On the Congeniality in Spirit between John Dryden and Early Royal Society: The Influence of Science Upon Literature

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Abstract. It was in the seventeenth century that English society underwent significant social changes. The early Royal Society of London was established in this century and dedicated itself to the progress of natural science. The founding of Royal Society not only represented the leading competitiveness in science but also strengthened national self-confidence. As a representative poet, dramatist, and critic in the age of Restoration, John Dryden was chosen a member of the newly instituted Royal Society. During his contact with Royal Society, the congeniality radiating from the spirit of Royal Society drew Dryden closer to it. Under the influence, Dryden not only deepened his understanding of the skeptical way of thinking, but also applied scientific way of thinking and scientific discoveries to his writing, and even echoed with the rhetorical ideal of Royal Society in the manners of discourse.

Introduction

It was in the seventeenth century that English society underwent significant social changes which led to the historic bourgeois revolution, the subsequent Restoration and the eventual establishment of constitutional monarchy and parliament. The early Royal Society of London was established in this century and dedicated itself to the progress of natural science. Its founding not only represented the leading competitiveness in science but also strengthened national self-confidence. As a representative poet, dramatist, and critic in the age of Restoration, John Dryden (1631-1700) was chosen a member of the newly instituted Royal Society. During his contact with Royal Society, the congeniality radiating from the spirit of Royal Society drew Dryden closer to it. Under the influence, Dryden not only deepened his understanding of the skeptical way of thinking, but also applied scientific way of thinking and scientific discoveries to his writing, and even echoed with the rhetorical ideal of Royal Society in the manners of discourse and successfully bridged science and literature.

Congeniality in Spirit

The whole picture of Restoration would be characterized by the political turmoil and social upheaval. Confusion with the current state of the country indicated an eagerness for change as well as a quest for answers amid uncertainty. Poetry, together with science, began to revive in the aftermath of the iron dominion of military fanaticism (Scott 32). The relationship between science and poetry can never be closer upon the establishment of the royal society and the invitation to literary men for membership. “Restoration offers a momentary proof of what co-operation between science and poetry might be like. The glimpse is no more than that. A host of literary men entered the Royal Society in the first few years of its official existence from 1660, and took part in its early ‘inquisitions’ ” (Watson 1963: 26). Consequently, Dryden would be the best examples to prove the closeness and congeniality between the new science and poetry and eager to identify himself with the original purpose of its founding and its strong sense of mission.
The first historiographer bishop Thomas Sprat (1635-1713) wrote in a manifesto The History of the Royal Society of London (1667) and declared their first purpose was “no more, then only the satisfaction of breathing a freer air, and of conversing in quiet one with another, without being ingag’d in the passions, and madness of that dismal Age” (Sprat 1667: 53). Therefore, it would not be difficult to understand the appeal of the early Royal Society to Dryden as it offers an escape from the dismal reality, promises a future of hope and trust, and most importantly enlightens his own practice as a poet-critic with scientific spirit. Moreover, the Royal Society aims higher than the experimental learning and eventually involves the shaping of human mind. Their common goal is no less than to “redeem the minds of men, from obscurity, uncertainty, and bondage” (Sprat 1667:58). It’s more than inspirational to Dryden as he himself would do everything possible to improve the taste of the audience, please as well as instruct the audience. To put it simply, Dryden was also keenly concerned with the shaping of human mind and eager to identify himself with the purpose of Royal Society.

