Literature and the Monarchy
Literature and the Monarchy:  
The Traditional and the Modern Concept  
of the Office of Poet Laureate of England

By

Ewa Panecka
CONTENTS

Preface .................................................................................................................. vii

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................... xiii

Chapter I ........................................................................................................ 1
The Office

Chapter II ..................................................................................................... 27
The Appointment

Chapter III ................................................................................................... 65
Laureate Poetry

Concluding Remarks .............................................................................. 219

Works Cited ............................................................................................ 227

Appendix .................................................................................................... 243
The intention of the study is to analyze the relations between literature and the Monarchy, from the Restoration till the present time by offering as a focal point of the discussion a critical survey of the laureate poetry written by the twenty official Poets Laureate of England. The laurel, (a plant) in Ancient Greece was sacred to Apollo, and as such was used to form a crown or wreath of honour for poets and heroes. Laureate letters were once dispatches announcing a victory. The term laureate became associated with degrees awarded by European universities. The word laureate or laureated came to signify eminent or collocated with glory. From a more general use of the term laureate in England it became restricted to an office, that of Poet Laureate, a poet attached to the royal household whose duty was to write occasional poetry for royal and national events. It is difficult to define the Laureateship, either as an honour or as a position. In the three hundred year old tradition of the office, the Poets Laureate received their commissions in various ways: through powerful protectors, because they excelled as writers or for want of a better candidate. Some of them held a mirror to the Monarchy and had the courage to speak their mind. Some found the pressures of the office motivating, others felt discouraged. John Dryden was sacked when William of Orange succeeded James II in 1688. Otherwise, the Laureateship used to be a life-long post, which Tennyson filled so magnificently for forty two years that, as a mark of respect, it was left vacant for some time after his death. In 1999 it was decided that the Laureate would be nominated for a decade.

So far no attempt has been made to critically examine the respective merits and drawbacks of laureate poetry. John Selden, at the request of Ben Jonson, wrote about the title of Poet Laureate in the second edition of his Titles of Honour (1614). Thomas Warton in his History of English Poetry (1774-81) and Thomas Malone in his Life of Dryden (1800) give an

---

account of the office and the early holders of the title of Poet Laureate, although concentrating on biographical details rather than the poetry itself. Wiltshire Stanford Austin, Jr and John Ralph in their Lives of the Poets Laureate (1855), Walter Hamilton in The Poets Laureate of England (1879) and Thomas Gray in The Poets Laureate of England (1914) follow the same formula; they write about successive Poets Laureate, introducing the royal poets, recounting numerous anecdotes about their lives and the volumes they published as men of letters, with little, even sketchy, reference to their laureate poetry. All these authors rely on Thomas Warton’s outline of the laureate tradition, which unfortunately is guilty of many inaccuracies.

For a thorough, scholarly discussion of the office of Poet Laureate the public had to wait till 1921, when Professor Edmund Broadus published The Laureateship. A Study of the Office of Poet Laureate in England with Some Account of the Poets. Professor Broadus’s illuminating study concentrates on the history of the Laureateship, its traditions and obligations; consequently, it discusses how the Laureate fulfilled the responsibilities of the office. Kenneth Hopkins, author of The Poets Laureate (1954), acknowledges his debt to Professor Broadus. Unlike Broadus, however, Hopkins views each Poet Laureate separately in a rather dry chronological list, without any attempt to synthesize his observations.

The present study intends to offer such a synthesis by examining the Laureateship as an exponent of the complex relations between literature and the Monarchy; the aim of the author is to define the nature and specific status of laureate poetry in England. All monarchs, regardless of the age, liked to endorse a royal bard, a court poet, who would chronicle in verse the life of the monarch and the royal family, as well as pen occasional poems to commemorate national events. Geoffrey Chaucer was called ‘a laureate poet of three kings’, Edward III, Richard II and Henry IV, Edmund Spenser received a stipend from Elizabeth I and Ben Jonson a regular pension from King James I, but until 1668 no poet had been nominated to the office of Poet Laureate by the letters patent. Thus, the present study will focus on the twenty officially nominated Laureates. Since the time of John Dryden, the first officially nominated Laureate (1668), the office has been held by twenty poets; the present Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, was nominated in 2009.

---

Among the twenty officially nominated Laureates to date there are some exceptional poets: John Dryden, William Wordsworth, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Ted Hughes, but there are some whose names may be unfamiliar to today's readers and even students of literature; among the justly forgotten are figures like Nicholas Rowe, Laurence Eusden, Henry James Pye and Alfred Austin. The aim of the present study is not, however, only to discuss the work of the excellent poets who happened to be Laureates. Of course, the laureate verses of the outstanding poets will naturally be foregrounded, with the work of the less talented clearly seeming inferior in comparison, but the aim of the author is to interpret the laureate poetry in relation to the Monarchy, rather than as an artistic achievement. Thus, relatively little will be said about William Wordsworth, for example, because when he agreed to accept the Laureateship he insisted that he should be freed from the obligation of writing occasional poetry. John Dryden, now appreciated for his drama, lyrics and literary criticism is also discussed only in the context of his royal poems.

