

Commentaries

*New Light on Dryden's Conversion (Invited Commentary)**

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The conversion of John Dryden has perplexed scholars for centuries. Considering Dryden's literary stature, one can understand the consternation at the time that greeted his becoming a Catholic. The Anglican establishment was especially taken aback when he published *The Hind and the Panther* (1687), a 2,500-line poem defending the Catholic Church. Many pamphlets were published attacking his conversion as insincere. These unjust attacks on Dryden's character made Sir Walter Scott call him a "confessor" if not a "martyr" of the Catholic faith.

As I will explain, however, some of these pamphlets offer a very important insight into Dryden's motives. They inform us of his great admiration for the works of Abraham Woodhead, a fellow of University College, Oxford (1609–78). I find it fitting that a poet of such high intellect was drawn to his era's most learned defender of the Catholic Church. In 1961, Thomas Birrell showed that Dryden's acquaintance with Woodhead can be dated from at least 1680, when Dryden purchased Woodhead's *Ancient Church Government* (1662) at the sale of Digby's library.¹ Dryden was already a firm supporter of lawful succession and continuity in civil government, but now, as seen in *Religio Laici*, he began also to support lawful succession and continuity in Church Government.

In his diaries, the Oxford University historian Anthony Wood (1632–95) mentions that in 1685 Woodhead's *Life and Death of Jesus Christ* was published anonymously by Oxford University Press.² Both the Anglican bishop of Oxford and the vice chancellor disliked it and forbade it to be sold, because of passages savoring of "popery," like the one on Mary's perpetual virginity.³ Wood notes that in October of that year, King James II told Nathaniel Boyset that he had "seen a book lately come out by one that was Head of University College [meaning Obadiah Walker] and that it was a very good book and wondered how anyone should find fault with it."⁴ The king was mistaken about the identity of the author, but not about its Catholic tenor.

October 1685 marks the beginning of the king's interest in Obadiah Walker, master of University College (1616–99). In January of 1686, Walker went to London for a month and spoke privately with King James. After he returned to Oxford, he and some of his friends received a royal dispensation to absent themselves without penalty from Anglican services. Wood writes in his diaries that, by March 1686, Obadiah Walker's conversion was "discoursed of over all the nation," so much so that he became "a by-word to all—Obadiah

* Portions of this commentary appeared previously in Anne Barbeau Gardiner, "Abraham Woodhead, 'The Invisible Man,'" *Recusant History* 26, no. 4 (2003), 570–88.

1. Thomas Birrell, "John Dryden's Purchases at Two Book Auctions, 1680 and 1682," *English Studies* 42 (1961), 192–217.

2. Anthony Wood, MS Wood Diaries #24, 30, 31, 32, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

3. *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood*, ed. Andrew Clark, 5 vols., Vol. 3 : 1682–1695 (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1894), 164.

4. *Life and Times*, 3: 165.

Ave Maria.”⁵ In May or June of 1686, Wood adds, the poet Laureate Dryden also “turned papist.” In 1686, Mass was sung in the master’s lodgings until 15 August, but on that day Walker opened a little Catholic chapel near the front gate. After news of this chapel spread, a riot broke out at the gate on 12 September, the cries and shouts of the “rabble” disrupting the celebration of the Mass. Some scholars “laughed and grinned and showed a great deal of scorn” at the Mass and had to be ejected from the chapel. A similar riot broke out on 9 December.

In May 1686, the king gave Walker a unique license, valid for twenty-one years, and lots of paper to print 36 titles at Oxford, without incurring any penalty from the anti-Catholic laws. No one realized at the time (and even in modern times) that all those abbreviated titles listed in that license were the works of Abraham Woodhead, who had been Walker’s great and admired colleague at University College, and who had written those works in what Anthony Wood calls his “priory” at Hoxton where he was educating a few Catholic youths in his “principles.” Woodhead had been obliged to quit his fellowship in the early 1660s when his conversion to Catholicism was suspected. Unfortunately, some works listed in the king’s license were lost in the revolution of 1688, such as the one on Islam called *Greater Antichrist*. Many of Woodhead’s manuscripts also perished in the fire at the Spanish Embassy (1688), where they had been stored for safety. The high regard King James had for Woodhead can be seen in his plans to honor him in Oxford with a monument, of which only the inscription survives in Simon Berington’s biography, prefixed to Woodhead’s *Church Government, Part III* (1736).⁶