Both the shaping of human mind and a critical way of thinking were on the agenda of the new science. It’s “a critique of the very science they were promoting, a critique which varies all the way from timidity in generalization to philosophical skepticism” (Bredvold 1934: 60-61). Though this way of thinking can best guarantee the reliability of knowledge, it cannot shirk misinterpretation. “[T]o this fault of Sceptical doubting, the Royal Society may perhaps be suspected, to be a little too much inclin’d: because they always professed, to be so backward from settling of Principles, or fixing upon Doctrines” (Sprat 1667: 106-107). That’s exactly what Sprat would defend for the new science. Either the unattainability of certainty or the complete doubt in the unattainability may probably enter the intellectual scope of the Royal Society and urge its response from a scientific perspective. When such a reasonable doubt is applied to the new science and the natural philosophy, the question remains as whether scientific inquiries can shed light on the quest for certainty. Factually, the natural philosophy is far from doubtless and the uncertainty of science undoubtedly increased the difficulty in the acquisition of knowledge. But this doesn’t mean the denial of access to knowledge. Quite contrary, they were far from intending to discourage scientific and philosophic activity. But they believed that he is least likely to go astray who is most keenly aware of the weakness and deception of human faculties” (Bredvold 1928: 430-431). The self-consciousness of its members about the limitedness of the natural philosophy and inadequacy of human mind may agreeably find support in Dryden and his way of thinking despite the fact he was a layman in the scientific circle but a true representative among men of letters.

Moreover, this closeness exactly indicates the possible bridge between science and literature. A brief comparison between Robert Boyle (1627-1691)’s The Sceptical Chymist (1661) and Dryden’s Essay of Dramatic Poesy (1668) would serve well to verify the link in the manner of demonstration and argumentation. The Sceptical Chymist takes the form of an open conversation involving 5 friends: Carneades the host and the Skeptic, Philoponus the Chymist, Themistius the Aristotelian, Eleutherius the impartial Judge, and an unnamed narrator. He clearly cast Aristotelian theory of the four elements and three elements by Paracelsus in complete doubt and offered his own definition of “chemical element”. This critical way of exposition involves a dispute in quest of solutions regardless of objections. Dryden may not be able to understand chemistry but Dryden may find Boyle’s way of exposition quite agreeable. In his Essay of Dramatic Poesy, four interlocutors take part in the debate on behalf of the moderns, ancients, Francophile and English. Every one of them takes turns to argue and counter argue. But none of them end up by gaining the upper hand decisively. That’s what Dryden intended: to leave all of them doubtful for the readers to determine. “Eugenius demands the same privilege of doubt and dissent that was taken for granted in the ‘modest inquisitions of the Royal Society.’ His role in the Essay is essentially the same as that of Boyle's interlocutor in The Sceptical Chymist, for both speakers challenge the authority of received opinions in the name of free inquiry” (Harth 29).

It’s positive that Dryden’s Essay might owe something to his contemporary scientists and Robert Boyle might serve as a source of inspiration for him. Boyle, as one of the founding members of the society may best represent the spirit of the royal society, which emphasized the uncertainty of
science and vote for a critical outlook. It is the “critical” way which might help Dryden better demonstrate his skeptical viewpoints. The following self-declaration of Dryden is manifest: “in vindication of myself, I must crave leave to say that my whole discourse was skeptical…and which is imitated by the modest inquisitions of the Royal Society” (Dryden 1926: 124).

Instead of rushing to hasty generalization, Dryden remains critical, adopting the skeptical way of reasoning and indulging in the inquiring process among equals. In Harth’s words, “a sceptic in philosophy” would be the self-image Dryden wanted to present. By the same token, Boyle’s attempt to reject an unquestioning faith in ancient authority and belief in the freedom of inquiry best embodies the spirit of “scepsis scientifica”. Theoretically and scientifically, Royal Society guided and inspired Dryden in his practice as poet-critic, even the shaping of human mind in general.

The Influence of Science upon Literature

The congeniality in spirit merely starts to bring Dryden under the full impact of science. On the surface, Dryden’s contact with Royal Society can be said to be short-lived, simple and coincidental in view of the length of his membership. But the opposite is very true. Dryden’s contact with Royal Society can also be viewed as deep enough to strengthen the connection between science and literature, strong enough to equip him with scientific way of thinking, and influential enough to deepen Dryden’s understanding of skepticism. As a result, he vigorously defended the new science and applied scientific knowledge and discoveries to his works.

