

Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector: Perceived as 'King in all but name'? The Pleasures and Pitfalls of Widening the Evidence Base in History

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This article focuses on the nature of historical evidence, that is evidence which might be useful to a historian, in an increasingly interdisciplinary world, in relation to an argument on a question of historical importance. In this case, that question is to what extent Cromwell's contemporaries perceived him to be, in his role as Lord Protector, 1653-1658, 'King in all but name'? This provides the context for debate: the aim is to investigate the issues which may arise as historians increasingly widen the scope of historical evidence to include items which have previously been considered the purview of other academic disciplines. The article thus tackles issues around methodology and historiography, and in particular it considers whether historians can address such evidence without an understanding of the way it would be addressed by those in a different academic sphere. This is done through a comparison of a pamphlet written in the form of a dialogue between the ghosts of King Charles I and Oliver Cromwell (what might be thought of as a straightforward piece of historical evidence) and a poetic elegy on the death of Oliver Cromwell by John Dryden (more usually examined through the lens of English Literature). It concludes that despite the difficulties of analysing and evaluating such a poem in the light of literary criticism, the poem does have as much value to the historian as the straightforward pamphlet and should not be ignored

Oliver Cromwell died on 3 September 1658, having been styled 'Lord Protector of England, Scotland and Ireland' since December 1653. From that date onwards, a persistent area for debate has been the nature of the government of which he was titular head: tyranny, dictatorship (benevolent or otherwise), autocracy, one person and parliament, political experiment, or monarchy in all but name? In entering that debate, historians have usually relied on factual knowledge of the events of the period, government documents such as letters to and from the government's ambassadors and those of other countries, what Cromwell himself said through his letters and speeches, the letters, diaries and speeches of others and other printed political materials such as pamphlets. However, in more recent decades historians have started to widen the scope of the evidence they consider relevant and useful.

One area where this can be seen is the twenty-first century English secondary school History classroom. The thick bibles of 'fact' of the 1970s, containing page upon page of text, only occasionally alleviated with the odd black and white portrait of Elizabeth I or Cromwell, have now been replaced by text books containing numberless references to a very wide range of historical and cultural artefacts, including extracts from ballads, novels, etc. as well as contemporary images, from portraits of monarchs by Holbein and Van Dyck to woodcuts such as that in Figure 1, and modern images of artefacts such as tapestries and jewellery. These are all advanced for evaluation as evidence of contemporary life, politics, attitudes, social change, regional difference etc., hopefully helping to produce students who

question and discuss rather than accept and learn by rote.¹

A similar increase in the range of acceptable evidence is also to be found in books for both academic and general readers. This raises very important questions as to how such evidence should be treated and in particular the extent (if any) to which account could and/or should be taken of work on such evidence by those in other academic disciplines such as literary criticism, philology, philosophy and art history so as to explore such evidence in depth.

The question posed at the start of this article was how far did contemporaries perceive that Cromwell was 'King in all but name'? It is known that he was offered the crown twice, first in the original draft of the Instrument of Government at the end of 1653 (the constitution under which he became Lord Protector) and later, in 1657, at the time of the Humble Petition and Advice. There are various theories as to why he refused, ranging from common sense pragmatism (obviously republicans such as Sir Arthur Heselrige would not have supported such a move and neither would many in the army, while Stuart royalists would have been further angered, so that Cromwell's stated aim of 'healing and settlement' would have been compromised) – to over-weening ambition ('A name that the law knows not, and that is boundless, is that under which a man exerciseth

more arbitrariness.').² However, as Roy Sherwood demonstrated in 1997, Cromwell certainly took on many of the trappings of monarchy, living at Whitehall Palace and Hampton Court, being addressed as 'His Highness, Oliver, Lord Protector' and having his profile and coat of arms on the Great Seal, being just three of many examples.³ How then did the English people view him? That some of those in government considered him a monarch (or thought it would be sensible to have him seen as such, if only to assist in the establishment of his son Richard as his successor) can be seen from the very elaborate funeral arrangements, imitating those of James I in 1625 (the last funeral of a head of state before that of Cromwell), including Cromwell's effigy lying in state at Somerset House.⁴ This is the scene shown in Figure 1: the crown is clearly visible, as are the ermine robe, orb and sceptre of the monarch.⁵ This is King Oliver I. (The value of such an image as evidence would seem obvious, but even here care must be taken. Just as modern photographs can be manipulated so could some engravings, a case in point being the *Headless Horseman* series showing Cromwell on horseback, clearly modelled on Van Dyck's equestrian portrait of Charles I and M. de St. Antoine, which was later reworked as Louis XIV).⁶