The royal license made no difference to the Anglican bishop of Oxford, who refused to let Obadiah Walker print those 36 books at the university press, saying he “would as soon part with his bed from under him.”⁷ Walker then hired a printer in Lichfield, who betrayed him by secretly giving the work “sheet by sheet”⁸ to Protestant adversaries so their answers could appear in the university press at the same time the Catholic book came out. And so, Walker was obliged to set up a printing press in his own master’s lodgings at University College and begin publishing Woodhead’s works under his own supervision. The title pages did not provide an author’s name, but said “printed in Oxford,” and so writers across England began speaking of the unknown author (Woodhead) as “that learned Oxford discourses” and “the Oxford author.”⁹ Most thought those works were written by Walker himself or else by a “fraternity” of Oxford Catholics.¹⁰ That these books were emanating from Oxford stirred up much anger there, as seen when Henry Aldrich worried that Woodhead’s writings on the Real Presence might pass for a “specimen of the University’s judgment.”¹¹

Could Dryden have read Woodhead’s works hot off the press? It seems likely, because one of his sons appears to have been studying at Oxford under Walker at this very time and perhaps helping him to prepare Woodhead’s manuscripts for publication. Thomas Shadwell, in a satire on the poet called *The Address of John Dryden* (1689), calls his son,

5. *Life and Times*, 3 : 176, 196.

6. Simon Berington, “The Preface: Giving a succinct Account of Mr. Woodhead’s Writings and Life,” in *Ancient Church Government. Part III* ([London], 1736), *lxvii*, quoting the antiquarian Thomas Hearne, from a letter of 8 April 1734. This preface will be cited as “Life.”

7. *Life and Times*, 3: 198.

8. *Life and Times*, 3: 209.

9. [C. Hutchinson], *Of the Authority of Councils and the Rule of Faith* (London : R. Clavel, W. Rogers, and S. Smith, 1687), 101, 102 ; and Joshua Basset, *Reason and Authority* (London : Henry Hills, 1687), 73, 76, 77, 83, 89, 99, 116, 119.

10. [Henry Aldrich], *A Reply to Two Discourses Lately Printed at Oxford Concerning the Adoration of Our Blessed Savior in the Holy Eucharist* (Oxford: at the Theatre, 1687), 2. This came out, Wood says (3: 220) on 30 May, 1687.

11. *Reply to Two Discourses*, 68.

John Dryden, Jr., an “Oxford nursling” comparable in zeal to St. Robert Bellarmine: this lad, he says, was “Designed for a new Bellarmine Goliah / Under the great Gamaliel Obadiah.”¹² We must believe Shadwell on this point. He had inside knowledge because his own son John Shadwell, the godson of Samuel Pepys, was matriculated at University College at that very time and was probably in sympathy with Walker, because the notoriety surrounding Walker’s conversion and printing of Catholic books didn’t make him leave the college. Later in the 1690s, John Shadwell was a physician working in Paris and was friendly with English Catholics, as seen in his correspondence with his godfather Pepys.

One lampoon on Dryden’s conversion, called “A Heroic Scene,” has the poet confess “One son turned me, I turned the other two.”¹³ If this be true, it seems likely that the son who converted his father was John Dryden, Jr. It certainly took great zeal and courage for him to enter Magdalen College as an intruded Catholic fellow in 1688. And in order for him to be appointed a fellow of Magdalen College, across the street from University College, the young man had to have received a solid education in the previous years without taking the anti-Catholic oaths. Possibly he received that education from Walker himself. When I looked for proof of Dryden’s son having resided at University College in 1686–87, I found that the “buttery books” listing the students who were eating there in those years were missing. A librarian assured me, however, that John Dryden, Jr. could have been Walker’s servitor or private student because the master’s lodgings were quite large.

