

John Blow in the Restoration Court

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John Blow was eleven years old when the monarchy was restored in 1660. It is likely that he was singing in Charles II's Chapel Royal just over a year later. Through his engagement with the musical and liturgical arms of the royal court for almost the next half century, Blow witnessed and took part in the nexus of politics and culture at that court. There were few artefacts of court culture that remained immune from the heady politics of the period. Some of those artefacts were used to assert the legitimacy of the newly-restored Stuart monarchy, but many were adopted to negotiate and query royal policy and behaviour. Through his odes, songs and anthems – and especially his *Venus and Adonis* – Blow put to music words that engaged directly with the political and ethical concerns of his time.

Restoration Court Morality and Blow's *Venus and Adonis*

Blow had been a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal barely three months when John Wilmot, second Earl of Rochester, wrote and scribally distributed a poem that attacked some of the proceedings in that Chapel Royal, while itself attracting censure for promoting courtly immorality. Rochester's *Satyr against Mankind* attacked the churchmen that members of the court were expected to hear preach. He dismissed them as 'formal band[s] and beard[s]', challenged those who attacked court libertines' appetitive sexual and bibulous instincts, and struck a blow at a cornerstone of Restoration Anglicanism: reason. For many Anglicans in Restoration England, reason was the simple guiding light for religious practice, a crucial element on the route to Heaven. Also, for anyone interested in appropriate behaviour - secular or sacred - reason was what one conduct writer described as that which 'distinguishes us from beasts, and bridles our senses and extravagant appetites'. For Rochester, though, his 'right reason' was one that followed such appetites; for him it was entirely 'reasonable' to pursue sex or alcohol if that was what his appetite dictated.

In much the same way that Rochester redefined reason to justify Restoration court libertinism, in other poems he manipulated the meanings of concepts like honour to challenge fundamental behavioural norms. The language of honour was ubiquitous at Charles II's court, but quite how that term should be defined was open to negotiation and corruption. For Rochester, honour was earned through sex, alcohol and violence. In his *Disabled Debauchee*, the eponymous rake's 'honourable' scars were those from syphilis and drunken brawling, and they were mentioned in the same approving tone as would normally be reserved for the honourable scars earned in battle. Another poem included in Rochester's *Poems* (1680) - though not by Rochester himself - observed that 'Only Debauchees of the Nobler strain' earned honour. Words were being dislocated from their conventional meanings, which meant that moral norms could be contravened more easily, by casting immoral conduct as reasonable or honourable.

This linguistic distortion may seem to be of limited importance, until it is considered that the libertine wrenching of words from their conventional meanings attracted considerable attention, and that it was happening at the royal court with the apparent consent of Charles II himself. The royal court was seen as a microcosm of the rest of the nation, and it was the common fountain from which the rest of the nation drank. Libertines like Rochester and his coterie poisoned that fountain, and it seemed that normally immoral behaviour was licensed by its approval at the highest levels. Rochester is famous for being banished from court after accidentally handing a scurrilous lampoon to the king, but for the first twenty years of his reign Charles II was more indulgent than he was censorious. Rochester drunkenly destroyed Charles's sun dial in June 1675, for example, yet the king was content to put aside over £300 for improvements to the wit's lodgings the following summer. Indeed, that same summer Rochester and his drunken companions were implicated in the death of Captain Downs at Epsom. It was rumoured that Rochester was to be tried for murder; in reality, he was recalled to court within a matter of months.

Charles II's household ordinances were aimed 'To the intent that good Government and Order may be established in Our Court which from thence may spread ... through all parts of Our Kingdoms'. A well-governed and orderly court should, in theory, have led to a well-governed and orderly nation. But there was a wild discrepancy between this ideal and the reality of Charles's court. For commentators, both inside and outside the court, the natural and military disasters, political and religious difficulties of Restoration Britain, could in part be blamed on the immorality of those at court – and their father king – who were supposed to provide the lead for the rest of the nation. As the preacher William Cave told the court: 'Vice is never more fatally prosperous and successful than when it has the patronage of great examples to recommend it'. Right at the centre of power, seemingly with the king's endorsement, the cornerstones of morality and social stability were pulled away. If the court prescribed and legitimised behaviour for the rest of the nation, the consequences of Rochester's subversion of language, of honour and reason, were profound.