In order to facilitate the analysis, the twenty official Laureates have been divided into two groups, the traditional and the modern. Those who treated the Laureateship as an office, an obligation to glorify the monarch, both in the annual Birthday Odes and in other poems written for royal occasions, and who duly produced the annual New Year Odes praising the State are labelled as traditional. However, the men of letters who received their nominations as an honour and a decoration for their excellence as poets are classified as modern; the laurel has been given to them for past merit rather than in anticipation of loyal service. Robert Southey, a Laureate who was in office for thirty years [1813 – 1843] closes the list of the traditional Laureates, but he could equally well be classified as “transitory”; for although he produced the Birthday and New Year Odes he kept them out of print and, eventually, freed the office from the obligation of annual flattery. Unlike the traditional, the modern Laureates write occasional poems or they do not; the decision being left entirely to their discretion. William Wordsworth, the first ‘modern’ Laureate according to the proposed classification, was nominated by Queen Victoria, who initiated the principle of choosing the best of the living poets. To illustrate the newly acquired independence of the office it should be remarked that throughout his seven year tenure Wordsworth did not write a line of poetry pertaining to the Laureateship. Thus, according to this division, the traditional Laureates were John Dryden, Thomas Shadwell, Nahum Tate, Nicholas Rowe, Colley Cibber, Laurence Eusden, William Whitehead, Thomas Warton, Henry James Pye and Robert Southey. The list of modern Laureates includes: William Wordsworth, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Alfred
Austin, Robert Bridges, John Masefield, C. Day Lewis, John Betjeman, Ted Hughes, Andrew Motion and Carol Ann Duffy. The division seems to parallel the chronological order; the Laureates of the Restoration and The Age of Reason are categorized as traditional and the modern Laureateship begins with the reign of Queen Victoria. However, in the three-hundred-year-old tradition of the office there have been some exceptions to this rule and these will be highlighted in the course of the analysis: among the Laureates of the Age of Reason there were some who occasionally refrained from excessive praise of the regime, like Thomas Warton, or tried to address the nation rather than the monarch, like William Whitehead. On the other hand, among the modern Laureates who have not been officially required to submit verses of occasional praise there is Alfred Austin [years in office: 1894 – 1913], a Tory who duly chronicled all royal events and perhaps too readily offered his pen in the service of the Conservative Party; under his tenure the Laureateship came too close to being a political platform.

The study is divided into five parts. Chapter One, ‘The Office’, which follows the Preface, outlines the history of the office of Poet Laureate in England with regard to its status, emolument and rank. In order to define the relations between poetry and the Monarchy, the changes in the method of royal payment and the rise or fall in the laureate fee are noted. To provide a broader perspective on the issue of the status and rank of the Poet Laureate as an institution, the chapter offers a historical account of the royal poets before the creation of the formal concept of the office. The twenty official Laureates are presented as holders of a position at the royal court, a position which involved certain traditions and obligations that varied according to who sat on the throne during the tenure of the Laureate.

Chapter Two, ‘The Appointment’, reveals the political structures behind the choice of the Poets Laureate, which have exerted an influence on cultural matters concerning the Monarchy from the Restoration to the present time. The traditional and modern Laureates are considered independently as a growing tendency towards the “democratization of the Monarchy” can be observed, at least in the cultural sphere; with time more and more parties began to be involved in the process leading to the nomination of a poet.

Chapter Three, ‘Laureate Poetry’, includes an analysis of the laureate verse, whose aim is to establish a sense of, as Wordsworth put it, ‘national importance within Poetic Literature’. No laureate poetry has ever been
censored, and even the annual Birthday or New Year Odes could have been more than mere flattery had the traditional Laureates showed enough determination and ability to avail themselves of the opportunity. In fact, all English Laureates had the chance to make their voice the voice of England. Although most of the modern Laureates accepted the office out of a sense of duty to the Monarchy and to the nation, with time they learnt to speak less to and about the monarch, addressing their compatriots instead. They have tried to define in their laureate poetry a sense of Englishness, of nationhood. The five Laureates nominated by Elizabeth II view their role as a poet who voices the current concerns of Englishmen. Thus an extensive part of the present study is devoted to the laureate poetry of Elizabeth II’s Laureates, which has never been subjected to a thorough critical analysis. The final part of the present study, entitled ‘Concluding Remarks’, is an attempt to propose a synthetic view on the complex relations between literature, culture and the Monarchy for which the Laureateship has provided the only official link.