Documents are just as, if not more, open to interpretation than images, so let us ask the

¹ See, for example, the AQA History A Level syllabus <<https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/history>> [accessed 4 March 2023] and David Farr, *Oxford AQA History for A Level: Stuart Britain and the Crisis of Monarchy 1603-1702* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

² Oliver Cromwell, quoted by Christopher Hill, *God's Englishman* (London: The Folio Society, 2013. First published 1970), p.166.

³ Roy Sherwood, *Oliver Cromwell: King in all but Name, 1653-1658* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997).

⁴ For a full description of the funeral see *Some Farther Intelligence of the Affairs of England The Death of the Renowned Oliver, Lord Protector of England, Scotland, and Ireland. With an exact relation how Somerset-House was prepared for his Effigies.* (London: printed by M.S. for Thomas Jenner, 1659) London, British Library <<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/pamphlet-on-the-death-of-oliver-cromwell>> [accessed 4 March 2023]; Huntington Library <<https://www.proquest.com/books/some-farther-intelligence-affairs-england-death/docview/2248535278/se-2>> [accessed 4 March 2023].

⁵ For a fuller discussion of this and similar images see <<http://stuartsonline.com/resources/films/oliver-cromwell-king-in-all-but-name/>> [accessed 4 March 2023].

⁶ John Cooper, *Oliver the First: Contemporary Images of Oliver Cromwell* (London: National Portrait Gallery 1999), pp.45-47.

Figure 1: *Cromwell's effigy lying in state in Somerset House*, woodcut.
Included after page 8 of *Some farther Intelligence of the Affairs of England. The Death of the Renowned Oliver, Lord
Protector of England, Scotland, and Ireland.*
(London: printed by M.S. for Thomas Jenner, 1659), British Library C.55.c.9, Public Domain

Figure 2: Frontispiece to pamphlet, *A New Conference
Between the Ghosts of King Charles and Oliver Cromwell.*
Faithfully Communicated by Adam Wood.
(London: Robert Page, 1659).
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Collection E.988.(28.)

same question of two very different documents, comparing them in relation to such matters as authorship, content, language, form, and readership. The two pieces which will be considered are a pamphlet, *A New Conference between the Ghosts of King Charles and Oliver Cromwell. Faithfully communicated by Adam Wood* (hereinafter 'A New Conference'), published in June 1659 just after the downfall of Richard Cromwell, and a poem, John Dryden's elegy on the death of Oliver Cromwell (hereinafter 'Heroic Stanzas'), published 1659 but stated to have been written shortly after Cromwell's funeral (November 1658).⁷ These two pieces have been chosen because they were both produced in the short period between Cromwell's death and the arrival of General Monck from Scotland in January 1660, eventually leading to the negotiations to restore the Stuart monarchy under Charles II. They are therefore pieces written at a time of assessment of the past and uncertainty as to the future, when censorship was loosened, meaning authors were less likely to feel they had to take a particular line, something which changed in the early Restoration period, when strongly Royalist propaganda became again the order of the day, including, of course, Dryden's 'Astrea Redux' and 'To his Sacred Majesty, A Panegyric on his Coronation'.⁸ More importantly, the first is what might be considered straightforward historical evidence while the second is something more usually viewed through the lens of English Literature.

