The Canon

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter examines the development of a canon of English drama during the later part of the 17th century. It describes a number of interacting developments that made possible the formation of this canon. These include the emergence of a body of critical writing on the drama, the growing respect for the drama both in performance and in published form, and in the expansion of the market for printed plays.

Keywords: English drama, canon, critical writing, dramatic performance, printed plays

They have each their proper graces...which makes every one appear that individual Poet He is.

Moderator, 23 June 1692

It is agreed, I think, by all that understand our Language, that we have equall’d, if not surpass’d all other Nations in Dramatic Poetry; and that our Tragedies excel those of other Countries, both in Majesty of Style, and Variety of Incidents: And that this Part of the Drama is a Sort of Poetry peculiarly adapted to the Martial Genius of the British Nation...

Thesaurus Dramaticus (1724), vol. i, pp. iii-iv
IN the later seventeenth century the interaction of a number of developments made possible the formation of a canon of English drama. There was the expansion of the market for printed plays. There was the growing respect for the drama both in performance and in published form. There was the emergence of a body of critical writing on the drama. There was the increasing consciousness of the distinctiveness and individuality of authors. To those processes, which this book has charted, we can add another, a growth in England's sense of its cultural identity and in the nation's pride in its literary achievements. Those developments were not all new, but none of them had hitherto been strong enough for a hierarchy of esteem to form.

That contrast between the earlier and later seventeenth century has gone unnoticed, despite the interest in questions of canonicity shown by modern literary historians. Scholars have dwelt on the ascendancy of the triumvirate of wit in the seventeenth century and of Shakespeare in the eighteenth. Several recent studies have emphasized the construction of the triumvirate through the publication of the Jonson, Shakespeare, and Beaumont and Fletcher folios in 1616, 1623, and 1647 respectively. Shakespeare is believed to have outstripped the others by the late 1730s, and to have become the nation's cultural icon by the time of the Stratford Jubilee in 1769. This account, though not incorrect, is incomplete. It overlooks the set of preferences which is clearly visible in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In that period the pre-eminence of the triumvirate waned and the solitary greatness of Shakespeare was by no means assured. Shakespeare did not simply displace Fletcher and Jonson in the national pantheon. The critical evaluation of drama after the Restoration was, I shall argue, both more complex and more appreciative of contemporary achievement than has been realized. The new generation of playwrights—Dryden, Otway, Lee, Behn, Shadwell, and, later, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar—enjoyed a high reputation. Their plays proved enduringly popular on the stage and won critical acclaim when printed. These modern bards were widely thought to have equalled, if not surpassed, the ‘Gyant Race...before the Flood’.

How were plays and playwrights classified, assessed, and judged in the Restoration? What was the correspondence, if any, between critical acclaim and theatrical success or failure? In order to recover the contemporary outlook we have to go beyond clichés about the supremacy of the triumvirate of wit. Equally we have to avoid undue reliance on two famous critical documents, which, for all their distinction, are unrepresentative of the tastes and preferences prevalent in our period: Dryden's Essay of Dramatick Poesie (1668) and Rymer's Tragedies of the Last Age (1678). A more dependable guide is provided by the pattern of play publication and by the ranking of writers and plays that was built into and disseminated by successive catalogues of printed drama.
The investment of the trade in the publication of plays was based on a careful estimate of market demand. The choice of authors and plays, the timing, format, and size of the edition, were all calculated to answer to the tastes and expectations of the reading public, which they duly shaped. Most plays, both old and new, appeared in cheap quartos. The few instances of collected publication, a more expensive and commercially more risky undertaking, provide telling evidence of the standing of the authors who were thus honoured. To identify those writers, and to compare the formats and layouts of their collected editions, is the first step in the reconstruction of the contemporary dramatic canon. The second is to examine the valuation of these and other writers’ work by the compilers of catalogues of plays and of biographical dictionaries of poets and playwrights. These were the documents which advertised, assessed, and classified the growing profusion of printed drama. They not only told prospective buyers what was on offer, but also instructed them how to read and judge the plays they purchased. The aesthetic outlook embodied in these compilations was, at least ostensibly, consensual; they purported to reflect and propagate a universally accepted critical standard. These compendia are an invaluable record of cultural change. Published over a period of time, they register the shifts within the hierarchy of older and current writers.

Collected Plays
The importance of the Jonson, Shakespeare, and Beaumont and Fletcher folios to the evolution of the canon of English drama has been virtually an article of faith for twentieth-century scholars. I do not wish to deny the contribution of these publications to the formation of a canonical hierarchy, but I do want to suggest that the hierarchy that prevailed in the later seventeenth century did not privilege the triumvirate to the extent that is often assumed. The canon of English drama after the Restoration had, of course, a double existence. Plays were performed and plays were published. Performance records prior to c.1703 are too scanty to tell us much about current tastes, but the publication of older plays (as opposed to new ones) gives us an idea of the stature of their authors. Little scholarly attention has been devoted to the publication of collected editions of plays in the mid- to late seventeenth century, but it is a subject that repays attention. The members of the triumvirate, as we shall see, were neither the only playwrights whose work appeared in collected editions nor alone in being accorded lavish print presentation.4

Moseley's Octavo Authors
The suppression of the theatres in 1642 provided, by way of compensation, a stimulus both to the reading and to the publication of plays. The scripts which theatrical companies had previously withheld from publication were now increasingly made available. One response to this new opportunity was the proliferation of quarto playbooks; another was the appearance of collected editions. The only collection of plays in folio issued during the Commonwealth period was the volume of *Comedies and Tragedies Written by Francis Beaumont And John Fletcher* (1647). A genuine innovation, one hitherto overlooked by scholars, was the publication of play collections in octavo. The pioneer of this form of publication was the prominent London publisher Humphrey Moseley, who had also been the prime mover behind the Beaumont and Fletcher folio. Moseley's collections of Middleton, Massinger, Brome, Shirley, and Carlell, issued throughout the 1650s, contributed to the establishment of the œuvres of these playwrights. This process was abruptly arrested at the Restoration, when the urge to retrieve and preserve pre-Civil War scripts gave way to the appeal of theatrical novelties.

Moseley's series of octavo play collections supplemented the canonical hierarchy of literary reputation which had been mapped out by the folios of Jonson, Shakespeare, and Beaumont and Fletcher. Richard Brome's *Five New Playes* and James Shirley's *Six New Playes* of 1653 were succeeded by Philip Massinger's *Three New Playes* in 1655, and by Lodowick Carlell's *Two New Playes* and Thomas Middleton's *Two New Playes* in 1657. The smaller and less dignified octavo format reflected these authors’ subordinate standing in relation to the triumvirate. Gerard Langbaine spoke for a number of late seventeenth-century commentators when he described Shirley as ‘the Chief of the Second-rate Poets’ and ranked Middleton among ‘Poets of the second Magnitude’ (*Account*, 474, 428).
The level of uniformity in Moseley's dramatic collections shows (p.184) that they were meant to be recognized as parts of a series. First, the title-pages, which were typographically standardized, observe a common formula, announcing the number—‘Five’ or ‘Six’—of ‘New Playes’. Second, each volume presents the reader with an engraved portrait of the author (see Fig. 7). Third, each book contains plays only. Fourth, all the plays are ‘new’, that is, they have never appeared in print before. Fifth, Moseley adopted the strategy of publishing single-play octavos of the authors whose collections he had previously brought out (or was going to bring out) in that format, so that the new volumes could conveniently be bound with the old. For instance, in 1655 he issued James Shirley's *The Politician* and *The Gentleman of Venice* concurrently in quarto and octavo so as to enable the owners both of Shirley's prior quartos and of the octavo collection of 1653 to enlarge their respective volumes.6 Lodowick Carlell's *Two New Playes* of 1657 could be enlarged by the addition of the earlier *The Passionate Lovers* (1655) and of *The Deserving Favourite* in 1659, Middleton's *Two New Playes* by the inclusion of *No Wit, No Help* in 1657. The Bodleian Library copy of Carlell's *Two New Playes* is bound together with *The Deserving Favourite*. Charles Gildon recorded in his *Lives and Characters* that Middleton's *No Wit, No Help, More Dissemblers besides Women*, and *Women, Beware Women* ‘may be had bound together, in a small 8vo. or 12mo’ (p. 99); and the New York Public Library has a copy of the three bound together, with ‘Two’ corrected to ‘Three’ in a contemporary hand.7

The long-term significance of Moseley's collected editions of pre-Civil War drama consists in their canon-making potential. The collections in effect legitimized the playwrights they featured, and initiated the establishment of their individual dramatic canons. The regular appearance within single volumes of a number of plays which were attributed to a named author, each of them given its separate title-page, its list of dramatis personae, and its own apparatus of ornament, can only have strengthened the standing of those plays as literature. The standing of their authors was raised too. The author was the focus of each volume. His name appeared prominently on the title-page; his engraved likeness adorned the frontispiece; and a wealth of paratextual material, consisting of the publisher's addresses (p.185) to the reader, commendatory verses, and dedications, was centred on him. The author, immortalized by his engraving, became a central, unifying presence, binding together, and conferring value upon, a cluster of disparate and hitherto dispersed texts. To adopt the words of the epistle prefaced by Henry Marsh to his collection of drolls called *The Wits, or Sport upon Sport*, Moseley's play collections succeeded in ‘making of a fluid a solid Body’.8
On 29 June 1660 Moseley re-registered the plays he had entered with the Stationers’ Company on 9 September 1653. He was now in a position to issue new collected editions of plays by Davenant, Chapman, Davenport, Dekker, Ford, Henry Shirley, Glapthorne, and William Rowley, as well as to supplement his earlier collections of Massinger and Brome. These projects never materialized. Moseley died in January 1661, and his plans died with him.

The Triumvirate of Wit
With monarchy and theatre both restored, the impetus to bring out old scripts and closet drama waned rapidly. The habit of reading plays was firmly entrenched, but what the public now wanted, and what the booksellers obligingly supplied, was current stage fare. With performance rights protected within the framework of a theatrical duopoly supervised by the Lord Chamberlain, recent premieres were readily available for publication. Their novelty made them hot commodities, although it is also true that stage revivals conferred some novelty value on older pieces. In print both new titles and reprints of revived plays were advertised by the standard formula ‘As it is now Acted’, which superseded the earlier formula ‘As it was/hath been Acted’.

In the later seventeenth century cheap quarto remained the standard format both for new plays and for revivals. What changed was the timing of editions of new plays. From a year or more in the 1660s, the standard lag between première and publication decreased to three months by the late 1670s, two to three months in the 1680s (p.186) (with the exception of the Exclusion Crisis period when it varied widely), and one month in the 1690s. By the 1700s, the lapse had shrunk to less than four weeks. On sale during or shortly after the end of the first run, printed plays relied more directly than ever on the publicity of theatre production.10

In contrast to quarto playbooks, collected editions, especially those which appeared in the expensive folio format, called for a substantial outlay. The capital was then frozen for as long as the bulk of the edition remained unsold. As booksellers’ advertisements attest, folio playbooks could stay in print for decades. They were luxury items. The number of people who could afford them, and whose interest in drama, or perhaps whose snobbery, induced them to sustain the expense, was small. Nevertheless, the sales of early seventeenth-century play folios must have been sufficiently encouraging to justify the continuance of the enterprise on a limited scale. ‘The First Edition of these Plays in this Volume’, noted the publishers of the Beaumont and Fletcher folio of 1679, ‘had found that Acceptance as to give us Encouragement to make a Second Impression.’11 By the time the ‘Second Impression’ appeared, thirty-two years had elapsed since the publication of the ‘First Edition’.
Members of the trade were not bold in their choice of authors. They preferred proven names. The only pre-Restoration dramatists set forth in folio were those whose work had been published, and sold, in that format before: Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Jonson. But the rationale for issuing fresh editions of the triumvirate, and the manner in which those editions were marketed, had undergone a subtle shift. Novelty was replaced by, or rather redefined as, completeness. Items issued separately in the past, and the successive volumes of prior collected editions, were now gathered together and enclosed within the covers of a single book. The resulting tome purported to unite and display the writer's entire dramatic output in all its richness and diversity. The folio was determinedly styled as an embodiment of his—or, in the case of Beaumont and Fletcher, their—lifetime achievement.