Unfortunately, as yet no comprehensive anthology of laureate verses has been compiled; there is the rather outdated Laureates of England, ed. Kenyon West (1895), which only includes certain sample texts. The majority of the traditional Laureates, with the exception of Dryden and Southey, had to be tracked down in the memoirs of their contemporaries and in general studies of the specific literary period. The more recent Verses of the Poets Laureate (1999) by Andrew Motion, briefly introduces the English Laureates yet includes only one or two poems by each. As laureate poetry is composed for special occasions, a production of a moment, it sometimes has failed to find its way into the author’s collected works, as if it has been irrelevant. Written with the aim to comment upon current issues, laureate poems appear in newspapers and magazines, and so the author of the present study found old texts in, among others, The Gentleman’s Magazine, The London Chronicle, and The Annual Register. For the more recent she has turned to, for example, The Guardian or The Independent.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Professor Krystyna Stamirowska, from the Jagiellonian University for her steady guidance and unfailing support which helped me bring this research project to completion.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Peter Vernon, from the University of Tours, who read an early draft of the study, for his encouragement and sound advice.
CHAPTER I
THE OFFICE

The history of the office reflects the Monarchy’s unwillingness to permit a democratization of ancient institutions; the Poet Laureate has always been nominated and paid by the Crown and constituted a part of the royal household. The present study of the Laureateship begins with the tenure of John Dryden, the first English Laureate, officially appointed to the position in 1668. Like Dryden, all his successors in the office held the title of Poet Laureate, which carried a pension from the Crown and the status of a functionary of the court. The aim of the following discussion is to analyze relations between literature and the Monarchy, from Charles II’s reign to the present day. However, in order to place the Laureateship in a broader cultural perspective, it is necessary to present a historical outline of the ancient traditions of the poets whose function was to compose verses, and then recite or sing them before the monarch, who, in turn, might choose to pay the bard for his art. The status, rank and emolument of these royal singers changed over time.

I. Before the Laureateship

1. Anglo Saxon Scop

The English tradition of the Laureateship goes back to the Anglo Saxon scop, a poet whose duty was to entertain the lord and his thanes at a feast. The scop is the first ‘Poet Laureate’ who holds a position similar to that of the court poet of later times. Scops feature in Old English laments, such as Deor’s Lament, in which Deor laments the loss of the lord’s favour when he is replaced by Heorrenda, a new scop. Widsith, the earliest extant dirge, which probably dates from the fifth century, is the story of Widsith, a scop who enumerates the rewards he receives from his lords; Widsith was better

---

than any other scop at singing stories and the lords respected him, showing their generosity lest he became displeased and composed songs not to their liking. It seems that scops were ready to extol whichever master paid them, disregarding their own political or national affiliations: the Norse Gunlaug Snakestongue, a tenth century scop, praised the English King, Æthelred Eadgarsson, and the Irish King Sigtrygg Silkbeard, with equal zeal. Gunlaug is numbered among the more skillful scops who tried to render in their “praise poems” individual traits of the monarch’s personality. Unfortunately, only fragments of these verses, which now can be labelled as ‘early laureate’ have survived.

2. Medieval Minstrel

After 1066, due to influences from the continent, the Anglo Saxon scops evolved into medieval minstrels. The medieval minstrel was not the King’s poet, his duties instead being those of a musician and general entertainer. William I had his ioculator regis, to whom he gave estates in Gloucestershire, and Henry I had his mimus regis, Rahere, who was so lavishly paid for his services that he could afford to found the Priory of St. Bartholomew at Smithfield. Henry II was a monarch who, due to the influence of his wife, Eleonor of Aquitaine, made the court a centre of literary activity and in this way paved the way for the minstrel, who was more than ioculator or mimus. Henry of Huntington, a royal poet and historian, updated his Chronicle to make reference to the King’s accession and included both his own and other poets’ panegyrics glorifying the monarch.

Bertran de Born, a count and troubadour from France, aspired to rather more than just the position of entertainer and court poet; he interfered in political issues. De Born was a master to King Henry’s sons, always making sure that the brothers were at war among themselves and with their father. A politician by nature, de Born also did not wish for peace between

---


3 Broadus, op.cit., p. 6.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.


7 Broadus, op. cit., p. 6.
King Henry and the King of France, and he did his best to keep them in a state of animosity. In the person of de Born, the royal minstrel becomes more than a traditional court poet; he is active in political affairs.

3. Troubadour

In the figure of the troubadour there can be observed an evolution in the status of the court poet: no longer a wandering minstrel or professional entertainer; he becomes the official singer at court. Under Richard I the court was populated with troubadours, such as Ambroise, who sang at his coronation. To Blondel, another famous troubadour, legend ascribes his discovery of the imprisoned Richard. Although many authors mention Gulielmus Peregrinus as Richard’s official Poet Laureate, it seems that there is no evidence to support the fact that Gulielmus was nominated. Gulielmus accompanied Richard to Palestine, but he did not possess any official distinction. According to Leland, he wrote a history of Richard’s expedition in Latin, entitled Hodoeporicon Ricardi Regis, and dedicated it to Archbishop of Canterbury and Stephen de Turnham. Troubadours were court poets who served the monarch by writing verses that today would be classified as ‘laureate’, however, they never received any official distinction.