Some contemporary attacks on Dryden made an explicit link between the poet’s conversion in 1686 and Woodhead’s writings, but they did not attribute those writings to Woodhead, who was later dubbed “the Invisible Man” because he never signed his works.¹⁴ In their lampoon *The Hind and the Panther Transversed*, Matthew Prior and Charles Montague, who knew the poet well, portray him as actually pestering his acquaintances to read two of Woodhead’s major works: “Mr. Johnson, you are a man of parts, let me desire you to read *The Guide of Controversy*, and Mr. Smith, I would recommend to you *The Considerations on the Council of Trent* [this was the Fifth Discourse of *The Guide in Controversies*].”¹⁵ Here Dryden is portrayed as an enthusiastic admirer of Woodhead’s learned histories of Church Government.

In *The Late Converts*, another contemporary attack on Dryden, Thomas Brown makes three connections between the poet and the writings of Woodhead, whom he calls “that learned author.”¹⁶ First he says that *The Spirit of Martin Luther* turned Dryden against the entire Reformation. This is the work in which Woodhead closely examines Luther’s account of his many conversations with the Devil in 1523 about the Sacrifice of the Mass. According to Brown, Dryden declared that from “reading Mr. Walker’s book of Oxford,” he imbibed “such prejudices” against Luther that nothing could ever remove them. If we are to believe Brown, Dryden was unaware of the real author of the works he was recommending, but I find this doubtful. Second, Brown depicts Dryden as having read all five of Woodhead’s works on *Church Government*. He does this in a scene where “Crites” asks the poet to explain “what Dr. Walker meant by his five theses of Church Government.”¹⁷ This request implies that the poet is a known expert on the subject. Third, Brown traces Dryden’s new regard for celibacy

12. Thomas Shadwell, “The Address of John Dryden, Laureat to His Highness the Prince of Orange” (1689), in *The Complete Works of Thomas Shadwell*, 5 vols., ed. Montague Summers (London: Fortune Press, 1927), 5: 350.

13. *Poems on Affairs of State: Augustan Satirical Verse, 1660-1714*, Volume 4: 1685–1688, ed. by Galbraith M. Crump (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), 84, line 103.

14. Berington, “Life,” *lix*.

15. Charles Montagu and Matthew Prior, “The Hind and the Panther Transversed,” in *Poems on Affairs of State*, 4: 123.

16. Thomas Brown, *The Late Converts Exposed Part II* (London, 1690), 28.

17. *Late Converts*, 45.

to Woodhead's *Discourse concerning the Celibacy of the Clergy* when he says that the defense of celibacy in *The Hind and the Panther* is the "quintessence" of what a "modern Author has advanced for the cause."¹⁸

Similarly, in a letter to his friend Obadiah Walker, dated 25 May 1688, Dr. John Radcliffe refers to Dryden's *The Hind and the Panther* as "one of your new Converts' poems."¹⁹ Like so many others, Radcliffe thinks that Walker is the author of Woodhead's works and that reading them has been the cause of Dryden's conversion. The link between Woodhead and Dryden is evident throughout *The Hind and the Panther*, but here let me call attention only to the two epigraphs in front of this magisterial poem. The first one is "Antiquam exquirite matrem," a line from Virgil's *Aeneid* (3: 96) applied to the Catholic Church. This is inspired by *The Guide in Controversies*, in which Woodhead cites passages from Luther and Calvin that express contempt for the Ancient Church and then asks the reader to "search" for himself which of "the two present Churches," Catholic or Protestant, most resembles his Ancient Mother and then to "cast himself into her arms":

After which search diligently made (as it much concerns him), let him again review and compare which of these two, in its constitution and economy, hath more resemblance of that Church described in the New Testament and acting in Primitive times . . . ; and then that of the two which, by its greater likeness in government and manners to this ancient Church, he takes to be his Catholic Mother, let him securely cast himself into her arms and communion. . . .²⁰

This is likewise how Dryden portrays the true Mother Church:

See how his Church adorned with every grace
With open arms, a kind forgiving face,
Stands ready to prevent her long lost sons embrace. (*The Hind and the Panther*,
2:639–41)

In both cases, the Ancient Mother awaits with open arms to embrace her English sons.