Both the First and Second Shakespeare Folios had aspired to completeness. The head title to the First Folio of 1623 read: ‘The Workes of William Shakespeare, containing all his Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies’. The Second Folio of 1632 reproduced the head title verbatim. So did the Third Folio brought out in 1663 by Philip Chetwinde and reissued by him in 1664. But in 1664 ‘all’ meant more plays than in 1623, 1632, and 1663. ‘Unto this [third] Impression is added seven Playes, never before Printed in Folio’, proclaimed the title-page of Chetwinde's Shakespeare. The potential buyer was tempted with the promise of wholeness and perfection. Individual items making up the supplement—Pericles and six pieces of what are now known as Shakespeare apocrypha (The London Prodigal, The History of Thomas Lord Cromwell, Sir John Oldcastle, The Puritan Widow, A Yorkshire Tragedy, and The Tragedy of Locrine)—had all appeared in print before, when they had been attributed either to ‘William Shakespeare’ or to ‘W.S.’ What was new, and what the title-page of the reissue of the Third Folio expressly advertised, was the fact that seven previously scattered plays were now brought within the compass of a book featuring William Shakespeare’s other productions. The move reflected the publisher's perception that the seven would sell better when marketed under Shakespeare's name. At the same time, their addition would reinforce the commercial appeal of the folio by making it look thorough and comprehensive.
When in 1647 Humphrey Moseley had brought out Beaumont and Fletcher's *Comedies and Tragedies*, he advertised it as a 'New Booke', and held up as exemplary his decision to omit the authors' 'old' pieces which were available in quarto: 'for all of this large Volume of *Comedies* and *Tragedies*, not one, till now, was ever printed before. A *Collection of Playes* is commonly but a *new Impressio*on, the scattered pieces which were printed single, being then onely Republished together: 'Tis otherwise here’ (sig. A4r). He followed the same principle when devising his octavo collections. His clients, Moseley reasoned, should not have to pay for what they already owned, or could purchase at a lower price, in order to gain access to his new offerings. Over thirty years later, Henry Herringman, Moseley's successor as the leading publisher of *belles-lettres* in the Restoration, and two other members of the trade, John Martyn and Richard (p.188) Marriot, combined resources to bring out a folio collection of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays.13 Both the rationale and the makeup of the book now had to be different. To reissue Moseley's volume unaltered was not really an option. In a market awash with quartos of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays, such a volume would have seemed deficient and arbitrary. Herringman and his partners settled on a more costly, but also a more promising, alternative. They crammed all extant plays into one thick folio volume, and aggressively promoted the outcome, *Fifty Comedies and Tragedies*, as the best, because all-encompassing, edition of the duo's dramatic work to this date. 'Thus every way perfect and compleat', the booksellers assured the reader, 'have you, all both Tragedies and Comedies that were ever writ by our Authors, a Pair of the greatest Wits and most ingenious Poets of their Age’ (sig. A1r–v).
The prefatory address was practically a trade manifesto outlining the principles of editorial policy. The key requirements—which the folio was touted as effectively having fulfilled—were that the text be correct, comprehensive, and sympathetically rendered on the page. To ensure textual accuracy, the syndicate had secured a copy ‘which an ingenious and worthy Gentleman had taken the pains (or rather the pleasure) to read over; wherein he had all along Corrected several faults (some very gross) which had crept in by the frequent imprinting of them’. The authority of this genteel editor stemmed from his ‘intimacy with both our Authors’, and from his having been ‘a Spectator of most of them when they were Acted in their lifetime’. Second, the book was enlarged by the inclusion of previously unpublished matter (‘several Prologues and Epilogues, with the Songs appertaining to each Play, which were not in the former Edition’) and by the addition of items excluded from Moseley’s folio (‘no fewer than Seventeen Plays more than were in the former, which we have taken the pains and care to Collect, and Print out of 4th in this Volume’). Third, reading was facilitated by indications of locale, by lists of dramatis personae, and, in a few cases, by the insertion of actor-lists (sig. A1r). In all those respects the 1679 folio—‘an incorrupt and genuine Edition’—affected to be a better (p.189) book than its predecessor. Should it prosper, the publishers affirmed, ‘we shall be encourag’d to bring Ben. Johnsons two Volumes into one, and publish them in this form; and also to reprint Old Shakespear’ (sig.A2r).

‘Old Shakespear’ was indeed set forth six years later, in 1685, by a syndicate of Henry Herringman, Edward Brewster, Richard Bentley, and Richard Chiswell. The Fourth Folio was basically a reprint of the 1664 reissue of the Third, and contained no extras which might specifically have recommended it to prospective buyers. Unscrupulous in their search for profit, or perhaps merely careless, the confederate publishers caused the title-page to repeat verbatim the now spurious claim that seven plays ‘Never before Printed in Folio’ had been added to the volume.14
Both early and late seventeenth-century folios promoted Shakespeare, and Beaumont and Fletcher, as playwrights only. They contained none of their non-dramatic writings. Editions of Shakespeare's poems, which had been excluded from the folios, were barely accessible to late seventeenth-century readers. The Sonnets and The Rape of Lucrece had last been published before the Restoration; Venus and Adonis appeared in a slight quarto in 1675. Neither was printed again until the early eighteenth century. By contrast, Beaumont's Poems (1653) exploited the publicity generated by the folio of Comedies and Tragedies (1647). Though substantially a collection of Beaumont's work, the octavo volume reprinted prologues, epilogues, songs, and commendatory verses from its more illustrious forerunner. To maximize the somewhat tenuous connection with the folio, the title-page of the reissue of Poems in 1660 misrepresented the contents, which remained unchanged, as The Golden Remains Of those so much admired Dramatick Poets, Francis Beaumont & John Fletcher. Yet the movement was solely in one direction. The publishers of the 1679 folio apparently saw no benefit to be derived from importing Beaumont's poems into their volume of plays. The two forms of literary production, poetry and drama, were kept strictly separate.

The transmission of Jonson's work offers a parallel. It too testifies to the urge to assemble and consolidate an author's creative output. (p.190) In Jonson's case, however, dramatic and non-dramatic writings appeared together from the time of the publication of his Workes in 1616, which Jonson himself saw through the press. The Workes of Benjamin Johnson brought out by Richard Bishop in 1640 was basically a reprint of that edition. Later in 1640 Richard Meighen supplemented Bishop's collection with what he called the second volume of Workes. It contained three plays which had been absent from the 'first' volume as from that of 1616, but which had long been available in quarto: Bartholomew Fair, The Staple of News, and The Devil is an Ass. A 'third' volume, consisting of more miscellaneous and previously uncollected matter (masques, poems, plays, the translation of Horace's Ars Poetica, The English Grammar, and Timber), followed in 1641. It lacked a general title-page and seems to have been intended solely as a companion to the preceding two (Greg, Bibliography, iii. 1079–84). The publisher was Thomas Walkley. Although each of the three folio volumes of 1640–1 was issued with a different imprint, they were clearly conceived as jointly amounting to a larger whole: the complete works of Benjamin Jonson. This plan was not realized until 1692, when another trade alliance headed by Henry Herringman brought out The Works of Ben Jonson, Which were formerly Printed in Two Volumes...now Reprinted in One. To which is added a Comedy called The New Inn. With Additions never before Published.
The Works of 1692 embodied the commercial and editorial strategies developed by the recent folios of Davenant, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Shakespeare. It also went beyond them. The title-page emphasized the comprehensiveness of this new edition which merged multiple volumes into one. The text that was derived from earlier editions of the Works was supplemented by previously unpublished matter and by items reprinted from quarto. The physical bulk of the book was massive; its contents were extensive in range and scope. The reader was presented with everything the individual by the name Ben Jonson was known to have written: the author's output in toto.

(p.191) Readers had indeed come to expect collected editions to have no lacunae. In 1691, a year before the ‘Complete Jonson’ appeared, Gerard Langbaine judged the earlier folios imperfect: ‘He has three other Plays, which are omitted in these Volumes, tho’ for what reason, I know not’ (Account, 298). Writing in the late 1690s, with the new Works to hand, Charles Gildon pointed out that the omission had now been rectified: ‘The before mentioned Plays, and other Poems, &c. were formerly printed together in Two Volumes, Fol. 1640, and 1641[,] but Three other Plays which are there omitted, are hereunder mentioned, and may be found in the late Edition, printed 1692’ (Lives, 81). In 1710 Gildon would himself repair a similar defect of Rowe's six-volume Shakespeare. The title of that collection, The Works of Mr. William Shakespear, was misleading since the edition contained plays only. Gildon's seventh volume made Rowe's title good by supplying 'Venus & Adonis, Tarquin & Lucrece And His Miscellany Poems'.

Over the last four decades of the seventeenth century, the triumvirate by no means dominated the folio market. The total number of their folios published between 1660 and 1700—four—seems paltry; even Cowley's Works went through more editions in the interim. Of the four folios, only one, the Shakespeare of 1663–4, appeared before 1679 (Beaumont and Fletcher), and the last was published as late as 1692 (Jonson). As we shall see, authors other than the triumvirate held sway over collected publication in the early decades of the Restoration.

Genteel Amateurs
The 1660s witnessed a proliferation of collected editions of plays by well-born amateurs. Margaret Cavendish, Marchioness (later Duchess) of Newcastle’s Playes (1662) and her Plays, Never before Printed (1668), Thomas Killigrew's Comedies, and Tragedies (1664), Sir Robert Howard's Four New Plays (1665), Sir William Killigrew's Four New Playes (1666), and the Earl of Orrery's The History of Henry the Fifth. And the Tragedy of Mustapha, Son of Solyman the Magnificent (1668) and his Two New Tragedies: The Black Prince, and Tryphon (1669) were clearly designed to capitalize on Moseley's perception that 'new' plays had a canonical potential. There was, however, an important departure from Moseley's practice. Whether published commercially or at the expense of their authors, these amateur collections appeared in folio, not octavo. They therefore aligned themselves with the triumvirate of wit, not with Moseley's poets of the second magnitude.