4. Versificator Regis

The position of the official singer at court began to be honoured with the title of versificator regis during the reign of Henry III, when the versificator regis became a member of the royal household. This is the beginning of the tradition of a poet being honoured at court with a position which is higher than that of a ioculator or citharista. Henri d’Avranches

---

11 Broadus, op. cit., p. 9.
was the first holder of the title of versificator regis.\textsuperscript{14} Henri was the author of poems in Latin, in which he celebrated the King’s achievements. He also wrote a long poem about Abbot William of Trumpington. Henry III appreciated his poetical services, issuing a liberate ordering the payment of ten pounds, which was then a significant amount, to Magistro Henrico, Versificatori\textsuperscript{15}, to be paid in arrears\textsuperscript{16}. Additionally, a life time grant of wine, which became a perquisite of the Laureates, was initially paid to the King’s poet when Henri was in office. In The Calendar of Patent Rolls for May 20, 1257, there is a “grant for life to Master Henry de Abrincis, the King’s poet, of two tuns of wine of the King’s wines, which are in the keeping of the Chamberlain of London, to wit, a tun of vintage and a tun of rack (de recko), and also a mandate to Thomas Esperun and Matthew Bukerel, Chamberlains of London, so long as they have the chamberlancy of London, to let him have the said tuns”\textsuperscript{17}. The position of versificator regis did not become permanent, and in fact it died out along with the minstrels and troubadours. Indeed for about two centuries the tradition of the office of court poet was discontinued.

5. Academic Laureate

The title of Laureate is of academic origin. The tradition of conferring the Laureateship passed from the court to the universities. In the thirteenth century Paris was the intellectual centre and the source of academic tradition\textsuperscript{18}. Alexander Neckam, the author of De Naturis, Bishop Grosseteste, who wrote Chasteau d'Amour, Robert Bacon and Duns Scotus all studied in Paris. In 1229 scholars left Paris and settled in Oxford as a result of a quarrel between the Provost of Paris and Queen Blanche. In England they initiated the French custom of conferring the title of “laureate” on university graduates when crowning them with a laurel wreath\textsuperscript{19}. Robert Baston, described by Wood as a Poet Laureate of Oxford\textsuperscript{20}, was inaccurately

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 268.
\textsuperscript{17} Maxwell Lyte, H. C. Great Britain. Public Record Office. H.M. Stationery Office, 1908, p. 555.
\textsuperscript{18} Broadus, op. cit., p. 11.
referred to as ‘Poet Laureate to Edward II’\textsuperscript{21}. Probably Baston was a laureate like all Oxford graduates and added the title to his profession, or vocation; thus Poet Laureate. Tradition has it that Robert Bruce captured Baston during the siege of Stirling Castle (1304) and forced him to write a poem about the event, which he did. The poem \textit{De Striveliniensi Obsidione} gave the author a legendary place in the history of the Laureateship\textsuperscript{22}.

John Kay, sometimes referred to as the Laureate of Edward IV, was never nominated; the only reason he was called “Laureate” is to be found in his own dedication in the Latin history of the Siege of Rhodes by Gulielmus Coarsinus\textsuperscript{23}, which he translated: “To the most excellente moste redoubted and moste Crysten Kyng: Kyng Edward the fourth Johan Kay hys humble poete laureate and moste lowly servant: Knelyng into the ground sayth salute”\textsuperscript{24}. Kay was probably, like Baston, an academic laureate of Oxford, who also called himself Poet Laureate. Warton in his \textit{History of English Poetry} also calls him “the Poet Laureate of Edward IV”\textsuperscript{25}.

John Skelton was the most outstanding of the academic laureates. He studied at Oxford University in the early 1480s, and received the title of “Poet Laureate” in 1488. The title of laureate was also given to him by the University of Louvain in 1492, and by Cambridge University in 1492-93. Skelton was famous for his rhetoric, satire and translations. In 1488 he joined the court of Henry VII, tutored Henry VIII and kept his position as royal poet for almost forty years. He enjoyed great respect among his contemporaries. William Caxton, in the preface to \textit{The Book of Eneydos} asked: “mayster John Skelton, late created poet laureate, in the university of Oxforde, to oversee and correct this book”\textsuperscript{26}.

\textsuperscript{21} Austin, Wiltshire Stanton, Jun. and John Ralph. \textit{The Lives of the Poets Laureate}. London: Richard Bentley, Publisher in Ordinary to Her Majesty, New Barbington Street, 1855, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{22} Broadus, op. cit., p. 15.
\textsuperscript{25} Warton, op. cit., p. 125.
After the time of Skelton, the formal practice of university laureation was discontinued. It was occasionally revived by the students through the election of one of their number, who would become Poet Laureate\(^{27}\). The students of Trinity College once elected Thomas Warton as Laureate of their college. He was crowned with laurel in the common room and asked to recite an ode in honour of their lady patroness\(^{28}\).

Out of the many academic Poets Laureate, there was only one officially recognized by the court. He received a pension from the crown and composed annual odes and occasional verses. His name was Bernardus Andreas Tholosatis (of Toulouse). Tholosatis was a blind Augustinian friar, and his first poem was written on the occasion of the Battle of Bosworth Field, *Carmen Sapphicum de Prima Regis Victoria*. The poem is not of great literary significance, but Henry VII must have been pleased and on November 21, 1486, he directed the Bishop of Exeter, Keeper of the Privy Seal, to issue letters patent, granting an annuity of ten marks to “Bernard Andreas, Poet Laureate”, with a warrant to pay Andreas the arrears of his salary from the preceding Easter\(^{29}\).