There can be little doubt that *A New Conference* is, at least on its face, the easier piece to interrogate, being a short (merely 8 small sides) but fascinating pamphlet containing political commentary dressed up as a dramatic dialogue between the two ghosts of King Charles I and Oliver Cromwell. 'Heroic Stanzas' on the other hand is a complex piece of outwardly elegiac poetry written to commemorate the death of Oliver Cromwell and published in 1659 with two other elegies, one by Thomas Sprat and the other by the then far better known Edmund Waller. Both pieces were published in the same year, yet they are not only different in form but one, 'Heroic Stanzas', looks backward to provide an assessment of Cromwell as a leader, while the other looks forward to consider a preferred type of government. Nevertheless, both should be capable of providing evidence of contemporary attitudes to Cromwell's Protectorship.

The first question is 'whose attitudes'? Nothing appears to be known about Adam Wood. He might therefore have been a significant figure, hiding behind a nom de plume, or someone with no public persona. Therefore, as with many pamphlets written anonymously in the mid-seventeenth century, what we know of the author can only be inferred from the pamphlet itself. The risk to the author from anyone taking umbrage at his discourse would appear to have been relatively slim, unless given up by the printer or publisher. Again, no more appears to be known about Robert Page than is recorded on the frontispiece of *A New Conference*.⁹ Dryden is, of course, a much better known figure: Poet

⁷ John Dryden, 'Heroic Stanzas Consecrated to the glorious memory of his most Serene & Renowned Highness Oliver, Late Lord Protector of this Commonwealth &c. Written after the celebration of his funeral' in *John Dryden: Selected Poems*, edited by Steven N. Zwicker and David Bywaters (London: Penguin Books 2001) (hereafter *Poems*), pp.4-10. The poem was first published in *Three Poems Upon the Death of His Late Highness Oliver Lord Protector* (London: William Wilson, January 1659) pp.1-9. Adam Wood, *A New Conference between the Ghosts of King Charles and Oliver Cromwell. Faithfully communicated by Adam Wood* (London: printed for Robert Page, 1659).

⁸ *Poems*, pp.11-19 and 20-23 respectively.

⁹ Henry R. Plomer, *A dictionary of the booksellers and printers who were at work in England, Scotland and Ireland from 1641 to 1667* (London: Printed for the Bibliographical Society, by Blades, East & Blades, 1907), p.143.

Laureate 1668–1689, literary critic, satirist and dramatist. The crucial point however is that he was not so well known in 1659. Born in August 1631, he was therefore only 10 when the Civil War commenced and 17 at the execution of Charles I. Educated at Westminster and Trinity College, Cambridge he appears by September 1658, at the age of 27, to have become, possibly under the auspices of a relative, Sir Gilbert Pickering (Lord Chamberlain 1655–1659), some sort of civil servant. It appears to be generally accepted that he was the ‘Mr Draden’ or ‘Draydon’ who walked in Cromwell’s funeral procession with John Milton and Andrew Marvell as a secretary of ‘ye Ffrench & Latin Toungs’.¹⁰ However, Philip Hammond has argued that he was almost certainly employed by Cromwell’s spy master, Thurloe, (something also accepted by Blair Worden) while Zwickers and Bywaters in *Poems* suggest that he held only some minor public office.¹¹ This is obviously important: the higher up the government scale Dryden was, the more likely he is to have had personal knowledge of Cromwell, or, at least, knowledge at only a few steps removed. Some of his information may have come from Pickering but there is no evidence as to how intimate Dryden was with Pickering and his household. Unless and until further evidence is discovered it is impossible to say what his position actually was and therefore, somewhat surprisingly, little

