

## London Reborn: Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis*

The restoration of Charles II to the English throne was attended by much celebration—and much anxiety. People of all political persuasions hoped that the nation could now look forward to an era of peace and security after two decades of conflict and instability. A minor royalist poet, Alexander Brome, expressed his optimism in verses written in the spring of 1660:

We'll eat and we'll drink, we'll dance and we'll sing,  
The Roundheads and Cavs, no more shall be named,  
But all join together to make up the ring,  
And rejoice that the many-headed dragon is tamed.  
'Tis friendship and love that can save us and arm us,  
And while we all agree, there is nothing can harm us.

Just below the surface of Brome's celebratory lines lurks his fear of civil conflict and the enduring threat of mob rule (the "many-headed dragon"). The poet expresses more confidence than he perhaps feels, but it was through such acts of willed optimism all across the country that the Restoration came about, and came about peacefully.

Six years after the Restoration, it must have been even more difficult to remain optimistic about the nation's future. The year 1666 witnessed a string of disasters, including humiliating military defeats by the Dutch, huge mortality from the last great outbreak of bubonic plague, and finally the Fire of London, which destroyed a huge part of the old city. The destruction and horror caused by the Fire are vividly described by Samuel Pepys in his *Diary*.

John Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis* ("year of wonders") performs the paradoxical feat of turning the disasters of 1666 into triumphs, as it sings of victories to come. Like Brome in the verses quoted above, Dryden is resolutely (if not quite convincingly) optimistic, paving over recent defeats and lingering divisions within English society by painting a picture of England's imminent exaltation. Although the technical subject of the extract from the poem in *The Norton Anthology* is the destruction of London by fire and the rebuilding of the city, Dryden's comparison of the conflagration to a Cromwell-like "dire usurper" sent "To scourge his country with a lawless sway" makes the wider relevance apparent. The poem conveys a sense of new beginnings, of a nation starting from scratch but with confidence in its unlimited potential. Like John Donne at the dawn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Dryden chooses the legendary phoenix as the emblem of his age.

In this poem, much more than a bigger, better London is rising upon new foundations. Dryden's confidence in England's future greatness at the end of this year of disasters may be mostly bluster, but what is more remarkable is what he is blustering about: naval power and global trade.

His commercial lines consciously invoke the memory of Elizabeth, the virgin queen. Yet her modern equivalent is not Charles II, but the mercantile city of London. Even for Dryden, a royalist to the bone, the index of English greatness is to be found not in the majesty of its monarch, but the balance of its trade.

When Dryden wrote *Annus Mirabilis*, the London that would rise in splendor from the ashes was still little more than a blueprint by Christopher Wren. Many were inclined to interpret the fire, along with the horrific plague that preceded it, as a sign of God's unappeasable anger with England's decadent capital. Yet at least as far as the city was concerned, Dryden's confidence proved entirely justified. Just two years after the fire, which he recorded so vividly, Samuel Pepys was cheerfully doing business at "the Change"—that is, the Royal Exchange, swiftly rebuilt after the fire as a vast shopping mall which became the hub of city life. The resurrection of London added greatly to the confidence of its citizens that they were indeed living in a new Augustan age. Just as the Emperor Augustus had found Rome brick and left it marble, so Wren and others had triumphantly transformed England's capital.