However, formal appointment of Bernard Andreas as Poet Laureate never took place\(^{30}\). He received the title of Historiographer Royal and wrote a history of Henry VII’s reign, which included panegyrics celebrating Henry’s victories in France in 1492, an ode to Henry’s Queen, Elizabeth, a poem on the birth of Prince Arthur, another on the young prince being created the Prince of Wales, and an elegy on the murder of the Earl of Northumberland. The poems were written in Latin:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Henrici cano Septimi triumphos} \\
\text{Fama, religion, comitate,} \\
\text{Sensu, sanguine, gratia, decore}^{31}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{27}\) Broadus, op. cit., p. 23.


\(^{29}\) Broadus, op cit., pp 24-25.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., p. 25.

These are lines from an ode of 1487, celebrating Henry’s victory over the Yorkist conspirators. Bernard Andreas enjoyed the favour of Henry VII, receiving many gifts in addition to his pension. He was a tutor to Prince Arthur. Henry VIII also liked Andreas, and it was rumoured that the blind poet wrote Henry’s diatribe against Martin Luther. In the person of Bernard Andreas, who was both the first official chronicler of the royal family and wrote occasional poetry commenting upon current national issues, the tradition of the versificator regis reached a transition stage.

6. Laurel Awarded for Poetic Achievement

The term Poet Laureate came to be associated with poetic achievement, and was appreciated but not rewarded with an official patent. It is true, Geoffrey Chaucer received an annuity of twenty marks from Edward III, together with a daily pitcher of wine, with Richard II confirming these grants, but many esquires of Edward III received similar privileges. Dryden calls Chaucer “Laureate to three kings”, Edward III, Richard II and Henry IV, but he probably had in mind Chaucer’s excellence as a poet, for no official patent or title was ever conferred on the Father of English Literature. John Gower and John Lydgate were not official Laureates either, though Lydgate received a pension from the court. He was commissioned to write a poem for the pageant in honour of the entry of Queen Margaret into London in 1445. In fact, Lydgate deserves the title of Laureate to Henry V and Henry VI “much more definitely than Chaucer does to his three kings”.

Sir Edmund Spenser, Michael Drayton and Samuel Daniel are sometimes called traditional Poets Laureate. They never received a patent, but in the second edition of Wood’s *Athenae Oxonienses* in 1721, the editor added certain unexplained comments that were also not always entirely accurate, including numbering Spenser and Daniel among the English Poets.

---

32 Austin and Ralph, op. cit., pp 17-18.
34 Broadus, op. cit., p. 31.
36 Broadus, op. cit., p. 19.
Robert Southey mentions the three of them in his *The Lay of the Laureate*:

\[
\text{That wreath which in Eliza's golden days} \\
\text{My master dear, divinest Spenser, wore,} \\
\text{That which rewarded Drayton's learned lays,} \\
\text{Which thoughtful Ben and gentle Daniel bore.}^{39}
\]

Spenser was unquestionably the best poet among his contemporaries. In 1591 he was given a pension of £50 a year by the Queen, but this was not associated with his appointment to an office at Court. The pension was in fact a sign of the court’s recognition of his poetic achievement. Spenser is “automatically” called Elizabeth’s Laureate on the strength of his *Fairie Queen*, dedicated “To the Most Higher, Mightie, and Magnifecent Empersse Renowned for Pietie, Vertue, and all Gratious Government Elizabeth”. Tradition accorded Spenser the title of Elizabeth’s Laureate to acknowledge his excellence as the best poet of his generation.

Drayton would have liked to have been crowned with the laurel. He wrote the eulogies for Queen Elizabeth, the Countess of Pembroke and the Countess of Bedford, followed by a series of panegyrics directed to the great and the good, hoping they would reciprocate with favours, with “golden showers”:

\[
\text{Unto thy fame my Muse herself shall task,} \\
\text{Which rain'st upon me thy sweet golden showers,} \\
\text{Upon whose praise my soul shall spend her powers}^{42}
\]

Samuel Daniel won the heart of his patroness, the Countess of Pembroke, whose influence brought him two appointments, namely Licenser of Plays and Groom of the Privy Chamber. There is no documented warrant for his Laureateship, either from the times of Elizabeth or the times of James I. Daniel wrote masques for James I, which Lord Chamberlain characterized

---

40 Broadus, op. cit., p. 35.
41 Ibid., p. 37.
as solemn and dull, the writing of which Daniel did not enjoy for he felt himself to be a poet. The first such masque written by Daniel, *Vision of the Twelve Goddesses*, was presented at Hampton Court on January 8, 1604. His *Musophilus* is a poem about the power of the poet in an ideal commonwealth, which can be read as Daniel’s application for the Laureateship. Judging by his declaration in *Musophilus* Daniel would have made a respectable Laureate:

*I know I shall be read among the rest,
So long as men speak English, and so long
As verse and virtue shall be in request,
Or grace to honest industry belong.*

7. Unofficial Poets Laureate

Ben Jonson and William Davenant are usually referred to as “official” Poets Laureate but in the present study they will be labelled as ‘unofficial’, for they received a patent and a pension but were not officially appointed to the office. Ben Jonson received two patents, one on February 1, 1616, which granted him a pension of 100 marks, the other on April 23, 1630, increasing the pension to £100 and adding a “terse of Canary Spanish wine yearly”. The patents did not appoint Jonson to the office of Poet Laureate, but Jonson calls himself Laureate on the title page of *The Masque of Lethe*, which appeared in 1616, the year he received the first patent. Ben Jonson wrote masques, which were considered to be the responsibility of the court poet within the Jacobean Court. Beginning with *The Masque of Blackness*, written for Twelfth Night, 1605, each year he produced a masque for the Christmas festivities at Whitehall, with the exception of 1607, 1612, 1614, 1619 and 1620 - 1625, as well as for Twelfth Night, 1631. Other poets, however, were also encouraged to write masques, so Jonson did not exclusively receive commissions as Laureate.

Ben Jonson wrote occasional poems for James I and Charles I, such as *To King James, upon the Happy False Rumour of his Death* (1606); *Epigram to King Charles for a Hundred Pounds sent me in Sickness* (1629), *Epigram on the Prince’s Birth* (1630), *Epigram on the Queen then Lying in* (1630), *An Ode or Song by All the Muses in Celebration of Her*

---

44 Ibid., p. 18.
Majesty’s Birthday (1630), An Epigram to the Household (1630), The Humble Petition of Poor Ben, To the Best of Monarchs, Masters, Men (1630), To the King on his Birthday (November 19, 1632), To My Lord the King on the Christening of his Second Son James (1633) and A New Year’s Gift Sung to King Charles (1635). It is interesting to see how many of these poems were written in 1630, when Ben Jonson had received an increase in his grant. Obviously, he wished to express his gratitude. It must be borne in mind that in the seventeenth century occasional poetry was abundant with Elizabethan, Jacobean and Carolinean New Year tributes, eulogies and addresses written to the monarchs. The fact that Ben Jonson wrote them as well does not make him the Laureate.

During Jonson’s life the Poet Laureateship had not officially been created, but a popular conception of the office developed. Elizabeth valued scholarship and culture. The royal progresses, the Twelfth Night revels, as well as the plays and poems privately performed at court were perfect occasions for ambitious poets to distinguish themselves before the monarch. They complimented the Queen, hoping for her patronage. She was praised as Una, Casta, Diana, Cynthia or Belphebe by both those who had her favour and those who sought it. Elizabeth had a good ear for poetry, and she could detect blatant flattery. With the accession of James I, who lacked Elizabeth’s dignity and restraint, panegyrics flourished. James was called the “poet-king” and his reign marked a golden opportunity for poets at court. It also has to be remembered that King James was a direct descendant of Henry VII, which aroused the interest of the general public in the reign of the monarch and reminded them of Bernard Andreas, Henry’s Poet Laureate. The Elizabethan period also marked an increased interest in classical literature. Philemon Holland translated Pliny’s Natural History, which included an exhaustive account of the uses and symbolism of the laurel. The practice of laureating was popular in Italy, and during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods learned Englishmen travelled widely, including to Italy, where they became familiar with the custom. However, when John Selden, Jonson’s friend, published a quarto entitled Titles of Honour (1614), in which he made no mention of the title of Poet Laureate Jonson asked him to complete a second edition, and to include

---

47 Broadus, op. cit., pp 43-44.
48 Ibid., p. 45.
49 Ibid., p. 44.
50 Ibid., p. 47.
51 Broadus, op. cit., p. 50.
a discussion of the title which could crown a poet’s career. In 1631 Selden fulfilled his promise to Ben Jonson, concluding:

\begin{quote}
And thus have I, by no unseasonable digression, performed a promise to you my beloved Ben Jonson. Your curious learning and judgment may correct where I have erred, and add where my notes and memory have left me short. You are

- Omnia Carmina doctus
- Et calles Mython plasmata et Historiam

And so you both know what concerns it, and your singular Excellencie in the Art most eminently deserves it\textsuperscript{52}.
\end{quote}

The title of Laureate, although never officially conferred, was given to Jonson by popular acclaim and he treasured it for its own sake, “although it brought him neither sack nor pension”\textsuperscript{53}.