more can be said about Dryden’s knowledge of what he wrote than of that of ‘Adam Wood’: both lived at the time and might therefore be expected to have an opinion. Furthermore, commentary on Dryden’s elegy for Cromwell has to be approached with care because of the natural tendency to view with hindsight the Dryden of the Protectorate in the light of the far more well known, celebrated and derided Dryden of the Restoration (the derision arising, ironically, in part from ‘Heroic Stanzas’). Thus Sir Walter Scott, amongst others, comments on ‘Heroic Stanzas’ as if Dryden was already aware of the coming Restoration at a time when there was no general foresight of such an event.¹² Yet Dryden’s age and what we can assume of his life experience in adulthood should militate against any assumption of Royalism on his part in 1659. *A New Conference* is part of a sub-genre of dramatic dialogue pamphlets or playlets which appear to have taken hold earlier in the century and been produced in much greater numbers in the 1640s and again in the late 1650s.¹³ Such pamphlets were intended to be cheap and *A New Conference* follows a usual pattern, printed on cheap paper (in the Bodleian copy the print comes through to the reverse side) and in a small size. Some pamphlets had decorative frontispieces which hinted at the political persuasion of its contents, as well as other decorative features and images, as, for example, did the obviously Royalist *Dialogue Betwixt the Ghosts of Charls the I, Late King of England and*

¹⁰ See for example Laura Lunger Knoppers, *Constructing Cromwell: Ceremony, Portrait, and Print 1645 - 1661* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.149.

¹¹ Paul Hammond, ‘Dryden’s Employment by Cromwell’s Government’, *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, 8 (1981), pp.130-136; Blair Worden, *Literature and Politics in Cromwellian England: John Milton, Andrew Marvell, Marchamont Nedham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.33; *Poems*, p.ix.

¹² Sir Walter Scott, *The Works of John Dryden, now first Collected in Eighteen Volumes. Illustrated with Notes, Historical, Critical, and Explanatory, and a Life of the Author, by Walter Scott, Esq.* 18 vols, (Scotland: Printed for W. Miller by J. Ballantyne and co, Edinburgh, 1808) I 41-42 in ‘Walter Scott: The Great Appraisal, 1808’ in James Kinsley and Helen Kinsley eds. *John Dryden: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1995) pp.328-398, <<https://www.proquest.com/books/83-walter-scott-great-appraisal-1808/docview/1828876841/se-2>> [accessed 9th March 2023].

¹³ Kevin Sharpe, *Image Wars: Promoting Kings and Commonwealths in England 1603-1660* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010) p.532. Generally on such pamphlets in the Civil War period, see Susan Wiseman, ‘New news for a new world? Genre, politics and the news dialogues of the 1640s’ in Susan Wiseman, *Drama and Politics in the English Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.20-39.

Oliver The late Usurping Protector of the same year, but that is not the case here (Figure 2).¹⁴

It would therefore have been very cheap and available to anyone with a few pennies to spare and the ability to read, or an available reader willing to read out loud. The readership was therefore likely to have spanned a wide range, its accessibility to those with little or no education being enhanced by the simple and straightforward English employed. Not so the 'Heroic Stanzas', first published as part of a larger and more expensive book, and in a language far less conducive to an inclusive readership. As will be seen, it is in the language and format of the poem that the difficulties of interrogating it as historical evidence really arise. What then can the historian learn from these two quite different texts to assist with answering the question 'Was Oliver Cromwell perceived to be 'King in all but name'?

The particular fascination, and usefulness, of *A New Conference* lies in the fact that it does not do what contemporary or modern readers alike might have expected: it does not advance either a strong pro- or anti-Cromwell argument or pit Cromwell and Charles I against each other, as can be found in the later *Hell's Higher Court of Justice; or, The Trial of Three Politick Ghosts* (1661) or the contemporary *Dialogue*.¹⁵ On the contrary, in this conversation neither Charles nor Cromwell come out well: as Charles says to Oliver 'I played the Fool, tell me how thou didst play the Knave after my decease'.¹⁶ Instead it is a powerful polemic against the rule of a single

