Of Nappy-Ale in full-brim'd Skull.*

*Methinks I long to end,
I hear the Dyser call;
Which Woden here doth send
To bring me to his Hall.
With Asians there in highest Seat,
I merrily will quaff,
Past-hours I care not to repeat,
But when I die I'll laugh.*

Now compare the corresponding scene in Dryden:

GRIMBALD goes to the Door, and Re-enters with 6 Saxons in White, with Swords in their hands. They range themselves 3 and 3 in opposition to each other. The rest of the Stage is fill'd with Priests and Singers.

*Woden, first to thee,
A Milk-white Steed in Battle won,
We have Sacrific'd.*

CHOR. *We have Sacrific'd.*
VERS. *Let our next oblation be,
To Thor, thy thundring Son,
Of such another.*

CHOR. *We have Sacrific'd.*

VERS. *A Third: (of Friezland breed was he,)
To Woden's Wife, and to Thor's Mother:
And now we have atton'd all three
We have Sacrific'd.*

CHOR. *We have Sacrific'd.*

2 VOC. *The White Horse Neigh'd aloud.
To Woden thanks we render.
To Woden, we have vow'd.*

CHOR. *To Woden, our Defender.*

[The four last Lines in CHORUS.

VERS. *The Lot is Cast, and Tanfan pleas'd.*

CHOR. *Of Mortal Cares you shall be eas'd,
Brave Souls to be renown'd in Story.
Honour prizes,
Death despising,
Fame acquiring
By Expiring,
Dye, and reap the fruit of Glory.
Brave Souls to be renown'd in Story.*

VERS. 2. *I call ye all,*

*To Woden's Hall;
Your temples round
With Ivy bound,
In Goblets Crown'd,
And plenteous Bowls of burnish'd Gold;
Where you shall Laugh,
And dance and quaff,
The Juice, that makes the Britons bold.*

The six Saxons are led off by the Priests, in Order to be Sacrific'd.

Sammes pokes fun at the 'Death Song' – 'as good Verses as Ale could inspire' – and pictures King Lothbrok as a drunken oaf, but it is no mere 'bacchanal', nor is Dryden's re-write (and Purcell's setting of it). Woden demands a very high price for admission to his beer-hall: a valiant death in battle. The Saxon warrior-heroes look forward manfully to their reunion in Valhalla, without a drink in sight. Price remarks that 'a dichotomy of tone pervades the sacrifice scene, and the music leaves a modern audience puzzled by the difference between what they see and what they hear'.¹² Acquaintance with Dryden's source helps solve the problem.

¹² Henry Purcell and the London Stage, p. 300.

The final masque is conjured up by Merlin to celebrate ‘The Wealth, the Loves, the Glories of our Isle’, the charmed future to which Britons can look forward; and it ends, predictably, with a hymn to the Order of the Garter, that ‘most noble *Order* . . . [exceeding] in *Majesty, Honor, and Fame, all Chivalrous Orders in the world*'.¹³ There was ample precedent for a Garter-finale. To end Thomas Carew’s Whitehall masque *Coelum Britannicum* (1633) the clouds part revealing ‘a troope of fifteene starres, expressing the stellifying of our British Heroes’ – the brightest of all hanging over the King and Queen, seated in state – and below it, ‘a farre off, the prospect of Windsor Castell, the famous seat of the most honourable Order of the Garter’. The final scene in Dryden’s *Albion and Albanus* is strikingly similar:

In the Air is a Vision of the Honors of the Garter [including the Garter Star, of course – pictured in many a pub sign]; *the Knights in Procession, and the King under a Canopy: Beyond this, the upper end of St. George’s Hall.*

No doubt Dryden had *Coelum Britannicum* in mind: the old masque was better known than it deserved to be, since it had been mis-attributed to Davenant and reprinted in the 1673 folio edition of his works.

Given the intimate connection between *Albion and Albanus* and *King Arthur*, perhaps one should not be surprised to find the same emblems used at the climactic moment in both for essentially the same purpose. In *Albion and Albanus*, Fame standing on a globe (emblazoned with the Arms of England) sings to the glory of Charles II who, in the person of Albion, has just been ‘adopted’ as a god, and lifted up to heaven in a ‘very glorious Machine’ sent to collect him:

FAME. Renown, assume thy Trumpet!
From Pole to Pole resounding . . .
Great *Albion’s* Name shall be
The Theme of Fame . . .
Record the Garters Glory:
A Badge for Hero’s, and for Kings to bear . . .
And swell th’Immortal Story . . .