Margaret Cavendish's ‘General Prologue to all my Playes’, in her Playes of 1662, made the connection explicit. While affecting modesty and professing the inferiority of her own playwriting, Cavendish exhorted the reader to compare her compositions to those of the triumvirate:

But Noble Readers, do not think my Playes,  
Are such as have been writ in former daies;  
As Johnson, Shakespear, Beamont [sic], Fletcher writ;  
Mine want their Learning, Reading, Language, Wit...
(sig. A7v)

Thomas Killigrew's collection, Comedies, and Tragedies, reproduced verbatim the title of the Beaumont and Fletcher folio of 1647, which had itself alluded to Shakespeare's folios of 1623 and 1632. The commendatory poems to Sir William Killigrew's Four New Playes (1666) metaphorically allied the author 'to whom... Learning is unknown' (sig. *2v) with the equally unschooled Shakespeare. Taking their cue from the preliminaries to the Shakespeare and the Beaumont and Fletcher folios, the encomiasts resolutely celebrated Sir William's native genius and artless perfection: 'Miracle of Nature, by no Arts taught; | Borne beyond Learning; with such fancy fraught!' (sig. 2*2v), or, in the words of another eulogist, ‘Nature in him th’Effect of Art supplies’ (sig. *2v). The recipient of these accolades begged the reader in an apologetic epistle 'to excuse my confidence, for Printing so high Complements, from my kind Friends' (sig. 2*3v).
The title-page of each folio tome proclaimed the social eminence of the author whose engraved likeness was on view as the frontispiece. Margaret Cavendish was represented as ‘the Thrice Noble, Illustrious and Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle’ in 1662, and, following her husband’s recent elevation to the dukedom, as ‘the Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princess, The Duchess of Newcastle’ in 1668. Thomas Killigrew was described as ‘Page of Honour to King Charles the First. And Groom of the Bed-Chamber to King Charles the Second’; Sir William Killigrew as ‘Vice-Chamberlaine to Her Majesty’; Sir Robert Howard as ‘Honourable’; and the Earl of Orrery as ‘Right Honourable’. The front matter to individual volumes emphasized the genteel and amateur quality of the plays contained in them. For Cavendish ‘the chief Plots of my Playes were to imploy my idle time’. ‘I write and disperse [my Books] abroad, only for my own pleasure’, she announced in the preface to her second collection, *Plays, Never Before Printed*, in 1668 (sig. A2v). Sir William Killigrew referred to his ‘idle howers thus spent’. ‘If you have as much leasure to Read as I had to Write these Plays, you may, as I did, find a diversion’, wrote Thomas Killigrew, ‘though I wish it you upon better terms then Twenty Years Banishment.’ Even Sir Robert Howard, more a man of the theatre than his peers, engaged in a ritual denigration of his plays and insisted that he had consented to publication only after prolonged solicitations by the bookseller.

Thomas Killigrew fashioned his *Comedies, and Tragedies* into a veritable chronicle of a Royalist exile. In place of the customary information concerning theatrical venue, separate title-pages stated where, and occasionally when, a given play had been composed. The reader was taken on a tour of major European cities where Killigrew had tarried long enough to indulge his creative pastime. We learn that *The Princesse: or, Love at first Sight* was ‘Written in Naples’; *The Parsons Wedding*, ‘Written at Basil in Switzerland’; *The Pilgrim*, ‘Written in Paris…1651’; we traverse Turin, Florence, Madrid (where the centrepiece of the collection, the quasi-autobiographical *Thomaso, or, The Wanderer* was conceived), Venice, and Rome, before (p.194) returning to London with *The Prisoners*. The arrangement of the contents of the book figuratively evokes the course of the author’s enforced travels. Chronology is disregarded: the last two items, *Claricilla [sic]* and *The Prisoners*, were among Killigrew’s earliest work, and had been performed and printed before the Civil War. Marked as having been written in London, *The Prisoners* provides an apt close to the symbolic itinerary of the faithful Stuart follower which the preceding title-pages have mapped out.
Killigrew’s active participation in devising the shape of his book was by no means unique. The other genteel amateurs, except perhaps Orrery, were likewise eager to see their works appear in print. This was especially true of Margaret Cavendish and Sir William Killigrew, who themselves financed the printing of their respective volumes. When her first dramatic collection appeared in 1662, Cavendish’s sundry writings had been in print for several years. Poems and Fancies (1653), The Worlds Olio (1655), The Philosophical and Physical Opinions (1655), Natures Pictures (1656) had all been issued in folio. This format was therefore a natural choice for Playes. None of the pieces Cavendish included in the collection had ever been performed. ‘The printing of my Playes’, she wrote in one of her innumerable epistles, ‘spoils them for ever to be Acted’. 29 To emphasize that the second collection, issued in 1668, comprised new work she called it Plays, Never before Printed.

Cavendish’s investment, with her husband’s unwavering approval, in the publication of her various productions in the monumental folio format, and her donation of her books to college libraries and chosen individuals, did not pass unacknowledged. Walter Charleton was deferential, although there may be a note of irony in his letter of 7 May 1667:

> Among many other things, by which your Grace is pleased to distinguish your self from other Writers this seems to be not the least remarkable; that whereas they imploy only their wit, labour, and time, in composing Books, you bestow also great summs of Money in Printing Yours: and not content to enrich our Heads alone, with your rare Notions, you go higher, and adorn our Libraries, with your elegant Volumes. 30

Charleton’s was one of many obsequious epistles and verses, some of them in Latin, expressing gratitude for the Newcastles’ bounty and extolling their joint and several compositions. Two missives from Jasper Mayne, himself a poet and a sympathetic reader of Cavendish’s plays, indicate that she was thinking of having them rendered into Latin and that Mayne had been given the task of finding a suitable translator. 31
In contrast to Cavendish's closet drama, some, and possibly all, of Sir William Killigrew's *Four New Playes* (1666) had been staged. The genealogy of his collection was not straightforward. Three of the four 'New Playes', *Selindra*, *Pandora*, and *Love and Friendship* (the latter previously titled *Ormasdes*), had been printed before. Jointly they made up the octavo of *Three Playes Written by Sir William Killigrew*, which had been brought out in 1665 by two London publishers, John Playfere and Thomas Horsman. Perhaps swayed by the stately look of his younger brother's recent *Comedies, and Tragedies*, Sir William resolved to upgrade the format of his plays from octavo to folio, and had the job carried out in Oxford. The general title-page declared *Four New Playes* to have been 'Printed by Hen: Hall, Printer to the University, for Ric: Davis', but the separate title-page of *Selindra* indicated that it had in fact been 'Printed for the Author'. For Killigrew, as for Cavendish, the chance to construct a distinct authorial persona through publication was evidently worth substantial personal investment. Both authors were keen that their exalted social rank be made conspicuous in the properly dignified and expensive format of the book, and sought to capture public (p.196) attention by foregrounding the freshness of their volumes as 'New Playes' and 'Plays Never before Printed'.

The remaining folios of plays by genteel amateurs issued in the 1660s bear the imprint of Henry Herringman. He chose carefully the authors in whose folios he was prepared to invest. Thomas Killigrew was a royal favourite and patentee of the acting company patronized directly by Charles II; Sir Robert Howard was a part-sharer in the same company and a rising figure at Court; the Earl of Orrery was a prominent politician whose playwriting had been personally promoted by the king. More important to Herringman, the plays of Howard and Orrery had prospered on the stage.

Killigrew's tome projected an aura of gentility and aloofness becoming to a literary exercise; its divorce from the realities of theatrical production was complete. By contrast, Howard's and Orrery's volumes proudly heralded their connection with live performance. Sir Robert's *Four New Plays* were set forth 'As they were Acted by His Majesties Servants at the Theatre-Royal'; Orrery's two plays, *The History of Henry the Fifth. And the Tragedy of Mustapha, Son of Solyman the Magnificent* (1668), 'As they were Acted at his Highness the Duke of York's Theater'. The general title-page of Orrery's *Two New Tragedies: The Black Prince, and Tryphon*, which Herringman brought out in 1669, was equally informative: 'The first Acted at the Theatre-Royal, by his Majestie's Servants; The Other by his Highness the Duke of York's Servants'. Having published two folio volumes—each comprising two plays—by the same author, Herringman was eager to market them as a single item. The outcome was a nonce collection whose title once again bore witness to Moseley's influence and to the publicity value of theatrical production: *Four New Playes...As they were acted By His Majesties Servants, and His Highness the Duke of York's* (1670).
Sir William Davenant’s folio of 1673 stands apart from these earlier collections. For one thing, it was a posthumous publication. For another, it included both dramatic and non-dramatic compositions, and was therefore graced with a more majestic title, *The Works of S r William D’avenant K t Consisting of Those which were formerly Printed, and Those which he design’d for the Press.*\(^{36}\) The front matter made plain (p.197) how much such a publication had meant to the late Sir William. ‘I Here present you with *A Collection* of all those Pieces Sir William D’avenant ever design’d for the Press’, Wrote Herringman, ‘In his Life-time he often express’d to me his great Desire to see them in *One Volume*, which (in Honor to his Memory) with a great deal of Care and Pains, I have now Accomplished’ (sig. π3\(^{r}\)).\(^{37}\)

The contents of the volume were arranged in order of generic dignity. *Gondibert*, Davenant’s unfinished epic, came first. It was followed by *Madagascar*, numerous shorter poems, *The Entertainment at Rutland House*, masques and, at the end, plays. The plays’ position was an index of their relative insignificance. Conversely, the two major poems which opened the collection were also the only items mentioned by title in Herringman’s advertisement in the *London Gazette* for 14–18 November 1672: ‘The *WORKS* of Sir William D’avenant, Kt…. Wherein you have *Gondibert* and *Madagascar*, with several other Poems never before Printed; And sixteen Plays, whereof six were never before Printed.’

Herringman’s commitment to erecting an enduring monument to his ‘Worthy Friend’, who had been ‘*Poet Laureat* to two Great Kings’, bore fruit later in his career. The stress on completeness and novelty, the search for unpublished material, and the practice of reprinting quarto plays for inclusion in folio collected editions would determine, as we have seen, the mode of publication of the triumvirate folios for which Herringman was largely responsible. His edition of Davenant’s *Works* of 1673 prefigured both Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Comedies and Tragedies* of 1679 and Jonson’s *Works* of 1692.
The vogue for playwriting among genteel amateurs was short-lived. Orrery's *Two New Tragedies* (1669) was the last collection of genuinely new plays by a well-born author; that is, it was neither a reprint nor a retrospective concoction. (A few other genteel amateurs—the Duke of Newcastle, the Earl of Rochester, and the Duke of Buckingham come to mind—would occasionally pen a play, but the market was now decidedly in the hands of professional writers.) The circulation and sales of these folios varied from author to author. Margaret Cavendish gave copies to friends and institutions, but some of her volumes of plays may have been distributed by the trade, for (p.198) they were cited in Kirkman's catalogue of 1671 and we find them in the hands of such commentators as Langbaine and Gildon. The edition of 'Mr. Tho. Killigrew's Plays' of 1664 was among items advertised by Herringman as late as 1688. The less bulky collections of Orrery, by contrast, must have sold well since they went through several editions in quick succession. With the addition of *Guzman* (1693) and *Herod the Great* (1694), Orrery's *Four New Plays* were metamorphosed into *Six Plays* in 1694. Howard's folio too was reprinted in 1692 as *Five New Plays, The Great Favourite* being the fifth 'new' play (see Fig. 8). The Gentleman's Journal for May of that year carried an advance notice of the edition: 'Sir Robert Howard's Plays, which have been so scarce, are reprinting' (p. 25). In 1700 the same sheets were reissued as 'The Second Edition Corrected'. As this survey of collected publication demonstrates, the four folios of the triumvirate were dwarfed by the number of folios by well-born amateurs published in the latter half of the seventeenth century.

**Dryden and Other Professionals**

No living professional of our period was honoured with a folio of his plays. That there was an urge to collect the *œuvres* of prominent professional playwrights is none the less manifest in the appearance of the nonce collections of Dryden (1691, 1693, 1694, 1695), Lee (1691?, 1694, 1697), Otway (1692), and Shadwell (1693) in the last decade of the century. Such sets were made up of left-over quartos and marketed under the name of an individual writer. Each set was composed of old stock which the publishers were hoping to vend at reduced rates, and was furnished with a general title-page listing its-contents. When a given item grew scarce, it was promptly reprinted so as to keep the set complete.

