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Popularization and Conservatism: Audience and Intent in Sprat’s *The History of the Royal Society*

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Thomas Sprat’s *The History of the Royal Society of London, for the Improving of Natural Knowledge* has played a number of different roles in historians’ studies of the Scientific Revolution. From earlier studies such as Margery Purver’s work, which regards the *History* as a factual account of the official activities and beliefs of the members of the Society, to P. B. Wood’s more recent reconsideration of the book as an apologia intended to ingratiate the Society with the Church and Charles II, the purpose of Sprat’s *History* has undergone a radical reevaluation in scholarship. This reassessment is largely due to the inevitable evolution of studies of the Scientific Revolution: as areas of research move beyond the introductory to become increasingly specialized, more critical and focused study of the individual pieces of evidence becomes possible. Thus the claims of recent scholars such as Wood and Michael Hunter – that the *History* must be read within a more accurate understanding of the purposes, audience, and effects of the book – certainly resonate strongly, and their interpretation of Sprat’s book as an apologetic offered by a self-conscious and embattled Royal Society seem to be a satisfactory interpretation of Sprat’s words and the surrounding historical evidence.

Consequently, my aim here is not to contribute more to the debate about the specific function of Sprat’s *History* with regard to the Royal Society. Rather, I intend to take a closer look at the rhetoric of the *History*, analyzing the more subsidiary claims offered by revisionist historians of Sprat’s work in order to engage with it on a more detailed level. At the same time, such a consideration of the *History* as a piece of rhetoric in and of itself also provides a way to broaden the implications of the book, so that it can be understood as a general reflection of the concerns and reactions to the events occurring in England in the 1660s and 1650s. In this sense, Sprat’s history has a dual role in the history of the Scientific
Revolution: it is a deliberately fashioned tool of the Royal Society intended to persuade its readers of a certain vision of the group, and it is also a product of its times, a more passive, unintended reflection of the greater intellectual and political environment that asserts its presence between the lines of Sprat’s text.

As P. B. Wood writes in his 1980 article on Sprat’s History, “The question of the official status of the History should not be confused with questions of historical accuracy or of the representativeness of the views it contains. . .”¹ In this comment, Wood sets himself up against other historians such as Margery Purver, who claims in her 1967 book on the Royal Society that Sprat’s book essentially represents an “official manifesto” of the institution.² Wood’s assertion that Sprat’s history should be considered an “apologetic”³ particularly takes into account the description of the experimental method outlined by Sprat in his book. He argues:

[T]he History’s description of [the Royal Society’s] method was not necessarily accurate. Rather. . . Sprat portrayed a method which would further the aims of social and ecclesiastical stability and material prosperity, essential for the Royal Society since its continued existence depended upon the creation of a social basis for the institutionalized pursuit of natural philosophy.⁴

In his work building upon this interpretation, Michael Hunter has presented persuasive evidence for his suggestion that the Society’s “anxieties. . . about its possible collapse,”⁵ due to its relative financial uncertainty and its status as a victim of vociferous outside criticism,

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³ Wood, 5.
⁴ Ibid., 1.
contributed to the “defensive”\textsuperscript{6} position adopted by both the Royal Society and Sprat’s \textit{History}.

However, Wood’s categorization of Sprat’s book as having “aims of social and ecclesiastical stability and material prosperity” finds a great deal of support even without relying on outside knowledge of the historical circumstances faced by the Society. A look at Sprat’s text reveals that Wood’s interpretation is not such a radical departure from Sprat’s own self-conscious authorial representation in his book. In a defense and explanation of the decision to call his book a “History,” Sprat first outlines the format of the book, explaining its tripartite division in a section entitled “An Advertisement to the Reader.” As Sprat describes, Part I provides a whirlwind overview of “\textit{Ancient Philosophy}” and contemporary developments in thought, while Part III gives a “Defence” of the “\textit{Experimental Knowledge}” practiced by the Society.\textsuperscript{7} In terms of providing a record of the Royal Society it is only Part II that “peculiarly describes their Undertaking.”\textsuperscript{8} Sprat demonstrates a particularly acute understanding of the literary style and categorization of his book, explaining that if his writing style fails to be concise, it is due to the fault of his “Detractors.” As he writes, “For their Objections and Cavils against [the Royal Society], did make it necessary for me to write of it, not altogether in the way of a \textit{plain History}, but sometimes of an \textit{Apology}.”\textsuperscript{9} Given Sprat’s proactive decision to inform his reader of how to understand his book, it seems clear that Wood’s and Hunter’s regard of the \textit{History} is not far off from the true mark.