William Davenant, like Drayton before him, sought the patronage of powerful men from the beginning of his career as a courtier. He was initially a page, both to the Duchess of Richmond and to Sir Fulke Greville, Lord Brook. Afterwards he wrote a play \textit{Albovine}, dedicated to the Earl of Somerset. Among his patrons were Edward Hyde, the Earl of Clarendon and Lord Chancellor, and Lord Weston, the Lord High Treasurer and the Earl of Dorset\textsuperscript{54}. The person who had the most significant influence on Davenant’s career was Inigo Jones, architect and stage designer\textsuperscript{55}. Inigo Jones had quarrelled with Jonson, and therefore was ready to assist another playwright. Together Davenant and Jones presented at Whitehall in 1634 \textit{The Temple of Love}, a play “by Inigo Jones, surveyor of His Majesty’s Works and William Davenant His Majesty’s Servant”. After the production of the play the Queen Henrietta Maria was said “to have taken Davenant under her special protection”\textsuperscript{56}. Davenant cleverly dedicated his plays to two influential members of the court, Endymion Porter, the most devoted follower of Charles II, and Henry Jermyn, who was a favourite of the Queen\textsuperscript{57}.

Davenant, on hearing that Prince Rupert was to lead an expedition to conquer Madagascar, an unfortunate proposition that was eventually abandoned,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{52} quoted in: Broadus, op. cit., p. 50.
\textsuperscript{53} Broadus, op. cit., p. 51.
\textsuperscript{54} Austin and Ralph, op. cit., pp 113-114.
\textsuperscript{55} Hamilton, op. cit., pp 9-10.
\textsuperscript{56} Broadus, op. cit., p. 52.
\textsuperscript{57} Broadus, op. cit., p. 53.
\end{flushright}
wrote a poem *Madagascar* (1637), which circulated in manuscript form and was read to the Prince and the Court\(^58\). It seems that the poem resulted in Davenant receiving a patent, issued on December 13, 1638, whose terms were identical to those awarded to Ben Jonson – no official nomination but a pension that did not formally oblige the recipient to perform any duties at court\(^59\). The Folio of Davenant’s works, published in 1673, has as its frontispiece the poet’s head, encircled by a laurel wreath. Herringman, the publisher, wrote: “My Author was Poet Laureat to two Great Kings”\(^60\). With the fall of the monarchy, Davenant was made Lieutenant-General of Ordnance and was knighted during the siege of Gloucester\(^61\).

The Laureateship never imposed a particular sense of duty or obligation on Davenant\(^62\). His main interest was the theatre; he has gone down in the history of the stage as the first to introduce moveable scenery\(^63\). Davenant had always been a loyal supporter of Charles I, whose widow he accompanied into exile, but Charles II never enjoyed the poet’s admiration or trust\(^64\).

Sir William Davenant, like his predecessor, was never officially nominated but when he succeeded Ben Jonson sixteen months after the latter’s death the tradition of the popular conception of the post which had not yet been officially created gave him a recognition as Poet Laureate. It was assumed that Jonson held such an appointment and that the court installed William Davenant in the vacant office. The assumption was well justified; like Jonson before him, Davenant wrote passages which entertained the court, like Jonson he was granted a patent. However, similar royal pensions were given for other services rendered.

---

\(^{58}\) Hopkins, op. cit., p. 20.  
\(^{59}\) Ibid., p. 19.  
\(^{63}\) Ibid.  
\(^{64}\) Ibid., p. 20.
When Davenant died on April 7th, 1668 for the first time in the history of both England, and the world, the death of one court poet necessitated the appointment of another with the same duties and the same emolument65.

The Poet Laureateship, even before it had been created as an office, was prey to mockery. Sir John Suckling voiced his opinion of the Laureateship in a poem called *A Session of the Poets*. The poets are marshalled in a “session” because it is time to award the laurel to the one who deserves it most. In the chair is Apollo. Selden, who included a discussion of the Laureateship in his *Titles of Honour* at the request of Ben Jonson, is sitting by the chair. There are many minor poets who aspire to be recognized as court poet, including Edmund Waller, Thomas Carew and others but the most prominent candidates are Ben Jonson and Davenant. Ben is rejected because of his old age:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Those that were there thought it not fit} \\
\text{To discontent so ancient a wit;}
\end{align*}
\]

Davenant is also rejected, on account of his physical deformity:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Surely the company would have been content} \\
\text{If they could have found any precedent;} \\
\text{But in all their records either in verse or prose} \\
\text{There was not one laureate without a nose}^{66}
\end{align*}
\]

It seems that in the seventeenth century the position of the Laureateship was so well established in the national tradition that it even survived in the Inter-Regnum. Although Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of the Commonwealth, abolished the Monarchy, he preserved the royal institution of court poet. During the Inter-Regnum, Payne Fisher (1616-1693) was made Poet Laureate to Cromwell, producing panegyrics and congratulatory odes in Latin which praised the Protector and his Generals67. Cromwell was unable to rely on the literary service of Milton, his former private secretary who, accusing him of retreating into a personal rule which resembled that of Charles I, refused to pay any

---

65 Hopkins, op. cit., p. 15.
tributes to the Protector’s military achievements. Paradoxically, the royal office of court poet proved to be resistant to the turbulence in the country even though the Republic did away with the ancient institution of the Monarchy.

II. Official Laureateship

The following discussion will focus on the twenty officially nominated Laureates, both traditional and modern, whose appointment and laureate verses constitute the theme of the present study. For the sake of clarity, in this chapter, which outlines the origin and the history of the office, the figures of the twenty poets will be introduced with the reference to the status, emolument and rank of the Laureateship. In this way the chronological perspective, from the Anglo-Saxon scop to Carol Ann Duffy, the present Laureate and the first woman in the office, will serve as the background for subsequent analysis.