In 1691 a two-volume set of Dryden's plays and poems was promoted by Jacob Tonson as *The Works of Mr. John Dryden*. The advertisement of the collection in the first edition of *King Arthur*, in 1691, was preceded by a note supplied by Dryden himself:
(p.199) Finding that several of my Friends, in Buying my Plays, &c. Bound together, have been impos’d on by the Booksellers foisting in a Play which is not mine; I have here, to prevent this for the future, set down a Catalogue of my Plays and Poems in Quarto, putting the Plays in the Order I wrote them. (sig. π1v)\textsuperscript{42}

In the following year, the title-page of Cleomenes invited the reader to visit Tonson’s shop at the Judge’s Head ‘Where Compleat SETS of Mr. Dryden’s Works, in Four Volumes, are to be Sold. The PLAYS being put in the order they were Written.’\textsuperscript{43} Tonson placed an identical notice in the London Gazette for 2π5 May 1692. Two more variant sets, Mr Dryden’s Plays in two volumes, and The Dramatick Works of Mr. John Dryden in three, were issued in 1694 and 1695 respectively.\textsuperscript{44}

Encouraged by Tonson’s example, Richard Bentley touted Otway’s less abundant dramatic output as The Works of Mr. Thomas Otway. In one Volume (1692), and was soon ready with The Works of Mr. Nathaniel Lee (1694), also in one. The advertisement appended to John Crowne’s Regulus (1694) listed ‘Books lately Printed for J. Knapton. Among them we find ‘Mr. Tho. Shadwells Works, late Poet Laureat, containing these Plays following, to be had bound up, or single’ (the verso of p. 63). That it was Knapton who prepared this particular collection was natural, for he had published most of Shadwells work and still owned the unsold copies. Yet the same leaf also mentioned ‘All Mr. Dryden’s Works in four Volumes, Mr. Lee’s, and Mr. Otway’s, in one Volume each; or the Play [sic] single’, which suggests that London stationers closely co-operated on the sale of their various sets.

In one sense, admittedly, the appearance of a nonce collection was a sign that individual plays had not been selling well. To issue them in sets was basically a way of peddling old wares. Yet the notion that old plays would sell better if bound together and marketed as the ‘Works’ (p.200) of a Dryden or a Shadwell shows that the names of these authors had acquired high publicity value. They had become commercial assets. This was not true of other prolific writers.\textsuperscript{45} There must have been plenty of unsold quartos of plays by Thomas D’Urfey or Elkanah Settle which were never gathered together and called ‘Works’. The low esteem in which those playwrights were held would have rendered any such move unproductive and perhaps even slightly ridiculous. Conversely, the prestige and critical reputation of Dryden, Shadwell, Otway, and Lee convinced the publishers that to collect their works would be highly beneficial commercially.
The resulting nonce collections were far from stable. Their titles, constitution, and availability varied widely. They were, after all, makeshift concoctions, not carefully planned and executed editions like the Davenant and Jonson folios.46 Even so, these collections were the first to assemble the dramatic canons of the four leading professional playwrights and to present them to the readers in their totality. Though in practical terms this meant no more than binding old playbooks together and attaching a spurious title-page, the conceptual implications of the exercise were far-reaching. No longer single, scattered, dispersed, loose, each play was now an integral part of a larger physical and abstract whole, part of an individual dramatist’s œuvre. Organized around the figure of the author, and designated ‘Works’, these little stitched-up volumes at once reflected and contributed to the emergence of a new literary hierarchy.

How were they received and read? The preface to Edward Filmer’s abortive tragedy The Unnatural Brother (1697) provides an insight into one reader’s experience of a Dryden collection. ‘Not many daies (p.201) after the very cold reception which this Play met with on the Stage’, wrote the unlucky debutant, ‘as I was walking up and down my Chamber something discontented, tho not much mortified neither, at the unkindness of the Town, I happened to cast my eye on a Book which lay in a Window, and that proving to be the first Volume of Mr. Drydens Plays, I opened it, by meer chance, just on a Prologue of his which begins thus, Self love...’ (sig. A2r). Whether true or fictitious, the incident Filmer describes is of greater interest than the lines he proceeds to quote. Pacing his room, he noticed a book, a physical object of a distinct shape and substantial bulk. He would hardly have called an unbound quarto a ‘Book’. It proved to be the first volume of a set. We can identify it: only the nonce collection of 1694, bearing the imprint of Henry Herringman on the title-page, was called ‘Mr Dryden’s Plays’; all the others were marketed as ‘Works’. 
When opened, the volume revealed a portion of text which caught the reader’s eye. It was the prologue to *Tyrannick Love*, but it might just as easily have been the epilogue. Indeed, it might have been a prologue or epilogue to a different play, or a stretch of dramatic dialogue. In a volume of plays the range of possibilities is broad, much broader than in a lone quarto. The act of reading becomes more complex and stimulating. The reader may consciously select an item from the table of contents, or open the book casually, like Filmer, to chance upon one of the many items it contains. A collection enables the reader to get to know the author; to recognize and appreciate his or her imaginative scope, specific aptitudes, and weaknesses; to judge and compare the various productions. The contents of *Mr Dryden’s Plays* were placed in alphabetical order. But in a set such as Dryden’s *Works* issued by Tonson, where the items have been arranged chronologically, the reader may also get a sense of the writer’s artistic development, of his changing themes and concerns. The author is knowable through a collected edition more fully than through a copy of a single work. The authority of his text too is enhanced. Filmer’s deference to Dryden’s lines drawn from a mere prologue to a play is a sure mark of this elevation.

The successive nonce collections boosted Dryden’s popularity by making his output accessible to readers in something approaching a totality. It had become advantageous to publicize a piece of writing as his. Dryden’s contribution to the adaptation of Fletcher’s *The Pilgrim* (1700) was advertised on the title-page of the hastily published quarto: (p.202) ‘A Prologue, Epilogue, Dialogue and Masque, Written by the late Great Poet Mr. Dryden, just before his Death, being the last of his Works’. The ‘late Great Poet’ had been the first Restoration professional to have his dramatic and non-dramatic ‘Works’ gathered into a nonce collection; he was also the first and only one to be dignified with a folio of his own. Ushered in by an engraving of Kneller’s portrait of the author at the frontispiece (see Fig. 9), the two-volume *The Comedies, Tragedies, and Operas... Now first Collected together, and Corrected from the Originals* appeared posthumously, in 1701.47 In the same year, Tonson brought out two folio volumes of Dryden’s poems and translations, and arranged for sets of all four to be put on sale under the general title strikingly imprinted in black and red and enclosed within double rules—*The Works Of the late Famous Mr. John Dryden... Containing all his Comedies, Tragedies, and Operas; With his Original Poems and Translations*. Enshrined in a magnificent set of folio books (the fourth volume, his translation of Virgil, ‘Adorn’d with a Hundred Sculptures’), Dryden had attained the status of a contemporary English classic.
Dryden's was the last collection of plays in folio to be published in England. Because of the recent increase in the size of the sheet and the corresponding shift in the methods of bookbinding, early eighteenth-century publishers, instead of issuing unwieldy folios which would have been much larger than seventeenth-century ones, started bringing out multi-volume sets in smaller formats, octavo and duodecimo.\(^48\) (Issued in quarto, the two-volume edition of *The Genuine Works in Verse and Prose, Of the Right Honourable George Granville, Lord Lansdowne* (1732) has the portly appearance of a seventeenth-century folio.) The hierarchy implicit in the size of the book had all but vanished: now the triumvirate and the ‘modern classics’ were made available in identical formats. In the first two decades of the century, however, the prevalence of collected editions of modern playwrights was overwhelming.

The folios of Shakespeare, Jonson, and Beaumont and Fletcher\(^{(p.203)}\) had been eclipsed, in the later seventeenth century, by the folios of plays by genteel amateurs; in the early eighteenth century, collected editions of these dramatists in octavo and duodecimo were outnumbered by collections of post-Restoration playwrights. Between 1700 and 1720, there were only three collected editions of Shakespeare (two editions appearing in 1709 and one in 1714),\(^49\) one of Beaumont and Fletcher (1711), and two of Ben Jonson (1715 and 1716–17). By contrast, we have four collections of Farquhar ([1708], [1711], 1714, 1718); three each of Behn (1702, 1711, 1716) and Congreve (two different collections appearing in 1710, one in 1719–20); two each of Dryden (1701, 1717), Etherege (1704, 1715), Otway (1712, 1717–18), Rowe (1714, 1720), Steele (1712, 1717), Wycherley (1713, 1720), and George Villiers, second Duke of Buckingham (1715, 1718); and one each of Granville (1713), Lee (1713), Southerne (1713), Vanbrugh (1719), Mountfort (1720), and Shadwell (1720).\(^50\) The reputation, and therefore the economic viability, of Jonson and Beaumont and Fletcher had dwindled; and the boom in Shakespeare publishing only began in the 1720s. Early eighteenth-century readers would have been far more familiar with the collected output of post-Restoration playwrights than with the *oeuvre* of the antediluvian giants.

The Formation of a Hierarchy
What was the literary hierarchy of plays and authors at the beginning of the eighteenth century? How did contemporaries conceive of it? To reconstruct their criteria and order of preference we must look to publication history and critical commentary. In investigating the pattern of publication of collected editions, we have noted the temporary ascendancy of Moseley's octavo authors in the 1650s and of the well-born amateurs in the 1660s, Dryden's achievement of celebrity status in the 1690s and 1700s, and the prominence of the modern canon in the early decades of the eighteenth century. *Print*\(^{(p.204)}\) consolidated the emerging literary canon by making the work of popular dramatists increasingly accessible as reading-matter. What were the grounds of their popularity? How were they judged and rated?
Prologues, epilogues, prefatory epistles, and critical pamphlets are useful in assessing what appealed to late seventeenth-century audiences. Personal correspondence and diaries too can be of help. They register individual likes and dislikes, and occasionally offer an insight into the views of a family, a professional group, or a social class. Yet such sources are by definition partial and incomplete. Our most systematic evidence of critical commentary and judgement comes from play catalogues and dictionaries of dramatic biography. These compendia set out to list and attribute all extant English plays. From mere mechanical lists they evolved into well-considered guides. Their changing format and organization reflected a new understanding of the territory, and communicated this new understanding to a growing audience. Dramatic catalogues sought to define the standard of literary judgement, and by assessing and ranking the mass of printed plays showed how this standard could be applied in practice. To extrapolate and analyse the evaluative criteria embodied in successive catalogues is to recover the conceptual basis on which the contemporary dramatic canon was formed.

Kirkman, Phillips, and Winstanley

The urge to judge and evaluate was already implicit in Francis Kirkman’s catalogues. Though the primary aim of *A True, perfect, and exact Catalogue* of 1661 was to advertise the commodities for sale at his and his partners’ shops, and though he retained the alphabetical arrangement of plays typical of the commercial listings of the 1650s, Kirkman made his notion of the dramatic hierarchy plain by placing the plays of Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Jonson at the head of each alphabetical entry. The prominence of Shakespeare was further underscored, as we have seen, in the revised and expanded edition of the catalogue published ten years later. Kirkman now purposed to list the most prolific playwrights first. In failing to remove Shakespeare from the initial position in each consecutive entry, he conspicuously violated this design, for according to his own count Shakespeare had written fewer plays than either Beaumont and Fletcher or Jonson.