A full chorus repeats everything Fame sings, with dancers joining in to end the opera. Compare the words of the final chorus in *King Arthur*, with the Garter-revealing stage direction and a little introductory dialogue:

The Scene opens above, and discovers the Order of the Garter.

¹³ Selden, quoted in Elias Ashmole, *The Institutions, Laws, and Ceremonies of the Most Noble Order of the Garter* (London, 1672), p. 190.

Enter Honour, Attended by Hero's.

MERL. . . . Now look above, and in Heav'ns High Abyss,
Behold what Fame attends those future Hero's.
Honour, who leads 'em to that Steepy Height,
In her Immortal Song, shall tell the rest.
(Honour sings.)

1.

HON. *St. George, the Patron of our Isle,
A Soldier, and a Saint,
On that Auspicious Order smile,
Which Love and Arms will plant.*

2.

*Our Natives not alone appear
To Court this Martiall Prize;
But Foreign Kings, Adopted here,
Their Crowns at Home despise.*

3.

*Our Sovereign High, in Aweful State,
His Honours shall bestow;
And see his Scepter'd Subjects wait
On his Commands below.*

A full Chorus of the whole Song: After which the Grand Dance.

Here are verses 'clearly referring to William';¹⁴ 'Foreign Kings [pay] obeisance to King William III'¹⁵ – an allusion to William which, 'though superficially laudatory, may easily be construed as scathingly ironic'.¹⁶ The source-hunter can supply an amusing gloss from Elias Ashmole's monumental folio volume *The Institutions, Laws, and Ceremonies of the Most Noble Order of the Garter* (1672):

The Institution of the Order of the Garter . . . The Honor and Reputation thereof . . . It hath been honored with the Companionship of divers Emperors, Kings, and Sovereign Princes of Christendom, who reputed it among their greatest honors, to be chosen and admitted thereinto; insomuch as some of them have with impatience courted the honour of Election. For we find remaining upon this Registry of Honor, eight Emperors of Germany, three Kings of Spain, five French Kings, two Kings of Scotland, five Kings of Denmark, five Kings of Portugal, two Kings of Sweden, one King of Poland, one King of Aragon, two Kings of Naples, besides sundry Dukes and other Free Princes, as one Duke of Gelderland, one Duke of Holland, two Dukes of Burgundy, two Dukes of Brunswick, one Duke of Milan, two Dukes of Urbin,

¹⁴ Winn, *John Dryden*, p. 448.

¹⁵ Price, *Henry Purcell*, p. 316.

¹⁶ Bywaters, *Dryden in Revolutionary England*, p. 91.

one *Duke of Ferrara*, one *Duke of Savoy*, two *Dukes of Holstein*, one *Duke of Saxony*, and one *Duke of Wetttemberg*, seven *Counts Palatines* of the *Rhyne*, four *Princes of Orange*, and one *Marquess of Brandenburgh* . . . It entitles those *Knights* and *Noblemen*, whose virtue hath raised them to this degree of honor, to be *Companions* and *Fellows* with *Emperors* and *Kings*; a Prerogative of an high nature, and a reward for greatest merits.

The 'four Princes of Orange' mentioned here pre-date William III as crowned King of England and head of the Order *ex officio*. Dryden's reference to 'Foreign Kings', in a Garter context, would have been perfectly intelligible even in 1684.

There is no doubt that Dryden's audience in 1691 would have seized on 'Foreign Kings' as a reference to William, as modern critics have also done. But whether Dryden wrote it with William in mind is far from clear. Seemingly the most obvious 1691 addition to *King Arthur* may be no such thing. This final chorus may have been taken over from Dryden's original draft – the draft of an opera written to eulogize Charles II. It may have come to mean something new and subversive in completely different political circumstances, but with the words unchanged. In fact, as Price has suggested, not much re-writing need have happened at all.

Dryden's preface to *King Arthur*, published with the text of the opera in 1691, is worth a close reading:

I wrote it, seven Years ago . . . But not to offend the present Times, nor a Government which has hitherto protected me, I have been oblig'd so much to alter the first Design, and take away so many Beauties from the Writing, that it is now no more what it was formerly, than the present Ship of the *Royal Sovereign*, after so often taking down, and altering . . . [is] the Vessel it was at the first Building.