The moment Dryden was elected as a member may mark the official association of Dryden with the Royal Society. 26th November, 1662, he was chosen a member of the newly Instituted Royal Society. As a member of the committee responsible for the improving of English language, Dryden was active and willing to discuss the problems of language and style. There’s no doubt he would come into contact with the scientific ideas, attempt to understand them and even use them in a metaphorical and figurative way in his own writings. Delinquency was noted in the records of the Society in 1666 and in the following year reportedly Dryden was dropped by the Society. But it’s reasonable to say that the end to his membership didn’t indicate an end in his association with the Royal Society or its members. It could be long and deep in what they have in common regardless of the membership on the surface. He continues to feel the impact of the scientific ideas and occasionally try to demonstrate his critical view with the help of scientific terms. For one thing, as early as 1668, the appearance of the critical dialogue Of Dramatic Poesy marks the start of his career as a poet-critic. It is the very essay Dryden dedicated to Charles, Lord Buckhurst who was a member of the Royal Society (Sprat 1667: 432). Later in a letter to the same Charles who succeeded his father as sixth Earl of Dorset in 1677, Dryden briefly spoke of his recognition of Rymer’s The Tragedies of the Last Age (1677) during his stay on Dorset’s estate (Watson 1962: 208). The defense of the experimental methods and the commendation of the new thought and science are bound to impress his friend of the Royal Society with much satisfaction and trust. For another, Dryden’s unbiased emphasis on the scientific knowledge is shown in the qualification of an ideal poet he claimed in “A Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire” (1693). His estimate of a poet’s knowledge inclusively emphasized the necessity of mathematical and geographical knowledge.

His various intercourses with some of its members in person made us believe that his interest in the Royal Society didn’t come to a sudden halt yet continued to impact his practice as a poet-critic. Though his career as a fellow member of the Society was short-lived, the task that he was assigned to as a member of standing committees was treated as a life-long process with much dedication. The improving of the English language demands his dedication and reveals his abiding interest and enthusiasm for science in the embodiment Royal Society. Dryden’s relation with the new science and the Royal Society was roughly summarized by Sir Walter Scott as follows: “Dryden, who through life was attached to experimental philosophy, speedily associated himself with those who took interest in its progress” (Scott I: 32). Though his understanding might not be very accurate, it’s manifest that he was familiar with the scientific findings of the Society and keen on the employment of them from the angle of a man of letters. That’s why Mark Van Doren (1894-1972) once
commented: He was not a scientist. Yet he picked up the new language, and adopted the new airs; he established what Macaulay named “the scientific vocabulary” in verse (Van Doren 18-19). His keenness and novelty in instilling scientific features into literature is ground-breaking and innovative. This readiness and willingness to borrow the scientific treasure to decorate or highlight the ancient house of literature itself reveals his discerning power and warrants his insightful judgment. “No English poet, not even Mr. W. H. Auden, has used scientific analogies so readily. No English critic, certainly, has employed them so abundantly. Dryden’s works and especially his criticism are the largest single corpus of our literature to bear the stamp of scientific interest” (Watson 1963:27).

As a poet-critic, not only the shaping of human mind should be the major concern, how to put this thinking into practice matters as well. The Royal Society even offers a guidebook on how to deal with his rhetoric in addition to the inspirational way of thinking in the formation of human mind. It is not hard to find examples in which the poet John Dryden (who was an early member of the Society) pays respect to the linguistic ideals that are voiced in Sprat’s History (Skouen 39). Sprat spoke of the manner of discourse by “concluding, that eloquence ought to be banish’d out of all civil Societies, as a thing fatal to Peace and good Manners” (Sprat 1667: 111). It’s the rhetorical ideal for Royal Society to strive for as well as a wakeup call against an excessive emphasis on rhetorical skills in their own society. Sprat was in favor of the ban on excessive eloquence in case of abuse and resorted to “[m]athematical plainness”. His preference for plainness and clarify over luxury and redundancy is typical of the scientific inquiry and experimental philosophy. Sprat has made it clear by distinguishing the best uses in the hands of the wise from the worst use in the hands of the wicked. Eloquence can be both positive and negative in Sprat’s words. In order to demonstrate what was found to be true and facilitate easy access to knowledge, “the ornaments of speaking” should be promoted. On the contrary, if they fall into the wrong crowd of people, it would be against the original good will and generate confusion and unreasonable craze. As for his contemporaries, Sprat warned them of the danger of excessive imagery and the worse uses. If eloquence caters for the need of emotions against reason, the true sublime thought can be downgraded as low and cheap. Moreover, the potential threat to “peace and good manners” urges sprat to banish all use of “abundance of Phrase, this trick of Metaphors, this volubility of Tongue (Sprat 1667:112). Eloquence, the double-edge sword, confuses our knowledge of nature and the world in general while science clarifies our understanding of nature. Thus eloquence is likened to the stumbling block on the road to truth while experimental science is undeniable conductive to remove mists and uncertainty in human pursuit of knowledge. It boils down to the conclusion that “Science, not eloquence, is the driving force of civilization, and this is Sprat’s most powerful argument” (Skouen 48).