(p.205) The typographical layout of entries could only go so far in signalling precedence. And Kirkman felt that his familiarity with all the plays included in the catalogue qualified him to comment on their relative merits. ‘I have not only seen, but also read all these Playes’, he wrote, ‘and can give some account of every one; but I shall not be so presumptuous, as to give my Opinion, much less, to determine or judge of every, or any mans Writing, and who writ best.’ He promptly contradicted this profession of restraint by declaring that ‘in my Opinion, one [English Meriton], who writ two Pamphlets, which he calls Playes... was the worst [English Play-writer]’. With a perfunctory nod towards well-born amateurs—‘the English Stage is much improved and adorned with the several Writings of several persons of Honour’—Kirkman proceeded to state his genuine preference: ‘but, in my Opinion chiefly with those of the most accomplished Mr. John Dreyden’.51
Kirkman did not articulate the grounds for his dismissal of Meriton, for his respect for the genteel dabbler, or for his admiration for Dryden. Edward Phillips was more explicit. He was much exercised by the rise and fall of literary reputations. ‘In the State of Learning, among the Writers of all Ages’, he observed in the preface to Theatrum Poetarum (1675), ‘some deserve Fame, & have it; others neither have nor deserve it; some have it, not deserving, others though deserving, yet totally miss it, or have it not equall to their deserts’ (sig. *4f*). Phillips took linguistic change to be the main reason for the disappearance of older works from the canon. He also thought that plays were more likely to live beyond their time than other forms of writing. ‘Let us look back as far as about 30 or 40 years’, he wrote, ‘and we shall find a profound silence of the Poets beyond that time, except of some few Dramatics, of whose real worth the Interest of the now flourishing Stage, cannot but be sensible.’

‘Is Antiquity then a crime?’ he exclaimed. ‘[N]o certainly, it ought to be rather had in veneration, but nothing it seems relishes so well as what is written in the smooth style of our present Language taken to be of late so much refined’ (sig. **2r*). Phillips was uncomfortable about the arguments of Dryden, Sprat, and others concerning the spectacular improvement of the English tongue as both a communicative tool and poetic medium. He condemned his contemporaries’ excessive regard for new literary fashions and means of expression, and deplored the resulting shifts in the canonical hierarchy. This hostility to change and a yearning for stability derived from his conviction that ‘what was verum & bonum once, continues to be so always’ (sig. **3t*).

Phillips undertook to specify the ‘verum & bonum’ in all of the world’s poetry and drama; his compilation was promoted as a ‘Corn-pleat Collection of the Poets, Especially The most Eminent, of all Ages’. Phillips largely recycled and rearranged information culled from continental encyclopedias and dictionaries of literary biography, and was at his most original in his entries on English authors. His judgements of particular works were often commonplace. What was truly new about the enterprise was Phillips’s attempt to convey a sense of a hierarchy beyond the triumvirate, and to spell out some of the criteria for its differentiation.

Shakespeare was accorded pre-eminence over Jonson and Fletcher. Phillips recognized ‘his unfiled expressions, [and] his rambling and indigested Fancys’ (sig. **9v*), and allowed that ‘some others may perhaps pretend to a more exact Decorum and OEconomie, especially in Tragedy’. Even so, he averred that ‘never any expres’t a more lofty and Tragic heighth; never any represented nature more purely to the life’. For ‘where the polishments of Art are most wanting’, Shakespeare ‘pleaseth with a certain wild and native Elegance; and in all his Writings hath an unvulgar style’ (p. 194, second pagination).
Second in rank to the triumvirate of ‘the Chief Dramatic Poets of our Nation, in the last foregoing Age’ were James Shirley, Richard Brome, and Thomas Middleton. Phillips compared Shirley to Fletcher (‘by some he is accounted little inferior to Fletcher himself, p. 80, second pagination); Brome to Jonson (‘not many para-sangues inferior to him in fame by divers noted Comedies’, p. 157, second pagination); and Middleton to both those poets (‘a copious Writer for the English Stage, Contemporary with Johnson and Fletcher, though not of equal repute, and yet on the other side not altogether contemptible’, p. 180, second pagination). At the bottom of the scale he placed Thomas Nashe, ‘one of those that may serve to fill up the Catalogue of English Dramatics [sic] Writers’ (p. 181, second pagination).

Phillips’s rating of pre-Restoration playwrights was conventional and superficial. He was more outspoken in his criteria for assessing (p.207) recent English plays. His cardinal objection was that they unthinkingly imported imperfect French models. In the entry on Corneille, Phillips sarcastically noted the Frenchman’s popularity ‘both among his own Country-men, and our Frenchly affected English, for the amorous Intreagues, which if not there before, he commonly thrusts into his Tragedies and Histories’, and castigated ‘the Imitation whereof among us, and of the perpetual Colloquy in Rhime, [which] hath of late very much corrupted our English Stage’ (p. 28, second pagination). He was more appreciative of Molière, ‘the pleasantest of French Comedians, for smart Comic wit and Mirth; and to whom’, he admitted with embarrassment, ‘our English Stage hath within a few years been not a little beholding’ (p. 230, second pagination).

The taste of audiences must be vitiated, Phillips thought, if they applaud the ‘Dramatic Histories’ of the Earl of Orrery, with their ‘continual Riming, and love and honour way of the French’ (pp. 165–6, second pagination). He was likewise sceptical about Dryden’s two-part The Conquest of Granada, ‘in which...he have indulg’d a little too much to the French way of continual Rime and interlarding of History with...Love and Honour’ (p. 108, second pagination). Phillips’s patriotic resistance to the encroachment of Gallic fashions was not a new departure; similar sentiments had been voiced before. His was the earliest sustained endeavour to use the bias against French influence as the ground for discrediting specific English plays such as those by Dryden and Orrery.

The embryonic hierarchy of pre-Civil War playwrights discernible in Phillips’s Theatrum Poetarum was reproduced virtually intact by William Winstanley in his Lives Of the most Famous English Poets (1687). Winstanley was less overtly critical of native writers than his predecessor. He deleted both Phillips’s harsh dismissal of minor old writers such as Nashe and his reservations about the infiltration of the fabric of recent English drama by foreign accretions. To allow them to stand would have undermined the patriotic goal of his volume.
The work of Phillips and Winstanley belonged in the tradition of collective literary biography, to which they brought rudiments of critical judgement. Gerard Langbaine's *Momus Triumphans* (1688) (p.208) descended from an alternative tradition, that of the commercial play list. Langbaine proposed to do more than advertise available titles. His ambition was to teach his readers, the ‘Nobility and Gentry, who delight in Plays’ (sig. a3v), how properly to judge what they saw on the stage and read in the privacy of their closets. He encouraged them to become acquainted with criticism of the drama, and recommended relevant texts accessible in English. Among them were Jonson's *Timber*, Roscommon's translation of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, Rymer's translation of Rapin and his own *Tragedies of the Last Age*, Dryden's *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, Hédelin's *The Whole Art of the Stage*, Longinus’ *On the Sublime*, and Boileau's *Art of Poetry* (sigs. a3v–a4r). Reading criticism enhances understanding, he claimed, and to understand drama is better to appreciate and enjoy it. The audience ‘would have the greater satisfaction in seeing a *correct Play*, Langbaine affirmed, ‘by how much they were capable...to discern the *Beauties* of it; and the greater value for a *good Poet*, by how much they were sensible of the Pains and Study requisite to bring such a Poem to perfection’ (sig. a4r).

What is ‘a *correct Play*'? How to recognize ‘a *good Poet*'? There is a universal standard of judgement, Langbaine intimated, a set of prescriptive criteria, which help distinguish good plays from bad ones. Spectators and readers would become more competent judges once they learnt and absorbed these criteria as expounded in the critical texts he recommended. Langbaine, however, had his own distinct notion of what a play should be, and of how dramatists ought to be assessed, which went beyond any putative critical consensus. His major concern was with artistic self-sufficiency.

In the preface to *Momus Triumphans*, we recall, Langbaine laid out his views of plagiarism and appropriative licence in drama. He exhorted readers to compare plays and their sources in order to appraise the writer's achievement, and, by way of illustration, offered a review of Dryden's thefts and Shadwell's legitimate borrowings. To enable his readers to carry out such comparisons for themselves, he cited, in footnotes appended to individual titles, the sources which he had been able to identify. His own valuation was transparent in the terms he used to express the debt. Most footnotes simply indicated (p.209) the origin of the plot; others designated translations; but there were also damning ones which marked out plays stolen verbatim (see Fig. 2). The reader was led to conclude that that play was best for which Langbaine had identified no sources.
Langbaine’s preface represents a very early instance of reader-oriented criticism. It was meant to advise readers how to read, not to instruct writers how to write, even if dramatists were expected to learn from his castigation of plagiarists. Though furnished with a critical introduction and suggestive footnotes, *Momus Triumphant* was still an inventory of titles. As such it was unlikely to have much effect on what people thought of plays. *An Account of the English Dramatick Poets* (1691) was a vastly more substantial work. It combined the comprehensiveness of a play catalogue, and the interest in the lives of authors typical of biographical dictionaries, with the urge to issue value judgements intrinsic to criticism.

The distinctive feature of Langbaine’s critical enterprise in the *Account* was its scope. Treatises such as Dryden’s *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* and Rymer’s *Tragedies of the Last Age* tended to mention relatively few names of authors and titles of plays except the best known, or the ones they set out to discuss in detail. In making value judgements they resorted to general categories based on historical epoch or genre: the moderns, the ancients, tragedies of the last age. By contrast, Langbaine undertook systematically to compare, assess, and rank all extant English plays and authors. He proposed to render verdicts on hundreds of plays which were related to what he saw as their innate merits, and not necessarily or exclusively to their success in the theatre. However unfavourable some of his opinions may have been, such retrospective evaluation did treat plays as serious literary productions of individual authors.

Langbaine often mentioned that he had seen plays, and often commented on their fortunes on the stage. A play’s reception, however, was not for him an index of its quality. He was prepared to admit that ‘a Play Read...wants the Greatest Ornament to a Play, Gracefulness of Action’ (p. 202), but this did not prevent him from lavishing praise on closet drama. Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* was for him ‘an Excellent Piece’ (p. 376); and he used the same words to describe Dryden’s unacted opera *The State of Innocence* (p. 185). He could be equally appreciative of plays for which there was no record of performance. ‘I know not how it succeeded on the Stage’, he remarked of James Carlile’s *The Fortune-Hunters*, ‘but if it be consider’d as the First Play of a young Poet, I think it deser’d Applause, and exceeds several Comedies printed in this Age’ (p. 50). At times he commended plays which had failed in the theatre. ‘This Play notwithstanding it was decryed on the Stage’, he said about the anonymous *Belphegor*, ‘I think far surpasses many others, that have lately appear’d there’ (sig. Oo5r).
Langbaine constructed several canons or hierarchies. First, he formulated two fairly discrete ratings based on the time in which the authors lived and worked: one of the ‘Ancients’, as he called pre-Restoration playwrights, and a separate one of the ‘Moderns’, that is, those who wrote after the Restoration. Second, within this chronological classification there was a ranking of plays belonging to a given type or genre. Third, Langbaine assessed each writer’s output and judged which was his or her best or worst production. If less consistently, he also compared and ranked successive translations of foreign works into English, and weighed the achievement of native plays vis-à-vis their foreign sources or analogues. So how did he justify his good or bad opinion? What were his terms of praise and blame?

Langbaine rarely compared pre- and post-Restoration writers with each other. On occasion he might proclaim an old play to be superior to current stage fare, as he did in the case of Richard Brome’s Novella (‘This I take to exceed many of our modern Comedies’, p. 37). But overall old writers were for Langbaine hardly equal to the moderns. Even his assertion of the timeless supremacy of the triumvirate was no more than a hackneyed trope. Beaumont and Fletcher, he wrote, ‘succeeded in Conjunction more happily than any Poets of their own, or this Age, to the reserve of the Venerable Shakespear, and the Learned and Judicious Johnson (p. 203). Elsewhere he described ‘these three [sic] Great Men’ as ‘the most Correct (p.211) Dramatick Poets of the last Age’ (pp. 136, 138), thus leaving open the possibility that their achievement might be surpassed.
In his ‘Vindication of the Ancients’, Langbaine responded to censures which, he felt, Dryden had unfairly and erroneously advanced against them. He was particularly incensed by Dryden’s claim that the works of Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Jonson were structurally incorrect and derivative. Langbaine’s apology was an attempt to attenuate rather than deny this and other charges. Instead of exonerating the ‘Ancients’, he accused Dryden of like trespasses. Admitting Jonson’s substantial borrowings from the classics, he pointed out that ‘our late Laureat has far out-done him in Thefts, proportionable to his Writings’ (p. 145). Similarly, even as he conceded Fletcher’s appropriation of Spanish plots and frequent breaches of decorum, Langbaine maintained that the fault was more excusable in the earlier poet than in Dryden, ‘who pretends so well to know it, and yet has offended against some of its most obvious and established Rules’ (p. 143). He attempted to counter Dryden’s attack on Shakespeare’s irregularities of form and dramatization of trivial stories by explaining that Shakespeare had not known Aristotle or Rapin (p. 142).