Cutting would explain the sad demise of 'so many Beauties'. Dryden does not say that his dramatic verse was marred by party-political re-writing, only that beautiful parts of the original draft were taken away: 'not to offend the present Times', he was obliged to alter the design, to make (or to agree to) structural changes. Students of dramatic opera are used to structural changes made at a late stage in the production process, changes in the running order to solve logistical problems which only became apparent during rehearsal. Sometimes it is possible to work out what these changes were and consider undoing them, where the printed word-books and independently authoritative musical manuscripts disagree, or where the music sources show signs of disturbance. *King Arthur* is in 'disarray', it has been claimed: very revealing disarray, when one has learned how to read the evidence.

Dryden pointed to a number of cuts (one can only guess where the knife went in); but he also complained that in places he had been 'oblig'd to cramp [his] Verses' in obedience to the composer's wishes, bending the 'Rules of Poetry' to produce a serviceable libretto.

I flatter my self with an Imagination, that a Judicious Audience will easily distinguish betwixt the Songs, wherein I have comply'd with [Purcell], and those in which I have followed the Rules of Poetry, in the Sound and Cadence of the Words.

In the *King Arthur* word-book, then, one can expect to see four different classes of song text:

1. lyrics written back in 1684; Purcell set some of them, 'humour[ing] the poet's invention' – but he ignored others as unsuitable for music on Dryden's own admission;
2. lyrics originally written in 1684, revised in 1691 following Purcell's advice;
3. lyrics completely new in 1691;
4. lyrics not by Dryden at all; the fifth-act dialogue 'You say 'tis love' is labelled 'SONG by Mr. HOWE'.

Dryden, in the preface to *Albion and Albanus*, hinted at a set of 'rules which I have given to myself in the writing of an opera in general, and of this opera in particular'; rules he is likely to have followed in the writing of *King Arthur* too – at least in those parts of it which he wanted set to music:

'Tis no easy matter in our language to make words so smooth, and numbers so harmonious, that they shall almost set themselves, and yet there are rules for this in nature, and as great a certainty of quantity in our [English] syllables, as either in the Greek or Latin. . . I may, without vanity, own some advantages which are not common to every writer, such as . . . the knowledge of the Italian and French language, and the being conversant with some of their best performances in this kind; which have furnished me with such variety of measures, as have given the composer, Monsieur Grabut, what occasion he could wish to show his extraordinary talent in diversifying the recitative, the lyrical part, and the chorus.

Dryden's experience with *Albion and Albanus* persuaded him that a librettist's job was to write verses with varying line lengths, stress patterns and rhyme schemes, which a composer 'exactly express[ing] his sense' would set mostly as recitative or arioso: Dryden would never have imagined that full-blown arias rose spontaneously from the pages of his libretto and 'almost set themselves'.

But the poetical variety which Dryden accounted such a virtue in 1684 – providing Grabu with a steady stream of musical inspiration – was not at all what Purcell wanted seven years later. There is very little recitative or arioso in the *King Arthur* score: instead, a succession of songs and choruses, making much slower progress through the word-book than Dryden had anticipated. Purcell's compositional techniques were not those for which the libretto had been designed. Extensive cuts were inevitable. Dryden saw that the words were printed, even if Purcell had not set them, so readers could compare those songs in which he had 'followed the Rules of Poetry' with those wherein he had complied with Mr Purcell's stern demands. It is a pity that he did not distinguish them in the way Davenant did in *Salmacida Spolia* (1640): '[A Song] Inviting the Kings appearance in the Throne of Honor. To be printed, not sung.' There is probably a lot less missing music for *King Arthur* than many authorities have supposed: in fact there is the opposite problem of redundant printed lyrics. Compare (A) 'O sight, the mother of desires' from the restoration scene in Act 3, for which no Purcell setting survives, and (B) 'How happy the lover', the Passacaglia in Act 4. Keywords are in bold:

(A) MAN SINGS. *O Sight, the Mother of Desires,
What Charming Objects dost thou yield!
'Tis sweet, when tedious Night expires,
To see the Rosie Morning guild
The Mountain-Tops, and paint the Field!
But, when Clorinda comes in sight,
She makes the Summers Day more bright,
And when she goes away, 'tis Night.
When Fair Clorinda comes in sight, &c.*