person and in favour of a Parliamentary republic. Despite its brevity it is demonstrably based on an assessment of the facts of the Civil War and the Interregnum. These include Charles' treatment of Prynne, Burton and Bastwick, his ubiquitous 'evil counsellors' and his foolishness in not sacrificing his dignity in 1648 to accept terms which would have saved both his head and his Crown. While Cromwell's knighting of Sir Thomas Viner and others (using prerogative powers), his Western Design (to keep 'the Active Spirits in the Army impolyed'),¹⁷ and difficulties with the various Parliaments from the Rump to the Protectorate are also mentioned. This strong reliance on facts familiar to both contemporary and modern readers enhances its authority for its assessment of both 'the fool' and 'the knave'. The author deals directly, at the start, with the question of why Cromwell did not accept the crown: 'I durst not accept of the Title, because I had a Hand in your [*Charles's*]death Besides that, I often Imprecated and protested against the Government of a Single Person, in the hearing of the Officers of my Army'.¹⁸ His perspective is made crystal clear at the end when Oliver states 'I fear me now, neither your posterity nor mine shall ever attain the Supremacy: they will secure the Arms of the Nation from falling into the hands of the one person. I have done them some good, in teaching them that Lesson'.¹⁹ The complaint is against the nature of the rule of both Charles and Cromwell, who the author clearly sees as on one and the same level: 'a

¹⁴ For frontispiece and images from 'A Dialogue Betwixt the Ghosts of Charls the I, Late King of England and Oliver The late Usurping Protector', see Knoppers, pp.162-163.

¹⁵ Anon, *Hell's Higher Court of Justice; or, The Trial of Three Politick Ghosts* (London: [n.pub], 1661); Anon, 'A Dialogue Betwixt the Ghosts of Charls the I, Late King of England and Oliver The late Usurping Protector' (London: [n.pub.], 1659).

¹⁶ *A New Conference*, p.4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.8.

plague o' both your houses'.²⁰ The piece therefore provides the historian with a clear assessment, based on verifiable facts, of Oliver's position from one contemporary perspective. That it may be propaganda for a particular cause is largely irrelevant: it demonstrates that people did hold this particular viewpoint, and that it was considered worth putting it into print and distributing it. Care must still be taken not to accept pamphlets at their face value, as the debate on the existence or otherwise of the 'Ranters' has shown.²¹ Nevertheless, *A New Conference* can be read alongside the more sophisticated *Valerius and Publicola* of James Harrington and *The Humble Petition of the Army of May 1659*, as providing evidence for the existence in 1659 of strong support for a Parliamentary Republic. This text thus exemplifies why pamphlets have proved such a rich source of evidence for the historian.²²

Can the same be said of poetry such as 'Heroic Stanzas'? At first glance, this is a relatively short poem of only 148 lines, written in 4 line stanzas, or quatrains, with a clear and simple rhyming scheme, ABAB. It is in fact the only known poem in Dryden's own hand (Figure 3).

The elegiac purpose of the poem appears to be very clear: as can be seen from its full title (Figure 3). A more regal reference would be difficult to imagine! As an early modern elegy, it might be expected to follow a particular format:

'praise, demonstration of loss, lament, consolation and exhortation'.²³ However, English Literature specialists such as Steven N. Zwicker, Edward Holberton and Laura Knoppers all agree that the poem does not follow the expected form (perhaps why Annabel Patterson considers 'Heroic Stanzas' not as an elegy but rather 'a species of epic or heroic poetry').²⁴ That is where

