

Tina Skouen:

Passion and Persuasion: John Dryden's The Hind and the Panther

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Tina Skouen's *Passion and Persuasion: John Dryden's The Hind and the Panther* is a recent addition to VDM Verlag's print-on-demand listings. The text is a revision of Skouen's doctoral dissertation (Oslo: University of Oslo, 2007), and earlier versions or portions of the book have appeared as articles or essays in *Rhetorica* (2006: 24.4), *Notes and Queries* (2007: 54.4), and *Illuminating Darkness* (ed. Päivi Mehtonen, Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2007). As might be expected given the slightly different audiences of these publishing venues, Skouen seeks to satisfy scholars interested in the seventeenth-century from the perspectives of both rhetorical and literary history. Dryden is a particularly interesting choice for such a study, for even though critics frequently refer to him as a Christian humanist, his works are usually identified as having embodied the values and attitudes of the Age of Reason. The discursive conflict suggested by these different categorizations is that which dominated the late seventeenth century, particularly in Dryden's Restoration England: the lingering influences of Renaissance humanism versus the valorization of rational argumentation promoted by, among other forces, fascination with the century's 'new science'. This conflict had, of course, profound import for the era's attitudes toward and place in both the rhetorical and poetic traditions. Dryden's works demand consideration for many reasons, but, as Skouen's study makes evident, his texts are especially useful for scholars seeking to uncover some of the ways that late seventeenth-century Europe negotiated the intellectual shift from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment.

Skouen's Introduction (pp. 1-9) provides a useful framework for the succeeding chapters. She indicates that Dryden's handling of his public role as Poet Laureate and Royal Historiographer influenced and was influenced by his private crises of faith. At the same time, Skouen separates herself from both those critics who focus primarily on the "historical and ideological contexts of his work" and those who emphasize "the material conditions of Dryden's literary production" (p. 1). Her interest, she makes clear, is the way in which Dryden's efforts at persuasion, especially those of his *The Hind and the Panther* of 1687, evince his classical rhetorical training. Skouen acknowledges that such a position runs counter to that of most commentaries on the poet-critic, as he and his rhetorical thinking are more often "associated with the age of reason and the rhetoric of science" than with Renaissance humanism or the classical tradition (p. 2). The Introduction also provides an overview of Skouen's argument, with summaries of her text's main points. Finally, the Introduction explains that the arrangement of the book's topics follows both classical rhetoric and the rhetorical thought of Dryden's age by proceeding from invention to "forms of expression" (p. 9).

The seventeen chapters of Skouen's book are grouped into four parts, each of which examines a different aspect of Dryden's rhetorical thought and/or oratorical practice. The first part,

“Passion and persuasion” (pp. 11-30), is devoted to establishing that “the tabloid description of Dryden” (p. 14) and his work, which asserts that he is exclusively an example of that plain, direct, dryly rational kind of thought and expression associated in many minds with the late-seventeenth century, is somewhat misleading. Instead, Skouen argues over three chapters, Dryden’s resonant sentences, stirring images, and verbal playfulness align his understanding of persuasion with such classical authorities as Horace and Quintilian. Skouen further substantiates her claims by considering several texts by Dryden and his contemporaries, which show that two invidious misreadings of Dryden’s comments regarding rhetoric have been prevalent in the criticism. First, Dryden does not refer only to *elocutio*, but also to *actio* and *pronuntiatio*, when he employs the term ‘elocution’. This suggests that the bookish image of Dryden in the popular imagination fails to account for the image of Dryden that Skouen draws from the texts, an image of a man much more concerned with oral communication and social interaction than other portraits would allow. Second, the accusation, most famously voiced by T. S. Eliot, that Dryden is an example of a thinker and author too concerned with reason to demonstrate strong emotion, is dismissed with a reading of Dryden’s engagement with and employment of classical strategies for the evocation and display of emotion.