CHOR. WOM. SINGS. *'Tis sweet the Blushing Morn to view;
And Plains adorn'd with Pearly Dew:
But such cheap Delights to see,
Heaven and Nature,
Give each Creature;
They have Eyes, as well as we.
This is the Joy, all Joys above
To see, to see,
That only she,
That only she we love!*

CHOR. MAN. SINGS. *This is the Joy, all Joys above, &c.
And, if we may discover,
What Charms both Nymph and Lover,
'Tis, when the Fair at Mercy lies,*

*With Kind and Amorous Anguish,
To Sigh, to Look, to Languish,
On each others Eyes!*

CHOR. OF ALL *And if we may discover, &c.*
MEN & WOM.

I.

(B) SONG. *How happy the Lover,
How easie his Chain
How pleasing his Pain?
How sweet to discover!
He sighs not in vain.
For Love every Creature
Is form'd by his Nature;
No Joys are above
The Pleasures of Love.*

II.

*In vain are our Graces,
In vain are your Eyes,
If Love you despise;
When Age furrows Faces,
'Tis time to be wise.
Then use the short Blessing:
That Flies in Possessing:
No Joys are above
The Pleasures of Love.*

This rhyme-recycling suggests that 'How happy the lover' began life as a metrically more regular re-write of 'O sight', suitable (as 'O sight' plainly is not) for a strophic setting and probably meant to replace 'O sight' in Act 3. I think it was relocated in Act 4 rather later.

Evidence in the musical sources supports this theory. Music for the first five lines of stanza II, 'In vain are our Graces', is missing or garbled in three otherwise reliable manuscripts; and these same manuscripts – musical continuity notwithstanding – transfer the whole of the second stanza to Act 5. Why? Well, in Act 4 'How happy the lover' follows hard on the heels of 'Two daughters of this aged stream'. The two daughters are soprano duettists, sirens who 'arise from [a pool of] Water . . . [and] show themselves [naked] to the Waste'. They would hardly have had time to dry off, dress decently as woodland nymphs and re-enter at once for 'How happy the lover' – which

had therefore to be performed two principal sopranos short. Purcell's setting of stanza II, needing another three solo sopranos, was probably more than the chorus could manage unaided. So stanza II was cut. Where Purcell's music for the first stanza finished, someone wrote 'end of Act IV', sensibly recording their decision not to run on to the end of the movement. It is hardly surprising that later copyists, transcribing the whole lot, should mistake this stage direction and begin Act 5 where Act 4 appeared to end – cutting the Passacaglia in two. 'Blunders' like this gladden the heart of an imaginative editor.

One approaches *King Arthur* expecting great things: it has been billed as a 'momentous collaboration' between the foremost composer and the foremost dramatic poet of the age; 'a work unique in English music history, indeed without parallel anywhere. Though it is primarily an entertainment, it remains a unified work, unlike *The Fairy Queen*, and a truly poetic stage piece, unlike *Dioclesian*'.¹⁷ I think Zimmerman overstates the case. In this essay I have tried to show how the 1691 *King Arthur* – like *The Fairy Queen*, like *Dioclesian* – was adapted from a script written sometime before. True, *King Arthur* 'is unique among Purcell's semi-operas in that it was designed from the first as such';¹⁸ true, too, Dryden was alive and well when *King Arthur* went into production and available for consultation (unlike Shakespeare, Fletcher or Massinger). But the textual evidence does not suggest that Dryden substantially re-worded his original draft. Smoother versions of some of the lyrics were made grudgingly – modern music 'cramped' his poetical style; and Purcell probably did not set all the songs. Another author altogether supplied words for the prominently placed fifth-act duet. An imposing chorus planned for Act 3 was perhaps relocated in Act 4, more for practical than for artistic reasons. In short, pressures of production were as much responsible for the way *King Arthur* looked in 1691 as was Dryden himself.

¹⁷ Franklin B. Zimmerman, *Henry Purcell, 1659–1695: His Life and Times*, rev. edn (Philadelphia, 1983), p. 191.

¹⁸ J. A. Westrup, *Purcell*, rev. edn by Nigel Fortune (London, 1980), p. 131.