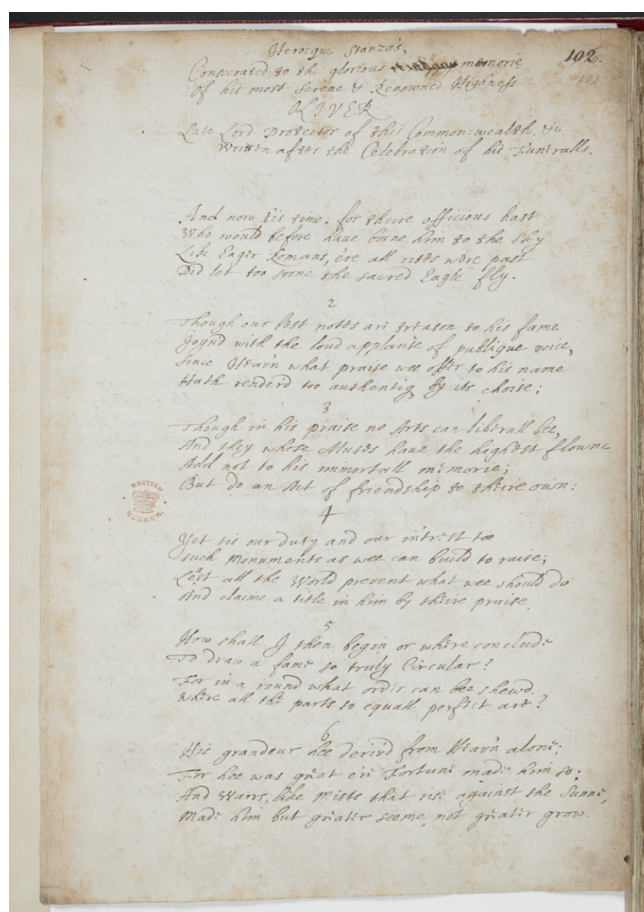


Figure 3: John Dryden, MS. *Heroique stanzas consecrated to the glorious memorie of his most serene and renowned Highness Oliver, late Lord Protector of this Commonwealth, &c.* Written after the celebration of his funeralls., fo. 102., © British Library Board, Lansdowne MS 1045/69.

²⁰ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, in *The New Oxford Shakespeare. Modern Critical ed.* edited by Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus, and Gabriel Egan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Oxford Scholarly Editions Online <10.1093/actrade/9780199591152.book.1>) III.1.

²¹ J.C.Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986).

²² James Harrington, *Valerius and Publicola* (London: Henry Fletcher, 1659); *The Humble Petition and Adresse of the Officers of the Army To the Parliament of the Commonwealth of England &c. Thursday May 12th 1659* (London: Printed by Henry Hills and Francis Tyton, 1659).

²³ Edward Holberton, *Poetry and the Cromwellian Protectorate: Culture, Politics and Institutions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p.182.

²⁴ Steven N. Zwicker, *Dryden's Poetry: The Art of Disguise* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984) pp.70-84; Holberton, pp.163-204; Knoppers, pp. 149-151; Annabel Patterson, 'Dryden and Political Allegiance' in *The Cambridge Companion to Dryden* ed. by Steven N. Zwicker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) pp.221-236 (p.222).

the agreement ends. There are a number of different schools of thought: for Zwicker the poem has 'no point of view', instead it 'seems neither to consistently deny nor affirm the grandeur of the Lord Protector'.²⁵ Zwicker sees the poem as reflecting the uncertainties of both the age and Dryden himself, meaning Dryden could not afford to produce a Cromwellian panegyric, and therefore sat on the poetic fence. Knoppers on the other hand sees Dryden as more innovative, replacing 'traditional royalist iconography with a new Cromwellian activism' so as to produce a poem 'more in keeping with Cromwell's own plain style' (which also seems to be Holberton's view).²⁶ Patterson meanwhile suggests that Dryden simply (and safely) adopted 'the general position that Cromwell's government has been better for the country ... than the republican one that preceded it, and implicitly better than the insular and pacific reign of Charles I'.²⁷ Added to this somewhat perplexing plethora of attitudes is the difficulty of reading the poem itself. Zwicker and Bywaters are not alone in pointing out that the apparently simple quatrain format enabled Dryden to praise Cromwell in the first two lines of a stanza and then qualify it in the second two.²⁸ Furthermore, in their application to Cromwell, the relevance of some of the classical analogies is hard to discern. A good example of this is stanza 34, where Dryden sees Cromwell as 'pressed down by his own weighty name,/ Did, like the vestal, under spoils de cease.' The vestal in question betrayed the Tarpeian rock to the Sabines, who then crush her under her own reward. Is Cromwell then to be viewed as a

traitor, getting his just deserts? An alternative reading might be that Cromwell did his utmost for his country but that it was all too much and wore him out. The reference to the vestal is difficult to understand.²⁹