The second epigraph of Dryden's poem is, "Et vera, incessu, patuit Dea (*Aeneid* 1:405), as applied to the Catholic Church. This passage is also inspired by Woodhead, who sees the church's smooth unbroken motion from age to age as a sign of her being invested with divine authority. He writes thus in *Guide in Controversies*: "If there be a Catholic Church still . . . invested with that authority that our Lord bestowed on the apostles and which the former [Ancient] Church practiced; then, seeing that all other Christian societies do renounce and not pretend at all to such authority," it follows that she "must be the sole Church-Catholic that thus bears witness to itself."²¹ Addressing the Anglican Church, Dryden makes the very same argument in the following lines of *The Hind and the Panther*:

For petty royalties you raise debate;
But this unfailing universal state
You shun; nor dare succeed to such a glorious weight,
And for that cause those promises detest

18. *Late Converts*, 11.

19. [William Pittis], *Dr. [John] Radcliffe's Life and Letters*. 4th ed. (London: A Bettesworth, E. Curll, and J. Pemberton, 1736), 16.

20. R. H., *A Rational Account of the Doctrine of Roman Catholics Concerning the Ecclesiastical Guide in Controversies*, second edition (n. p., 1673), 223–4.

21. *Guide in Controversies*, 213.

With which our Saviour did his church invest:
But strive t'evade, and fear to find 'em true,
As conscious they were never meant to you:
All which the Mother Church asserts her own
And with unrivalled claim ascends the throne. (2:490–98)

Here the poet even uses the same term “invest” that Woodhead used. Also, the phrase “unrivalled claim” parallels Woodhead’s “sole Church-Catholic.”

In the *Guide*, Woodhead states that it is not the letter of scripture but its “traditive sense” that is God’s word, because the text can never make itself more “intelligible.” Ancient Church councils, he says, appealed to “former Tradition, not argument.”²² Again Dryden follows his mentor closely, even using the adjective “traditive,” a common adjective in Woodhead, but one rarely used at the time and only once in Dryden’s poetry. The poet writes that when Protestants and Catholics divide on “things traditive” and “quarrel with the sense” of scripture, the matter cannot be resolved by examining the words.²³ The Nicene Fathers used tradition to confute the Arian heretics who vainly marshaled “squadrons of texts”:

The good old Bishops took a simpler way
Each asked but what he heard his Father say,
Or how he was instructed in his youth,
And by Tradition’s force upheld the truth. (*The Hind and the Panther*, 2:164–67)

Dryden continues that in church history, “every age does on another move, / And trusts no farther than the next above.”²⁴ This is the smooth, unbroken motion of the Goddess in Dryden’s epigraph, from “sire to son,” from ancient to modern times. Since I have read virtually all of Woodhead’s works and have extensive notes on them, I may in the future write an essay about how Dr. Radcliffe and other contemporaries were right to say that Dryden’s *The Hind and the Panther* reflects those works printed by Walker at University College under the Catholic king’s license.

As a result of the 1688 revolution, Obadiah Walker, aged seventy-two, was sent to prison, charged with treason. He was released in 1690. As he was dying, Walker wrote a letter to Francis Nicolson, one of his former students now in religious life, and asked him to ensure that a correct edition of Woodhead’s works would be published. Sadly only one more work was published in 1736. Woodhead’s works have now fallen into oblivion.

However, the name of Obadiah Walker is not forgotten at University College. When I was doing research there, three persons residing at the college told me on separate occasions that in the middle of the night Walker’s ghost comes screaming down a certain stairway. I replied that it could not be Walker, since he was laid to rest in 1699 near his friend Abraham Woodhead in Old St. Pancras churchyard, London, where a great many Catholics in that era were illegally laid to rest by torchlight. On the third occasion, I was outside, standing in front of the stairway, and asked the fellow who told me about the screaming ghost, “What was the room next to these stairs used for in the days of Dr. Walker?” He replied, “It was the Catholic chapel.” Then I remembered reading in Anthony Wood’s diaries about the riots at the nearby gate, and of this episode from 4 August 1688: “A boy going to Mr. Walker’s chapel, while Mass was singing, with a cat under his coat, which he sometimes pinching and other times pulling by the tail made her make such noise that it put them to some disorder.”

22. *Guide in Controversies*, 144–5, 111, 129.

23. *Hind and the Panther*, 2: 196.

24. *Hind and the Panther*, 2: 217–19.