Whatever his provisos and qualifications, Langbaine as good as acknowledged that in some respects Dryden had outdone Shakespeare and, by implication, the two less exalted triumvirs, Fletcher and Jonson. If Dryden ‘exceed Mr. Shakespear in Oeconomy, and Contrivance’, he wrote “tis that Mr. Dryden’s Plays owe their Advantage to his skill in the French Tongue, or to the Age, rather than his own Conduct, or Performances’ (p. 141). By framing his vindication in so accusing a mode, and by placing it in the entry on Dryden, which thereby grew to be the longest one in the book, Langbaine unwittingly acknowledged both the precariousness of the present position of the triumvirate and the authority of their modern detractor.

Individual entries on Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Jonson were full of tensions. Langbaine sought to endorse the triumvirate’s transcendence, but his efforts were undercut by his recognition that the œuvre of none of those authors had survived the rupture of the Civil War intact. For how to uphold Shakespeare’s—and Beaumont and Fletcher’s, and Jonson’s—status as poets ‘not of an age, but for all time’ when so many of their productions had either slipped from active repertory, or, in the case of Shakespeare, and Beaumont and Fletcher, had been given, in revivals, new garbs? How to stop the erosion of these writers’ reputations and protect them from the recent assaults of Dryden, Rymer, and others? Langbaine wavered in his resolve. He vacillated between rating Shakespeare only against his own contemporaries and affirming his priority over both ancients and moderns. Having described him, in the opening sentence of his sketch, as ‘One of the most Eminent Poets of his Time’ (p. 453), Langbaine proceeded to extol Shakespeare’s plays as timeless masterpieces: ‘I esteem his Plays beyond any that have ever been published in our Language’ (p. 454).
Langbaine’s prime concern was with plays as printed artefacts. He none the less took care to record the theatrical currency of some of Shakespeare’s remains, whether unaltered like *Othello* (‘an Admirable Tragedy…and is still an Entertainment at the Theatre-Royal’, p. 461), or adapted to present taste like *The Tempest* (‘How much this Play is now in Esteem, tho’ the Foundation were Shakespear’s, all People know’, p. 463). Langbaine was equally mindful of the continued appeal of a few pieces by Beaumont and Fletcher and by Jonson. He portrayed the former’s *The Bloody Brother* as ‘a Tragedy much in request’, which ‘notwithstanding Mr. Rymer’s Criticisms on it, has still the good fortune to Please’ (p. 207), and cited the ‘extraordinary applause’ with which the audience had received Buckingham’s ‘very much improv’d’ version of *The Chances* (p. 207). Jonson’s *Volpone*, he noted, ‘is still in vogue at the Theatre in Dorset-Garden’ (p. 298), and both *Bartholomew Fair* and *Everyman in his Humour* had been successfully revived after the Restoration (pp. 287–8, 290).

These were isolated triumphs. As the title-by-title survey of the triumvirate’s productions made plain, the bulk of their output was now dead to the stage. Langbaine did not advocate unconditional revival; at most, he recommended that certain pieces be revised and made fit for presentation, with due credit given to the original author. Nor did he elaborate on the aesthetic merit of individual plays by Shakespeare or by Beaumont and Fletcher. Their innate worth, he maintained, was sufficiently demonstrated by the propensity of the moderns to plunder them. Conversely, the claims of modern writers to excellence were rendered void, he argued, by their extensive reliance on old English masters and on the more recent work of foreign dramatists.

Beyond the triumvirate, whom he treated on special terms, Langbaine’s hierarchy of pre-Restoration playwrights contained two more distinct levels or classes. Presided over by Shirley, Langbaine’s second class included Heywood, Middleton, Chapman, Webster, and others. Among ‘Poets of the Third-rate’, by far the most numerous, he counted writers such as Nabbes, Dekker, Glapthorne, Manuche, and others. Following the example of Kirkman, he decried Thomas Meriton as ‘certainly the meanest *Dramatick* Writer that ever *England* produc’d’ (p. 367), and placed him in an underclass of his own.
Though he thus fitted old playwrights into categories, Langbaine styled himself a chronicler rather than a judge. He affected to convey inherited valuations, not to issue new ones. Having nominated Shirley as ‘the Chief of the Second-rate Poets’, Langbaine noted that ‘by some’ he ‘has been thought even equal to Fletcher himself’ (p. 474). He also pointed out that Heywood’s plays ‘were in those Days accounted of the Second-Rate’ (p. 256). When departing from received opinion, as he did by situating an obscure amateur, Cosmo Manuche, alongside professionals such as Dekker and Glapthorne, Langbaine felt that justification was required. ‘If it be consider’d that our Author’s Muse was travesté en Cavileer’, he pleaded, ‘that he made Writing his Diversion, and not his Business; that what he writ was not borrow’d but propriâ Minervâ, I hope the Criticks will allow his Plays to pass Muster amongst those of the third Rate’ (p. 339). According to Langbaine, Manuche, though not an accomplished writer, deserves recognition for his invention.

By analogy with the ancients, Langbaine envisaged several orders of Restoration playwrights. Uppermost in his hierarchy were Lee, Wycherley, and Etherege. Banks and Tate were among those assigned to the second rank; Duffet to the third. Such assignments were explicit. Langbaine averred that Lee’s ‘Dramatical Pieces…gave him a Title to the First Rank of Poets’, and remarked on how ‘soft and passionately moving, are his Scenes of Love written’ (p. 321). ‘I may boldly reckon [Wycherley] amongst the Poets of the First Rank’, he wrote, ‘no Man that I know, except the excellent Johnson, having outdone him in Comedy’ (p. 514), a ruling which implied that Shakespeare’s comedies were inferior to both Jonson’s and Wycherley’s. Duffet, he said, is ‘An Author altogether unknown to me, but by his Writings; and by them I take him to be a Wit of the third Rate’ (p. 177). Unspecified ‘pitiful Poets of the Fourth-Rate’ (p. 452) were relegated to the bottom of the scale.
Parallel to this ranking of authors was Langbaine’s classification of plays. While many of the plays he praised were held in general esteem, others were the works of little-known authors or failed plays of more famous ones. In line with his contemporaries’ opinion, he regarded the Dryden–Lee *Oedipus* as ‘one of the best Tragedies we have extant’ (p. 167), and was equally impressed by Lee’s independent pieces: *Theodosius, The Rival Queens, and Mithridates*, the last of which, he said, ‘may be reckon’d amongst those of the First-Rank, and will always be a Favourite of the Tender-hearted Ladies’ (p. 324). Yet at the same time he warmly commended the sole production of an academic amateur, William Joyner’s *The Roman Empress* (1671), for being ‘writ in a more Masculine, and lofty Stile than most Plays of this Age; and Terror and Compassion being the chief hinges on which he design’d his Tragedy should turn’ (pp. 308–9). Langbaine’s choices in comedy, too, included theatrical obscurata alongside perennial favourites. Not surprising was his celebration of Etherege’s *The Man of Mode* (‘as true Comedy, and the Characters as well drawn to the Life, as any Play that has been Acted since the Restoration’) and *She Wou’d if She Cou’d* (‘This Comedy is likewise accounted one of the first Rank’, p. 187), or of Tuke’s *The Adventures of Five Hours* (‘One of the best Plays now extant, for Oeconomy and Contrivance’, p. 505). He was more singular in his praise of Shadwell’s unsuccessful *A True Widow* (‘This Play I take to be as [sic] True Comedy; and the Characters and Humours to be as well drawn, as any of this Age’, p. 451) or St Serfe’s *Tarugo’s Wiles* (‘This Comedy if not equal with those of the first Rank, yet exceeds several which pretend to the second; especially the third Act, which discovers the several Humours of a Coffee-house’, p. 434).

The frame of reference for such judgements was extensive. Each play was assessed against all other plays of ‘this Age’, the age that had dawned at the Restoration. Langbaine made more local comparisons too. Indeed, he routinely looked at individual tides in the context of the author’s dramatic œuvre. Edward Howard’s *The Womens Conquest* was, according to Langbaine, ‘the best Play our Author has publish’d’ (p. 274), and Aphra Behn’s comedy, *The Feign’d Curtezans*, ‘One of the best she has written’ (p. 20). These pronouncements did not carry the same weight. The top production of a professional writer such as Behn, ‘sufficiently Eminent...for her Theatrical Performances’ (p. 17), was of a different order than the foremost composition of a ‘Gentleman...who has addicted himself to the Study of Dramatick Poetry’ (p. 274).
The criteria by which Langbaine judged plays were essentially aesthetic and structural, though a few pieces attracted his censure on account of bawdy and anti-clerical sentiment. In tragedy, he favoured lofty style, adherence to dramatic decorum, and the propensity to move passions. He clearly enjoyed spotting an occasional political allusion. His opinion that the anonymous *King Edward the Third* ‘exceed[s] most of the Plays that have been lately publisht’ was not unrelated to his perception that ‘in the Characters of Tarleton, Chancellor of England, and Serjeant Etherside, [the author] has somewhat detected the Misdemeanours of some Great Men in the last Reign’ (sig. Oo5v). In comedy, Langbaine prized humours and skilful handling of plot (in his nomenclature, ‘Oeconomy and Contrivance’). For farce and low comedy he had little but contempt.

In contrast to his successors, who wrote after the appearance of Jeremy Collier's *A Short View*, Langbaine tended to eschew moral judgements. He abandoned his customary neutrality only in a handful of cases. Unruffled by the witty indecencies of Etherege or Wycherley, he none the less condemned the ‘Libertinism’ of Otway's comedies (PP. 395–6) and the ‘Scurrility’ of Duffet's burlesques (p. 177). He also decried Shadwell's satire of the church in *The Lancashire Witches*, with its biting portrayal of the Anglican minister, Smirk, ‘for ‘tis evident that...the Clergy, are abused in that Character’ (p. 447). Langbaine advised the author ‘to treat serious things with due Respect; and not to make the Pulpit truckle to the Stage; or Preface a Play, with a Treatise of Religion’. ‘Every Man has his Province’, he insisted, and to engage in religious controversy is not a fit task for a playwright.

Besides judging the dramatist's individual productions, Langbaine issued succinct appraisals of his or her personal talents and aptitudes. The key concept he used to denote these special faculties was ‘Genius’, always spelled with a capital ‘G’. ‘His Genius’, he wrote of Dryden, ‘seems to me to incline to Tragedy and Satyr; rather than Comedy: and methinks he writes much better in *Heroicks*, than in *blank Verse*’ (p. 131). By contrast, he thought Crowne's ‘Genius...fittest for Comedy; tho’ possibly his Tragedies are no ways contemptible’ (p. 90).