Part Two, “*Captatio benevolentiae*: Appeals to the audience” (pp. 31-56), is also composed of three chapters. Across them, Skouen explores Dryden’s engagement with the audiences of his poems and plays, and turns to more direct analysis of her study’s primary example of Dryden’s art, *The Hind and the Panther*. Skouen argues that Dryden had an uneasy relationship with his audience, whom he approached as if they were judging a piece of forensic oratory. His relative distrust of their abilities to fulfill their role capably was not inconsequential, although he, like Quintilian, ultimately preferred the reader, who is allowed time to reread and reflect, to the listener, whose judgments will more likely be hasty and misinformed. The remainder of this part is given over to examining the implications of Dryden’s seeming dismissal, in *The Hind and the Panther*, of the conventional rhetorical goal of gaining his audience’s goodwill. Indeed, Skouen claims, there is a powerful “struggle between the author and his readers” (p. 44). The struggle manifests itself in two ways. Dryden uses a beast fable allegorically, a maneuver that is sure to alienate almost anyone involved in the English political and religious debacles he describes, as all are reduced to animals. In addition, the poem so thoroughly foils attempts to pin down Dryden’s attitude regarding his subject matter that one will likely find the question of his rhetorical message insoluble. The resultant frustrations, however, must be seen as Dryden’s way of promoting deliberation and moderation in a religious and political society that is, he suggests, being driven to ever greater conflict as a result of its bestial irrationality and ingratitude.

The five chapters collected in the third part, “Invention: The temperance topic” (pp. 57-122), elucidate Dryden’s advocacy of moderation in much greater detail. Skouen first provides numerous examples of seventeenth-century England’s tendency to side with Augustine rather than the Stoics; instead of seeking to obliterate or deny passion, one must temper it with reason. In addition, the control of emotion with rational faculties finds parallels in the soul’s control of the body and the sovereign’s control of the body politic. Relying heavily on references to John Wilkins’s 1668 *An Essay Towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language*, Skouen moves away from conventional readings of Dryden’s fable, which depend on religious or political understandings of the allegory, in favor of a *psychomachia*, in which the various beasts of the fable represent competing moral and emotional impulses within a single soul. Skouen’s main point is that such a reading of the poem would indeed have been apparent to the careful and

informed seventeenth-century reader Dryden hoped to attract, and that concern over the outcome of the soul's struggle would awaken passion within such a reader. According to Skouen, then, the poem's apparent resistance to interpretation can be seen as an effort to garner a strong reaction from – and even to provide some intellectual and moral pleasure for – its intended audience. This reading is further supported, Skouen argues, by the similarities between the structure of Dryden's poem and that of classical forensic orations.

The fourth and final part of Skouen's book, "Elocution: The body poetic" (pp. 123-180) turns to the poem's interest in and use of language. Skouen identifies a commonality between contemporary theory and early modern theory with regard to this point, in that Restoration-era readers apparently were and contemporary critics are acutely attuned to the aural dimension of reading, a dimension that has much less to do with the voice of the author than the voice the text creates in the reader. Such tendencies point to a continued fascination with the ways in which written texts suggest live performance and the consequently necessary presence of an actual living body; and Skouen moves forward from this point by means of a conceptualization of the performative aspects implied by Dryden's description of his poem as a 'body'. As part of the religious debate with which Dryden was concerned centered on matters of interpretation of scripture, the poem's advocacy of ways of reading carries great theological weight. However, Skouen reads Dryden's use of language as also engaging in more general theories of language, particularly seventeenth-century efforts to identify correspondences between letters and sounds, and words and their senses, and to establish rules for clarity in English style and diction. Dryden's concern with such matters indicates, Skouen maintains, his position on the cusp between classical conceptions of oratorical endeavor and those revised understandings of that task demanded by the increasingly ubiquitous printed text.