Restoration court dramatists, composers and musicians were sensitive to the moral, political and social chaos threatened by the ethically disordered court. John Crowne's *Calisto*, performed at court six years before Blow's *Venus and Adonis*, is replete with references to the dishonest dissembling nature of the quest for a lover. It is a play based on disguise: Jupiter is disguised as Diana and makes amorous advances towards Calisto; Calisto then shoots the real Diana, whom she believes to be Jupiter. The Restoration court had reflected back to them Jupiter's predatory mind games, which disrupted conventional notions of virtue and led to the young female characters' distressed confusion as to what was really true and to be believed. Jupiter boasts that he can 'make Vertue Vice'; Diana asks whether 'Vice [has] grown Virtue?'; Nyphe wonders whether there are such things now as 'Truth and Falshood'. Calisto stands amidst this ethical chaos in what she calls a 'horrid dream'. Indeed, her psychological turmoil is similar to that experienced by any lady at court who witnessed Rochester's and the wits' intelligent subversion of the language of virtue, honour and reason.

Blow's *Venus and Adonis* similarly reflected the questionable ethics of Restoration courtiers. Cupid's reflection that 'Courtiers, there is no faith in you, | You change as often as you can', is a direct reaction to Charles II, Rochester, and those courtiers who excelled in dissimulation. Cupid summarises: 'At court I find constant and true | Only an aged lord or

two'. Blow would have witnessed this all himself, of course, from his positions in the Chapel Royal. It is perhaps an in-joke that *Venus and Adonis* features a spelling lesson, just as Blow would have taught the children of the Chapel Royal after his appointment as Master of the Children, succeeding Pelham Humfrey in 1674. It is no accident that in this little Cupids' lesson, they are taught to spell 'mercenary', rather than – say – 'honourable'.

The pastoral scene of *Venus and Adonis* acts as a foil to two decades of the unstable and dangerous 'romantic' atmosphere of the Restoration court. As *Calisto* showed us, Restoration courtiers had taken the cynicism and dissimulation of the council chamber to the rural groves, in which ladies-in-waiting were meant to be wooed, not tricked and trapped. The resultant events are not as turbulent in *Venus* as they are in *Calisto*, but they are still destructive. There is no happily-ever-after for the lovers. If anything, Adonis dies precisely because he follows the instructions of the woman with whom he is infatuated. He joins the hunt that will lead to his death because Venus persuades him to. She persuades him not by appeal to martial honour or aggressive masculinity, but by claiming his absence will 'kindle new desire'. The result is the opera's dirge-like conclusion as Adonis dies, gored by a boar. This is hardly an advert for being motivated by sexual desire.

The Politics of Songs, Odes and Anthems

By the time *Venus and Adonis* was performed, Blow had already composed in excess of thirty anthems for the court; he had also been composing odes for special court occasions for over a decade. As with *Venus and Adonis*, the words that accompanied these compositions engaged with the tumultuous politics of Blow's lifetime. He began writing new year odes for the court in 1678, around the same time that (false) allegations surfaced that there was a 'Popish Plot' to assassinate Charles II and put his Catholic brother, James, Duke of York, on the throne. The anti-Catholic hysteria that followed must be viewed in the context of the intense fear of the Roman faith provoked by memories of Marian persecutions of Protestants in the 1550s, the Spanish Armada, and the Gunpowder Plot. Subsequent moves to exclude James from the succession were brought to an abrupt halt in 1681 when Charles summoned parliament to Oxford, then dissolved it. Blow's court ode at the end of that year reflected on this 'Exclusion Crisis', noting 'Tumultuous Tribes' and confidently asserting that 'Propitious winds bear all our Grievs away / And peace clears up the troubled day'. There was no mention here of the political parties that grew during the crisis - Whigs in favour of James's exclusion and Tories against it - nor that the Whigs did not just automatically disappear because Charles had dissolved parliament.