Banks's forte was, in his view, serious drama: ‘His Genius lays [sic] wholly to Tragedy’ (p. 7). Through a different choice of words in his entry on Settle—‘An Author...whose *Muse* is chiefly addicted to Tragedy’ (p. 439)—Langbaine conveyed this writer's lack of the innate gift which makes for a good tragedian. Others of lesser note were similarly dismissed. Here is Langbaine on D'Urfey: ‘In my Opinion he is a much better Ballad-maker, than *Play-wright*’ (p. 179); on Duffet: ‘One whose Fancy leads him rather to Low-Comedy, and Farce, than *Heroic Poetry*’ (p. 177); on Flecknoe: ‘he had a greater propensity to Riming, then a Genius to Poetry’ (p. 199).
Langbaine’s various rankings purported to measure and reflect artistic merit. His purely aesthetic valuations, however, were complicated and qualified by his assessment of the playwright’s invention and of the extent to which he or she relied on sources. To judge a play, he reasoned, is distinct from judging a playwright. For the play may be excellent, but the individual named on the title-page may not deserve all or even part of the credit. Thomas D’Urfey, for example, ‘is accounted by some for an Admirable Poet, but it is by those who are not acquainted much with Authors, and therefore deceiv’d by Appearances, taking that for his own Wit, which he only borrows from Others’ (p. 179). Likewise, Edward Ravenscroft ‘with the Vulgar passes for a Writer: tho’ I hope he will pardon me, if I rather stile him in the Number of Wit-Collectors; for I cannot allow all the Wit in his Plays to be his own’ (p. 417). John Leonard was for Langbaine no more than ‘A Confident Plagiary, whom I disdain to stile an Author’ (p. 319). Even as he acknowledged the value of the final product, Langbaine frequently voiced reservations about the integrity of its self-styled maker. Contrariwise, he might commend the invention of a writer for whose productions he had slight regard. Langbaine’s preoccupation with authorial self-sufficiency destabilized the aesthetic hierarchy embodied in the Account, and made a playwright’s position within a given class quite precarious.

No problems arose when his aesthetic and ethical judgements coincided. He genuinely appreciated the affective power of Lee’s tragedies which, he noted, ‘have forc’d Tears from the fairest Eyes in the World’ (p. 321); and he had no objections to Lee’s use of plots from chronicles and romances. He was only slightly less impressed by the plays of John Banks: ‘if he be not accounted a Poet of the first form, yet he bears up with his Contemporaries of the second’ (p. 7). Not having detected any thefts, Langbaine contented himself with listing the putative sources of Banks’s plays without comment. If Banks was in the upper echelon of the second class, Tate barely attained to the lower stratum. ‘For Dramatick Poetry’, Langbaine (p.217) opined, ‘he is not above the common Rank.’ Tate’s artistic ineptitude was, in Langbaine’s view, matched by his proclivity towards recycling extant plays: ‘generally he follows other Mens Models, and builds upon their Foundations: for of Eight Plays that are printed under his Name, Six of them owe their Original to other Pens’ (p. 500). His verdict on Thomas Thompson was yet more scathing. Since anything of worth in Thompson’s plays had been stolen, Langbaine dismissed him as ‘Another Author of the meanest Rank, and a great Plagiary’ (p. 503).
Most cases were less clear-cut. All too often, Langbaine found, gifted dramatists appropriated heavily while mediocrities trusted to their own barren fancies. How was he to rate prolific and successful professionals such as Dryden, Shadwell, and Behn who ranged far and wide in search of usable materials? How to accommodate pathetic, if doggedly self-reliant, amateurs such as Edward Howard or the Duchess of Newcastle? Langbaine faltered. Though he might explicitly rank several of their productions against other modern plays, he did not assign any of these writers to a specific category. Even as he conceded that ‘in Epick Poetry [Dryden] far exceeds...most, if not all the Poets of our Age’ (p. 452), he could not bring himself to designate that arch-plagiarist a first-rate author. However much he wished to assert Shadwell’s superiority as a comic writer—‘I like His Comedies better than Mr. Dryden's; as having more Variety of Characters, and those drawn from the Life; I mean Men's Converse and Manners, and not from other Mens Ideas, copyed out of their publick Writings’—Langbaine was candid enough to take notice of Shadwell's thefts: ‘I cannot wholly acquit our Present Laureat from borrowing; his Plagiaries being in some places too bold and open to be disguised’ (p. 443). He was equally conscientious in detailing Aphra Behn's debts (pp. 18–22). Yet he was sure that Behn ‘has borrow’d from others Stores, rather of Choice than for want of a fond [sic] of Wit of her own’, since, he said, ‘whatever she borrows she improves’ (p. 18). By contrast, his plea on behalf of the ‘Admirable Dutchess’ whose ‘Language and Plots...are all her own’ (pp. 390–1) seems tentative.

Langbaine's primary concern was that the language of a play be new. He was ready, as we have seen, to accept the lifting of a story from another genre, such as a novel, a romance, or a history (p. 162). He nevertheless believed that inventing one was preferable. ‘I know not any One Play, whose Plot may be said to be the Product of Mr. (p.218) Dryden's own Brain’ (p. 148), he complained. To equate Langbaine's demand for novelty and uniqueness of dramatic 'form' and 'content' with the later cult of originality would be a mistake. The hazard of anachronism is not the only reason for caution. Originality, in its Romantic signification, entails more than just difference: it betokens personal inspiration and consummate artistry. By contrast, Langbaine was able to cite authorial self-sufficiency in extenuation of artistic ineptitude. As his appraisal of the Duchess of Newcastle shows, he knew that to think up a plot was not necessarily to write a good play. The ultimate test of a writer, Langbaine thought, is the capacity to produce plays that are both aesthetically pleasing and entirely 'new' in their plots and words. No dramatist treated in the Account, whether ancient or modern, fully satisfied Langbaine's demands.

Gildon
In a revised and expanded edition of the *Account*, which he called *The Lives and Characters of the English Dramatick Poets* ([1699]), Charles Gildon challenged and discarded a number of Langbaine's valuations. He accused his predecessor of personal bias and lack of critical discrimination, and contested the ranking of authors and plays built into the *Account*. 'A Stranger to our Stage', Gildon claimed, 'wou’d from his Recommendation make a very odd and ridiculous Collection of our English Plays' (sig. A6v).

Langbaine, we have seen, had taken care to distinguish his rating of pre-Restoration playwrights from the modern canon. Even as he included Shirley or Heywood in the second rank of poets, he made clear that they were so classed only vis-à-vis their own contemporaries. His need to apologize for the triumvirate was a sign that their reputation had declined. Gildon misunderstood the separation between the two hierarchies implicit in the *Account*, and assumed that Langbaine had sought to elevate the ancients at the expense of the moderns. 'Mr. Langbain...often commends, Shirley, Heywood, &c. and will scarce allow Mr. Dryden a Poet', he complained, 'whereas the former have left us no Piece that bears any Proportion to the latter' (sig. A6v). His own sketches on older writers were brief and matter-of-fact, if not downright dismissive. Less prone to defer to the past than Langbaine, he sided firmly with the moderns.

The survival of old drama in active repertory was for Gildon a measure of its canonicity. 'Their Comedies are much the best', he (p.219) observed in the entry on Beaumont and Fletcher, 'yet of them take away five or six, and they will not bear Acting, scarce reading by a nice Judge' (p. 57). His contempt for these writers was manifestly due to so many of their plays falling out of the repertory. The survival rate of Jonson's productions was, by Gildon's computation, even lower (pp. 77–81). If he was less disparaging about Shakespeare, this was because some of his plays remained in stock throughout the Restoration while others proved enduringly popular when 'reviv’d with Alterations', like Shadwell's *Timon*. The latter, Gildon noted with visible respect, was for a few Years past, as often acted at the 'Theatre Royal, as any Tragedy I know’ (p. 129).

Gildon was readier than Langbaine to take success on the stage and continued public approbation as evidence of quality. 'Tho’ a bad Play may take’, he wrote, ‘yet we near very few Instances that a good one miscarried’ (p. 121). He was convinced that spectators, if left to themselves, were perfectly able to appreciate what they saw. When an undeserving piece succeeded, he maintained, the fairness of theatrical reception was likely to have been vitiated by advance publicity which the author had secured through his personal contacts and connections.58
Gildon was also more explicit about his evaluative criteria. The aesthetic standards he propounded were not very different from Langbaine's; the one notable discrepancy was his preference for wit over humour in comedy. Nor was he unmindful of the importance of invention and novelty.  

“The Duty of this Undertaking’, he observed in his account of Congreve, ‘and the Foundation I build on, obliges me to examine what he may have borrowed from others’ (p. 24). Gildon sought to locate the sources of all plays which had appeared since the publication of the Account, and in each case to determine the degree of verbal and thematic debt. Like Langbaine, he commended authors who admitted their borrowings and those who transformed and enriched borrowed matter. Gildon quoted in full Southerne’s grateful acknowledgement that he had drawn the (p. 220) plot of his tragedy Oroonoko (1696) from Mrs Behn’s novel of the same title, ‘because ‘tis very uncommon with Authors to speak well of those they borrow from in their Writings’. Gildon considered Oroonoko an exemplary dramatization of a novel in terms of its artistic and structural autonomy. 'The Play had not its mighty Success without an innate Excellence’, he opined, and ‘the necessary regularities a Dramatick Poet is obliged to observe, has [sic] left many Beauties in the Novel, which our Author cou’d not transfer to his Poem’ (p. 136).

What set Gildon apart from the earlier commentator was his ostensible concern about the moral function of drama. Adopting the concept from Rymer, he asserted that ‘Poetick Justice...ought ever to be observed in all Plays’ (p. 91). The lesson imparted through the outcome of the action should be fortified, he thought, by the apt drawing of passions. To elicit excessive sympathy for the culprit was, according to Gildon, a risky enterprise since the emotion might detract from, or even subvert, the edifying message. ‘Tho’ it is an extraordinary thing to make us pity the Guilty, (which I know none but Otway could do)’, he wrote in his appraisal of Ravenscroft’s The Italian Husband, ‘yet the Audience must be very Compassionate, to pity so willing an Adultery as this’ (p. 116). Gildon took exception to Dryden’s representation of the ‘famous patterns of unlawful love’, Antony and Cleopatra, on similar grounds.61 ‘All for Love’, he said, ‘were it not for the false Moral, wou’d be a Masterpiece that few of the Ancients or Moderns ever equal’d’ (sig. A6v). If Dryden’s artistic achievement is somewhat compromised by the ‘false Moral of his tragedy, the improbable climax of Colley Cibber’s Love’s Last Shift, when Loveless fails to recognize his wife Amanda after a period of separation, is, for Gildon, ‘abundantly outweigh[ed]’ by ‘the Excellent Moral that flows from it’ (p. 20).

These moralizing professions had little or no effect on the canon of modern English drama constructed in Gildon’s Lives. The most highly rated tragedians, Dryden, Otway, and Lee, were far from model adherents to the principle of poetic justice. Among comic writers, Gildon accorded priority to Etherege, Wycherley, and Vanbrugh. (p.221) The title of ‘Master of Farce’ went to Thomas D’Urfey, one of the smuttiest writers in the period (p. 48).
Gildon identified what he considered to be the best English tragedies in his discussion of Congreve’s *The Mourning Bride*. Although he agreed that this play, which ‘had the greatest Success, not only of all Mr. Congreves, but indeed of all the Plays that ever I can remember on the English Stage’, deserved ‘a Place in the first Form’ (p. 23), Gildon added the following proviso:

yet I can never prefer it to the *All for Love* of Mr. Dryden, *The Orphan*, and *Venice Preserv’d* of Mr. Otway, or the *Lucius Junius Brutus* of Mr. Lee, either in true Art in the Contrivance and Conduct of the Plot; or the Choice and Delineation of the Characters for the true End of Tragedy, *Pitty* and *Terror*; or the *true* and *natural Movement* of the Passions, in which Particular, none of the Ancients (I was going to say equal’d, but I will boldly say) surpass’d our English dead Bards in those Plays, and our living Poet in this of his that I have mention’d. Or the *Diction*, either in regard to its *Propriety, Clearness, Beauty, Nobleness*, or *Variety*, (pp. 23–4)

This proud assertion of native achievement in tragedy was matched by Gildon’s appraisal of comic drama. Wycherley, he declared, ‘excell’d all Writers in all Languages, in Comedy’ (p. 150). More recently, Vanbrugh's productions ‘have got him the Preference to all our Modern Writers of Comedy, since Mr. *Wycherly*, and Sir. *George Etheridge* have left the Stage’ (p. 142). The encomium on Vanbrugh was profuse. Gildon praised his wit, spirited dialogue, lively action and characters. Vanbrugh’s comedies are not only superb stage vehicles, he claimed; they are also good literature, for the author ‘puts Folly into such a Light, that it is as diverting to the Reader as Spectator’ (p. 143).