These four parts of the book are followed by a very brief Conclusion (pp. 181-182), in which Skouen restates her work's primary argument: listening to the "oral ghost" (p. 181) of Dryden's poetic body and understanding the extent to which he draws on classical rhetoric, reveals that he was much more closely connected to Renaissance poets such as Donne than to others of that later age with which he is more commonly associated. Furthermore, Dryden's close focus on the language of his work was tied to the era's efforts to create lasting and effective works in the English vernacular during a period when changing technologies for dissemination of texts called for new approaches to composition. Skouen's examination of Dryden's works, particularly *The Hind and the Panther*, is ultimately interested in uncovering these qualities and concerns, ones for which conventional arguments grouping Dryden with the age of reason fail to account.

Skouen's book is valuable for several reasons. Her focus on Dryden as a rhetorician in the classical tradition is certainly exceptional, yet her careful support of her argument with reference to a broad range of scholarship in the context of intellectual history – including not only classical rhetorical, ethical, and even medical texts, but also a wide array of early modern grammars, rhetorics, and linguistic treatises, as well as the most relevant points from centuries of Dryden criticism – justifies her departure from conventional readings of the poet-critic. Her well-organized insights are successful overall, and she thereby reclaims Dryden for more sensitive readings of his works as important to a key period in rhetorical history, readings that avoid the temptation to classify him in accord with what she calls his "tabloid" image.

By elucidating the ways in which Dryden stands with one foot in the English Renaissance and the other in the Age of Reason, Skouen is able to offer some broader assertions about the

most important intellectual debates of the period. At the same time, this perspective helps to explain subtle distinctions while allowing resistance to easy resolutions of those ambiguities and contradictions that fill Dryden's poetry and the thought of his age. In addition to its particular appeal to scholars of the history of rhetoric, Skouen's work will likely find a receptive audience in literary scholars interested in Dryden generally and *The Hind and the Panther* in particular. She does an outstanding job at close readings of this poem when required, and such passages are among her most impressive.

A few minor shortcomings might be suggested here. The first is a bit surprising, given Skouen's evident sensitivity to the complexities of changes in thought across time. Although the focus of her study is *The Hind and the Panther* of 1687, she draws on texts composed as early as 1664 (the Dedication of *The Rival Ladies*) and as late as Dryden's last year (the Preface to *Fables Ancient and Modern* of 1700). While such a range of sources indicates a broad familiarity with Dryden's work, it is perhaps less clear that remarks on moderating the passions published in 1664 or references to Horace and Aristotle from a text of 1695 will necessarily or reliably indicate an attitude or set of rhetorical practices consistent with those of the author of *The Hind and the Panther*. That an author's understanding of one or another concept, or expressed understandings of her or his relation to a tradition, may change over time should be particularly emphasized in the case of Dryden, whose public and private life was often in turmoil, as is suggested by the rapid shift from the fervent Anglicanism of *Religio Laici* (1682) to the Catholic apologetics of *The Hind and the Panther*. Another complaint might be the occasionally cavalier treatment of contemporary critical theory and poetics. Skouen, for example, usefully advances her discussion of the performative aspects of *The Hind and the Panther* by drawing on Garrett Stewart's *Reading Voices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), but also incorporates a comment regarding poetic delivery from Charles Bernstein. While Bernstein is admirable in many ways, and valuable to Skouen's argument, the significant conceptual leap taken when connecting ideas about performance held by Dryden with those of a leading Language poet could receive more sensitive treatment than the one sentence Skouen devotes to the point.

Any complaints voiced above are, again, minor ones. Skouen's reading of Dryden's rhetorical and poetic practices will likely be found more than satisfying by her readers. Her scholarship is strong, and her text is readable and provocative. This study's careful defense of a reinterpretation of Dryden's relation to and place in the rhetorical tradition both justifies new and more careful readings of the author and demonstrates how such readings may be executed. In addition, Skouen's evident awareness of early modern debates regarding language, the passions, and persuasion allows her discussion of *The Hind and the Panther* to contribute to our understanding of a period in which many fields, including rhetoric, met significant challenges and calls for redefinition in often surprising ways.

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