Sprat’s view on rhetoric cannot said to be encompassing rather critical. Rhetoric was traditionally believed to be the last straw which saved human being from falling into “its brutish existence in the wilderness” (Cicero 1860:14). The distinction between man and beasts lies in the recognizable role of reason and speech: man is a rational animal, and his capacity for reason reveals itself through his speech (Cicero 1860:14). That’s the very basic role rhetoric played in the civilization of human beings. But the civilizing power of eloquence didn’t stop here and aimed higher than that. Even if Sprat might agree on this point, he didn’t assume that a man was capable of using eloquence well enough to lead, guide, instruct and even please people. Quite contrary, he cast doubt on the reliability of man’s willingness to use eloquence correctly and indicated the liability to mislead and misguide. This kind of distrust let Sprat question the civilizing power of language and pin his hopes on science. That’s why Sprat’s claim for science to replace eloquence to initiate the civilizing process.

If the abuse of language confuses our understanding, science clarifies by means of scientific language. Such a de glamorization of rhetoric signified a shift from “the rhetoric of persuasion” to “a new rhetoric of exposition” (Howell 388-390). That’s the rhetoric for the scientist. Sprat’s History of the Royal Society represents a watershed moment when “the rhetoric of persuasion” is being substituted with “a new rhetoric of exposition” (Howell 388-390). It is “a rhetoric for the scientist”
which serves as an ideal and guidebook which would exert tremendous impact upon “a rhetoric for the poet”. And the manner of discourse which Sprat propounded did find its immediate response among poet-critics. Even if the Society did not set out to reform any other kinds of writing besides the scientific, the statements on language that were presented in Sprat’s History did in fact have an immediate effect on writers such as the poet-playwright John Dryden (Conley 169-170).

The concern with language may serve well to remind Dryden of the things he needs to pay heed to. Dryden may be susceptible to such an impact and tend to display simplicity and moderateness similar to what Royal Society calls for in terms of the rhetoric style. Moderate simplicity and “controlled richness” (Watson 1963: 34-35) may be characteristic of his critical essays. He desires “language not strained into bombast, but justly elevated” (Dryden 1926: 248), for Dryden “nothing is truly sublime that is not just and proper” (Dryden 1926: 246). More exposed he was to the strong metaphors and harsh figures of expressions, stronger he held contempt for the exuberance in eloquence, more impact Sprat’s concern with the manner of discourse might be upon him.

**Conclusion**

Science informed and shaped Dryden poetic pursuit during his contact with the early Royal Society. His official connection with the Royal Society may enable him to leave scattered traces of his scientific interest in his own writing and innovative usage of science images and discoveries. This only marks the initial respect and acknowledgment Dryden held for the new science. What underlines this superficial approval and transcends the matter of form might boil down to the congenial spirit. It is exactly this scientific spirit of the royal society which draws Dryden closer to it, reaffirms his belief and backs up his preferred way of thinking. Moreover, such a congeniality Dryden identified with, from the perspective of a poet-critic, might serve as the best proof to demonstrate the possible impact of science upon literature. Scientifically informed and inspired, Dryden may feel empowered in his practice as a poet-critic and competent enough to bridge literature and science.

**References**