\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
Within this broad framework of understanding Sprat’s *History*, there are specific points upon which disagreement with these historians’ interpretations emerges. The general arguments of Wood and Hunter tend to proceed by examining the discrepancies between the Royal Society described by Sprat – particularly in his explanation of the experimental method – and the Royal Society’s actual practices as described in letters, reports, and numerical data\(^\text{10}\) on the Society itself. Such analyses conclude that Sprat’s *History* “failed to do justice to the role of hypothesis in the work of the Society’s leading researchers, and upgraded the role of the pure accumulation of data,”\(^\text{11}\) overemphasizing the “cooperative compilation of natural histories, with the primary aim of utilitarian benefit.”\(^\text{12}\)

Thus for scholars such as Wood and Hunter, Sprat’s depictions of the Royal Society seem to be willful misrepresentations intended to project a certain image of the organization to various segments of a skeptical society. And in speculating on the intended audience of Sprat’s book, Wood and Hunter argue that Sprat’s book is attempting to curry favor with two specific institutions: the Church and the Crown. As Wood writes, “In disassociating the Society from atheism on the grounds that it did not subscribe to a sceptical point of view, and from enthusiasm because it did not uphold a dogmatical position concerning knowledge, Sprat sought to avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of Restoration theology.”\(^\text{13}\) And in this time, “theology” could not be separated from the political events of the “Restoration,” as “[r]eligious orthodoxy and loyalty to the sovereign were two sides of the same Anglican coin.”\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^\text{10}\) For detailed statistical data and numerical categorization of the members and monetary funding received by the Society, see Hunter’s *The Royal Society and Its Fellows*.


\(^\text{12}\) Wood, 6.

\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 10.

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 13.
In support of these interpretations, there are certainly an abundance of statements in Sprat’s book that lend themselves to such conclusions. For example, Sprat’s generous invocations of nationalistic sentiment throughout the book and the cajoling, flattering epistle to Charles II lend credence to the specific audience identified by Wood. The dedication begins, “Of all the Kings of Europe, Your Majesty was the first, who confirmed this Noble Design of Experiments, by Your own Example, and by a Public Establishment,”¹⁵ and this appeal to being the “first” among all the “Kings in Europe” reveals that the “Public Establishment” of the Royal Society yet needs royal support in order to survive.

Tipping his hand to his ecclesiastical audience, perhaps the term that Sprat uses with the most pejorative scorn throughout his book is that of “passion,” which he equates with a religious zealousness antithetical to the Church of England. As he states:

> [The members of the Society] have indeavor’d, to separate the knowledge of Nature, from the colours of Rhetorick, the devices of Fancy, or the delightful deceit of Fables. . . They have attempted to free it from the Artifice, and Humors, and Passions of Sects; to render it an Instrument, whereby Mankind may obtain a Dominion over Things, and not only over one anothers judgements.¹⁶

As he continues, the Society achieves these aims without elaborate laws or ceremonies, “but by the silent, effectual, and unanswerable Arguments of real Productions.”¹⁷ In light of this passage, in which Sprat emphasizes the sobriety of the Society, Wood’s claim that Sprat’s book portrays “Anglican divines and Fellows of the Royal Society alike stud[y]ing God’s revelation, the former in scriptures and the latter in the book of nature”¹⁸ is insightful. Sprat’s explanation that the pure “knowledge of Nature” must be “separate” and “free” from

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¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Wood, 14.
“Humors” and “Passions” certainly correlates well with the Protestant desire to strip away religious pomp in order to achieve a closer communion with God.

This interpretation of Sprat’s religious rhetoric fits in well with the view of the book as an extended apologia, and indeed it seems possible that Sprat’s wry reference to his book’s “Criticks (of Whom the World is now too full)”\(^{19}\) indicates that the *History* was written specifically to respond to attacks received from the religious community. In addition, Sprat’s assertion that “the Church of England ought not to be apprehensive, of this free converse of various Judgements,”\(^{20}\) and his section discussing how the Royal Society is “not dangerous to the Christian religion”\(^{21}\) in Part III only provide further support for Sprat’s book as being directed to a specific audience.