The misplaced confidence of the ode's assertion was demonstrated dramatically just two years later. In 1683 the royal brothers were the targets of the 'Rye House Plot'. They were to be assassinated as they travelled back to London from Cambridgeshire after watching the horse racing. A fire at Newmarket prompted Charles and James to return early to Whitehall, however, and the plot came to nothing. Nonetheless, many of the conspirators were caught and executed. On the Sunday between the plotters' convictions and their executions, 18 July 1683, Blow's symphony anthem carried apposite words from Psalm 64, vv. 1-9:

Hear my voice, O God, in my prayer; preserve my life from fear of the enemy.
Hide me from the gathering together of the froward, and from the insurrection
of wicked doers;
Who have whet their tongue like a sword, and shoot out their arrows, even
bitter words;
That they may privily shoot at him that is perfect: suddenly do they hit him,
and fear not.
They encourage themselves in mischief, and commune among themselves, how
they may lay snares; and say, that no man shall see them.
They imagine wickedness, that they keep secret among themselves, every man
in the deep of his heart.
But God shall suddenly shoot at them with a swift arrow, that they shall be
wounded.
Yea, their own tongues shall make them fall; insomuch that whoso seeth them
shall laugh them to scorn.
And all men that see it shall say, This hath God done; for they shall perceive
that it is his work.

The texts that Blow was setting to music tended, on the surface, to be mindlessly loyal to the king. They have therefore generally been given short shrift by commentators who prefer to deal with more subtle and complex lyrics, or who would rather just listen to the music. Yet the texts set by Blow betray political anxieties in a number of ways; they were not just unthinking propaganda. That loyalist texts had to be written, or selected, was a tacit admission that Charles II's kingdoms were bitterly politically divided. They had to challenge allegations that were made against the Stuarts: Charles I previously and Charles II now. One was the dynasty's alleged disregard for the law. So Blow set to music Tom D'Urfey's 'Song in the Royallist', in which the association between the Stuart monarchy and the law was underlined: 'then let 'em be confounded, confounded, confounded, / and so may every Round head, / that stands not up for King and Laws.' Blow even put to music some paraphrased advice given to Charles II by his father in *Eikon Basilike* (1648):

To be Charles the good
Is more honor than Charles the great.
But to be both like you,
This is alone compleat.

Aside from the somewhat empty and unconvincing claims for Charles II's greatness, Blow's ode adopted a word that became particularly politically charged after the Restoration: 'good'.

'Charles the good' was interpreted by many to mean 'Charles the merciful'. At the Restoration he had, through political necessity, forgiven many of those who had fought against the Stuarts in the civil wars or who had enthusiastically administered the Interregnum. As we have seen, Charles was also generally indulgent of immoral and deceitful courtiers. After two decades of his reign, then, with its combination of military and natural disasters, and increasingly entrenched political divisions, some commentators pointed the blame towards the king himself. He had allowed his enemies to thrive, when - some argued - they should have been destroyed, and he had provoked the opprobrium of God and subjects by patronising courtly immorality. To be called 'Charles the good' was not necessarily a compliment.

As an integral part of the Chapel Royal and as a composer for the court, Blow could not avoid the ethical and political concerns of the Restoration period. Even when the words he was setting appeared straightforward and loyal, questions about royal policy could be provoked. In any case, as *Venus and Adonis* demonstrated, observations about the Restoration court could be direct and critical. Just because the observations were sung, it did not mean they were not bitter. There was no celebration or grand apotheosis at *Venus's* conclusion, as you might expect to find in masques written for early modern princes. The melancholy air at the end of *Venus* instead reflected a court exhausted by a number of issues: the political traumas of a nation still divided religiously; the contemporaneous birth of political parties that clearly showed political divisions; and over twenty years of cynical and destructive subversion of those values – honour, reason and virtue – that were meant to be ordered and secure.

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