III. Traditional Laureates

1. Poet – Advocate and Spokesman for the Court

Many claim that John Dryden was a court poet who knew how to turn with the tide as he offered his pen firstly to the service of the Puritan Oliver Cromwell, before writing for the Anglican Charles II and finally the Catholic James II. John Dryden (1631 – 1700), [years in office 1668-1688] was England’s first officially nominated Poet Laureate by Charles II. Most of Dryden’s biographers claim that he was appointed Laureate in 1668, after the death of Davenant, on the strength of a warrant issued on April 13, 1668. The warrant was not an official secret, as the general public knew about the new nomination, which it is necessary to underline in view of the fact that certain biographers and historians claim that Dryden was appointed to the Laureateship in 1670, on August 18. The

69 Broadus, op. cit., p. 49.
misunderstanding is the result of confusing the date of Dryden’s appointment to the Laureateship with the date of his appointment to the post of Historiographer Royal. The patent of 1670 was issued because in those days the two offices were combined and the patent “served to confer the one and to confirm the other.” The patent grants Dryden a salary of £200 per annum and a butt of Canary for the two offices. Another “additional Annuity” was added to Dryden’s salary, £100 a year, paid in arrears from 1680, a fact which is specified in a Treasury warrant of May 6, 1685. Arrears were also to be paid on the pension of £200 a year. In this way it was clearly specified that the £200 was payment for the post of Historiographer Royal, and the £100, the amount traditionally paid to Laureates, as in the case of Jonson and Davenant, was the sum added by Charles II to Dryden’s income. In his role as Historiographer Royal, Dryden wrote *His Majesty’s Declaration Defended* (1681), as well as translating Maimbourg’s *History of the League* (1684) and Bouhours’s *Life of Francis Xavier* (1688) for James II. No duties were formally imposed on the Laureate, and, according to some historians and critics of literature, Dryden did not perform any. The view, however, that because Dryden wrote few typical laureate poems, flattering the monarchs whom he served, he should not be called a court poet, does not seem to be justified. Although Dryden had no official duties his responsibilities were self-created.

2. Professional Eulogist

Thomas Shadwell (1642 – 1692) [years in office 1688-1692] and Nahum Tate (1652 – 1715) [years in office 1692-1715], the two Laureates nominated by William of Orange, wrote quite conventional, rather banal odes, commemorating royal births, marriages and deaths. They failed to comment on current issues, either political or national. William of Orange could have been depicted as a liberator who had brought an end to difficult times. Indeed, there was his heroic victory at the Boyne, which Shadwell

---

73 Broadus, op. cit., p. 59.
74 Ibid., p. 61.
75 Ibid., p. 63.
78 Forbes Gray, op. cit., p. 61.
marginalized in his verse, and there was the Jacobite uprising in the reign of George I, which Tate failed to incorporate into his public poetry. Shadwell was the Laureate who began the custom of writing the New Year Odes. He was appointed to the Laureateship and the post of Historiographer Royal. On his appointment he received £300 a year and the traditional butt of Canary wine. He had no official duties as Laureate, and William of Orange did not need the support Dryden gave to Charles II. Unlike Dryden, however, Shadwell had no reason to complain about his laureate pension. Although Shadwell’s salary might have been temporarily found to be in arrears, it was not at the time of his death, and his dependents received the full payment for the year in which he died.

During his twenty three year tenure Nahum Tate was witness to the evolution of the Laureate office and its status; although he received a patent identical to that of Shadwell, his fee was a £100 pension for the Laureateship. While Shadwell inherited the posts of both Poet Laureate and Historiographer Royal from Dryden, on Tate’s appointment to the Laureateship, the position of Historiographer Royal went to Thomas Ryder, and from that time the two offices were conferred independently of each other. Tate kept the title of Poet Laureate during three successive reigns: he received his nomination from William of Orange and Queen Mary. Edward Villiers, the Earl of Jersey, who was Lord Chamberlain when Anne came to the throne signed the warrant confirming Tate’s position as Laureate in 1702. He was again formally appointed on the Queen’s death in 1714 by George I. The pension of the Laureate was chargeable to the department of the Lord Chamberlain, as with the pensions of the other paid servants of the King’s household. The ‘butt or pipe of Canary wine’ was still included as part of the Laureate’s payment. However, confirmation of the post, which was necessary after the accession of Queen Anne, was not issued in the form of a patent together with a relatively informal document, but it was performed officially by the Lord Chamberlain. The policy meant separating the office of Laureate from the greater State Offices and making it a personal position. Instead it became a minor office of the court, appointed with a brief warrant from the Lord Chamberlain. From 1710 the pension was chargeable to the Lord Chamberlain’s department and it became the monarch’s responsibility to take care of his Laureate.

---

80 www.british-history.ac.uk, op. cit.
81 Broadus, op. cit., p. 90. see also: Hamilton, op. cit., p. 126.