In Gildon there is no ‘anxiety of influence’, no sense that classical or older English drama is in any way superior to the plays written since the Restoration. Neither Shakespeare nor Jonson nor Fletcher receives special treatment; the overriding impression is that Dryden, Lee, Otway, Wycherley, and other contemporary playwrights are not only as good but better. Notwithstanding his attempted defence of the triumvirate and occasional praise of minor Renaissance writers, Langbaine’s canon had been at core a modern one; Gildon’s was more fully so. This modern bias was firmly in place twenty years later when Giles Jacob brought out *The Poetical Register; or, The Lives and Characters of the English Dramatick Poets* (1719), a work so up-to-date (p.222) that living authors such as Granville and Congreve were willing to provide autobiographical sketches for it (see Fig. 10).

The Canon and the Repertory
We have, in essence, been analysing the literary canon as recorded in publication history and play catalogues. Granting the difficulties imposed by the paucity of performance records prior to about 1703, we must ask to what extent the literary canon mirrors or contradicts the playhouse repertory. One useful and practicable test is to look at those plays which are known to have received at least ten performances between 1700 and 1711. Only ten pre-1642 plays meet this test. Three unaltered plays by Shakespeare qualify (*Hamlet*, which received 37 performances; *1 Henry IV*, 19; *Othello*, 19); four by Jonson (*The Silent Woman*, 24; *Volpone*, 19; *The Alchemist*, 13; *Bartholomew Fair*, 13); three by Fletcher (*The Royal Merchant*, 20; *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife*, 20; *The Scornful Lady*, 13). The total number of performances of these popular Renaissance plays is 243. They contrast with thirty modern classics which received 642 performances, the most popular of them being Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (59). Only fourteen plays by living and active authors—Thomas Baker, Susanna Centlivre, Colley Cibber, Nicholas Rowe, Charles Shadwell, Richard Steele, Joseph Trapp, and John Vanbrugh—achieved ten performances or more, the total coming to 302 performances. Seven adaptations from Fletcher and Shakespeare enjoyed a total of 148 nights, the most popular of them being Davenant’s alteration of *Macbeth* (35).
Thus the theatrical repertory of c. 1710, though quite different in content from the literary canon to be deduced from Langbaine or Gildon, projects a very similar pattern. A relatively small number of pre-1642 plays appear, and only two of them are by any writer other than the triumvirate of wit. Shakespeare is an important presence on the stage, but on the basis of only three plays (together with four (p.223) alterations, three of them radical). Jonson is at least as canonical as Shakespeare; Fletcher is much less visible. But for a regular playgoer of the first decade of the eighteenth century, Dryden, Cibber, Shadwell, and Vanbrugh are more conspicuous features of the repertory than Shakespeare. Farquhar, with 112 performances of three celebrated plays—The Recruiting Officer, The Beaux’ Stratagem, and The Constant Couple—is yet more visible. Obviously performance influences publication; likewise publication can influence performance. But the literary canon does not simply reflect performance history. Wycherley makes a good example: his critical reputation stood high, but between 1700 and 1711 we find only five known performances of The Country-Wife and nine of The Plain-Dealer. Plays may be revived because they are good vehicles for performers (which accounts, I suspect, for the thirty recorded performances of Dryden’s The Spanish Fryar). What creates literary reputation is harder to judge. At all events, the slowness with which Shakespeare rose in the repertory between 1700 and 1740 is powerful evidence of the degree to which offerings in the theatre remained independent of critical evaluations. We are, I believe, justified in concluding that the literary canon was only tangentially influenced by popularity in the theatre. Even so, there is a significant parallel between the literary canon and the theatrical repertory. In both, modern works predominate.

This chapter has pursued a pair of themes: (1) the process by which collected editions of the plays of single writers helped individualize authorship while giving the authors a greater canonical status, and (2) the way in which the urge to construct a national canon affected the evaluation of particular plays and their writers. The connection between the two is important. In the latter half of the seventeenth century the playwright was increasingly conceived of as an individual whose product was strongly differentiated from (or, better, totally independent of) his or her sources. The emergence of the concept of the individual author was accompanied by a mounting insistence that English (and later British) culture should be independent of foreign influence—or that, if foreign sources were used, they should be subjected to native domination. By the early eighteenth century, (p.224) the trope of conquest had come to be applied to the use of foreign material as a matter of course.
The canon that emerges from play publication and catalogues, I have argued, is more modern and contemporary than recent scholars have supposed. Shakespeare is far from a towering figure prior to the appearance of the Rowe edition in 1709, and not much more so for a good many years after that. As Bate, Dobson, and Hume have shown, the forces that created the Bard were nugatory until the 1720s and only began to achieve major influence in the 1730s. Yet the account even of those critics is incomplete. Preoccupied as they are by the standing of Shakespeare, they overlook the interest in and respect for modern dramatists. Late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century critics, believing as they did in the refinement of culture, thought that the triumvirate of Shakespeare, Fletcher, and Jonson could be, and indeed had been, surpassed. A strong sense of hierarchy does inform both the pattern of dramatic publication and the content of dramatic catalogues. Yet it is by no means a hierarchy that privileges the ‘Giant Race…before the Flood’. Patriotic sentiment breeds reverential statements about the triumvirate of wit, but the literary canon of the time implies quite different valuations of English playwrights. To make sense of the state of drama at the beginning of the eighteenth century, one must recognize the comprehensiveness and modernity of the dramatic canon.

Notes:

(1) See Gary Taylor, Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), 27–33; de Grazia, Shakespeare Verbatim, 32–48; Dobson, Making of the National Poet, 29–30. For other collected editions of Shakespeare, Jonson, and Beaumont and Fletcher see Appendix B.

(2) Jonathan Bate, Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism, 1730–1830 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 22–7; Dobson, Making of the National Poet, 134–222. For a valuable reassessment, from an angle different from mine, of the status of Shakespeare in the early eighteenth century see Hume, ‘Before the Bard’.


(4) For a list of collected editions of plays published in England from 1604 to 1720 see Appendix B.

(5) Kewes, “‘Give me the sociable Pocket-books...’”. For an account of Moseley's career see Reed, ‘Humphrey Moseley’.


(7) I am grateful to Dr John Jowett for passing on this piece of information.


(11) *Fifty Comedies and Tragedies* (London, 1679),r


(13) Greg, *Bibliography*, iii. 1082,

(14) Because much of the stock of F3 is presumed to have been destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666, F4 may have seemed more of a novelty, or perhaps a replacement as much as a sequel. I am grateful to Professor Richard Proudfoot for drawing my attention to this possibility.


(16) Jennifer Brady and W. H. Herendeen (eds.), *Ben Jonson's 1616 Folio* (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press;


(21) These aristocratic folios obviously hark back to the pre-Commonwealth folios of single plays by amateur writers such as John Suckling's *Aglaura* (1638), Sir William Berkeley's *The Lost Lady* (1639), Jasper Mayne's *The Citye Match* (1639), and Sir John Denham's *The Sophy* (1642).

(22) Except for those of Orrery and the elder Killigrew, all the folios featured an engraved portrait of the author:

(23) ‘To the Readers’, in *Playes*,


(26) ‘To the Reader’, in *Four New Plays* (London, 1665), r–v


(28) See *The Prisoners and Claracilla. Two Tragce-Comedies...As they were presented at the Phoenix in Drury-Lane, by her Mties Servants* (London, 1641). These two plays may have been a late addition to the folio: they were placed last, being paginated separately; their title-pages, which were dated 1664 (all others were dated 1663), displayed the name of Andrew Crook, the publisher of the 1641 collection, rather than that of Henry Herringman, who was responsible for the bulk of the present volume. The texts of both reprinted plays show signs of revision. See Harbage, *Thomas Killigrew*, 143–4.

(29) *Playes*, verso of the leaf inserted between A3 and A4.

(30) *Letters and Poems In Honour of...Margaret, Dutchess of Newcastle*, 108.*The Humorists*

(31) ibid., pp. 94


(33) The volume contained several of the commendatory poems which were to reappear in the folio collection, but no front matter originating with the author.

(34) In 1669 Killigrew's *The Imperial Tragedy* was published in folio, presumably to match the format of the Oxford collection. Killigrew continued to revise the texts of his plays, which suggests that he was planning a new collected edition. See Johnston, ‘Sir William Killigrew's Revised Copy of his *Four New Plays*', 72–4; Vander Motten, *Sir William Killigrew*, 178–9.


(38) *Henry Herringman*; *Joseph Knight*; *Francis Saunders*; *A Fool's Preferment* (1688).


(43) *Gloriana, or The Court of Augustus Caesar* (1699), Nathaniel Lee  


(45) *Cyrus the Great* (1696),  

(46) For example, *The Third Volume of the Works of Mr. John Dryden* (London, 1693) in the Bodleian Library, Mal. 101, contains the third edition of the *Spanish Fryar* (1690), the second edition of *The Duke of Guise* (1687), the first (and only) edition of *The Vindication* (1683), the second edition of *Albion and Albinius* (1691), the second edition of *Don Sebastian* (1692), the second edition of *Amphitryon* (1691), *The Songs in Amphitryon, with the Musick* (1690), the second edition of *King Arthur* (1695), the first edition of *Cleomenes* (1692). Inserted between *Ampitryon* and *The Songs* is a leaf with ‘A CATALOGUE of Mr. DRYDEN’S WORKS, as they are bound in Three Volumes in quarto, in the order they were written’. According to this list, the third volume ought to consist of poems, not plays. The confusion is exacerbated by the title-page of *Cleomenes*, which advertises Dryden’s *Works* in four volumes.  


(50) See Appendix B below.  

(52) For those well versed in foreign tongues, Langbaine adds a more challenging reading-list which includes Vossius, Heinsius, Scaliger, Plutarch, Athenaeus, Cinthio, Castelvetro, Lope de Vega, Corneille, and Menadière.

(53) For instance, Behn's *Emperour of the Moon* was described as ‘Stollen from *Harlequin, Emperur [sic] dans le Monde de la Lune*’ (*Momus*, 3 n.).

(54) *Horace* Sir William Lower's *Account*, 75

(55) *The Dumb Lady* Le Médecin malgré lui (Account*The Devil of a Wife*French*EnglishAccount*, 280

(56) Phillips, *Theatrum*, 80,

(57) *Athenae Oxonienses*, iv. 684.

(58) *Lives* The Post-Man Robb’d of his Mail, 335).


(60) *The Italian Husband* (1698):†

(61) *Works*, xiii. 10


(63) The other six were Vanbrughs *The Pilgrim*, 26; Shadwell's *Timon*, 25; the operatic *Tempest*, 20; Buckingham's *The Chances*, 14; Otway's *Caius Marius* (partly based on *Romeo and Juliet*), 10.

(64) Brome's *The Northern Lass*, 29, and *The Jovial Crew*, 17.