Reading the literary criticism on 'Heroic Stanzas' therefore leaves the historian in a somewhat perplexing place. Is it worth considering as historical evidence at all? I would argue it is. First, it must be remembered that literary analysis considers the poem in its historical context. This risks the poem being read with hindsight as to 'what happened next' and an assumption that the uncertainties of the time must necessarily have impinged on Dryden's poetry. Historical analysis on the other hand explores the poem for what it may reveal about the period: what does 'Heroic Stanzas' suggest about the rule of Cromwell and how does that fit with other evidence to produce an overall picture? While this risks us going around in circles, or the charge of being drawn 'into a kind of historical solipsism',³⁰ it is an important distinction. Historians do need to work with the literature establishment, as what is said there on literary expectations, form, language, metaphor and simile etc. is important for a full understanding of the text, but must then interrogate the text for what can be extracted of contemporary attitudes rather than reading the text as a necessary reflection of those attitudes. On this basis, Knoppers's argument that 'Heroic Stanzas' should be seen as innovative, producing a 'warts and all' portrait, of which, one can assume, Cromwell would have approved, seems

²⁵ Zwicker *Dryden's Poetry*, p.70 and p.79.

²⁶ Knoppers, p.150 and p.147; Holberton, p.202.

²⁷ Patterson, p.223.

²⁸ *Poems*, p.520.

²⁹ See further on this point, Anthony Mortimer, 'Domesticating the Devil: Cromwell and his Elegists' in *After Satan: Essays in honour of Neil Forsyth*, ed. by Kirsten Stirling and Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), pp.46-57 (p.57).

³⁰ David Bywaters, *Dryden in Revolutionary England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p.ix.

the more compelling. There is no room here for a stanza by stanza analysis of the poem. Suffice to say, it covers Cromwell's military successes, his foreign policy, his fame (and its consequences), his role in keeping the peace, his relations with Parliament, and his death. Furthermore, it does have something to tell us about Dryden's attitude to Cromwell and the Crown. The language is not such as would be expected on the death of a crowned head of state (for that, read the Waller elegy in the same volume), instead it is a poem about Cromwell as a great leader, who brought and maintained peace, but with his own very human flaws. Cromwell for Dryden was a man who was blessed by heaven but was not a god, or destined for godlike apotheosis. Stanza 7 directly raises the issue of the crown:

*Not borrowed bays his temples did adorn,
But to our crown he did fresh jewels bring;
Nor was his virtue poisoned, soon as born,
With the too early thoughts of being king.³¹*

This suggests that Dryden believed that Cromwell was entitled to wear the laurel leaves of Roman emperors (as he does on such coins as were minted during the Protectorate).³² However, rather than bringing jewels to his own crown, he brought them to the nation, suggesting a lack of personal ambition and a laudable approach to the State. The difficulties arise with lines 3 and 4 of this stanza and the reference to 'too early thoughts'. This might suggest that Dryden thought the refusal of the Crown in 1653 was right but that by 1658 accepting the crown would not have been abhorrent. Dryden certainly does not condemn Cromwell for considering the Crown at that

later stage. However, the impression from the poem is that Dryden's point of view was that it did not matter whether Cromwell wore the Crown or not, it was his actions that mattered and his ability to maintain the peace above all.

It can therefore be seen that, while evaluating any form of historical evidence has its pitfalls, 'Heroic Stanzas' raises particularly difficult issues arising out of its poetic form and the traditions of English Literature. However, political pamphlets and ballads should not to be preferred, because we think we understand them in their simplicity, but poetry avoided, because the language is too hard or the literary form insufficiently understood. On the contrary, to do so would be to dismiss a rich seam of potential evidence as to contemporary attitudes and understanding. To try to evaluate 'Heroic Stanzas' as historical evidence does require the historian to explore the world of English Literature specialists, but that should lead, ultimately, to a more nuanced understanding of the period and the way it was viewed by contemporaries, albeit it may initially feel we are viewing 'through a glass, darkly' (or wading through treacle).³³

³¹ *Poems* p.5.

³² See for example the unreleased coin of 1656 <<https://www.royalmint.com/stories/experience/oliver-cromwell-coins/>> [accessed 9th March 2023].

³³ 1 Corinthians 13:12

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