Consequently, what is lacking in such an understanding of Sprat’s *History* is not the accuracy of interpretation but the scope. While it is true that the Church and the King were important addressees of the book, they were by no means the only ones. After all, given that Charles II viewed the Society as more of a court amusement than a serious endeavor,\(^{22}\) it seems unlikely that either Sprat or the Royal Society would have been able to persuade the King to their cause through one book. And in fact, a closer examination of the epistle reveals that the tone of the dedication is not so much appropriate to the solicitation of a patron as it is to the remonstration of a dilettante or child. The epistle doles out advice in tandem with flattery, warning the King that “to increase the Powers of all Mankind, and to free them from the bondage of Errors, is greater glory than to enlarge *Empire*, or to put Chains on the necks..."
of Conquer'd Nations.” Such a pronouncement, warning against the lesser glories of conquest and war, seems more to be chiding the King’s lost attentions than to be actively attempting to regain them.

The epistle’s suggestion that it would be unrealistic to expect the King to play a large role in financing the activities and supporting the reputation of the Society is yet balanced by awareness about the “glory” of the Society’s endeavors; it indicates that there existed a wider audience to whom the History was addressed. The closing exhortation of the book may provide some illumination:

If now this Enterprise shall chance to fail for want of Patronage and Revenew, the World will not only be frustrated of their present expectations, but will have just ground to despair of any future Labors towards the increase of free Practical Philosophy. . . . But if our Nation shall lay hold of this opportunity. . . . the force of this Example will be irresistibly prevalent in all Countries round about us; the State of Christendom will soon obtain a new face; while this Halcyon Knowledge is breeding, all Tempests will cease. . . . the peaceable calmness of mens Judgments, will have admirable influence on their Manners. . . . their Opinions will be les violent and dogmatical, but more certain. . . . the value of their Arts will be esteemed by the great things they perform, and not by those they speak. . . .

As these last words reveal, the book’s practical purposes of finding “Patronage” and “Revenew” are certainly of primary importance; however, it seems that the perceived sources of such support are quite widespread. Notably absent is any special attention to the Church or to the King; instead the appeal is to the “Nation” – indeed to anyone who might be interested in “Practical Philosophy,” the elimination of war and “Tempests,” the improvement of “Manners” and society, the rejection of “dogmati[sm],” and even the development of the “Arts.” Such broad, sweeping generalities connecting the activities of the Royal Society to the well-being of the entire country seem to demand a consideration of a wider audience, and perhaps a wider aim, within Sprat’s book.

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23 Sprat, “The Epistle Dedicatory.”
24 Ibid., 437-8.
Significantly, the expansive statements about the benefits of the Royal Society are by no means confined to the conclusion of the *History*. Specific sections in Part III of the book advance arguments for the precise ways in which the various fields mentioned in the conclusion will benefit from the Society. Sprat argues for the notion that experiments will not be detrimental to the educational system,\textsuperscript{25} nor to the Christian religion,\textsuperscript{26} that they will be “advantageous to the Manual Arts,”\textsuperscript{27} helpful to the “Gentlemen of our Nation,”\textsuperscript{28} and an improvement for the “Wits and Writers” of the time,\textsuperscript{29} among other things. Within this explanatory section, many of the theories advocating the Society are negative, asserting more that the Society is *not* harmful than that it is positively beneficial. Such a stance supports the view of the *History* as being an apologia, primarily conceived with the aim of counteracting the “Criticks” of the Society that Sprat alludes to so scornfully. However, a significant number of the advantages proffered in this section are presented in positive terms, implying that Sprat’s book was intended to reach beyond a mere defense of the Society and beyond a plea for royal and ecclesiastical patronage.

Hunter has also acknowledged the “positive view of science’s role” that emerges in Part III, interpreting it as “symptomatic of the rather naïve – even inept – presumption of the protagonists of the new science that what they were doing was not only harmful to no one, but somehow might at the same time be positively appealing.”\textsuperscript{30} The “naïve – even inept – presumption” that Hunter describes refers to his notion that Sprat’s *History* aimed to express a cohesive ideology of the Society, even though it ultimately failed to do so.\textsuperscript{31} However, it is

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 323.  
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 345.  
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 378.  
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 403.  
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 413.  
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 200-1.
somewhat difficult to reconcile this understanding of the History as a document reflecting the Society’s desire to present a unified viewpoint with Hunter’s simultaneous belief that the document was intended to be an extended apologia to the public. After all, the former interpretation claims a positive stance and an active contribution to the public, while the latter argues for a negative stance and a passive defense against critics. And although such a discrepancy ultimately results from Hunter’s commendable efforts to encompass all the subtleties and contradictions within Sprat’s text, his characterization of the Royal Society as “naïve” is ultimately too speculative. Thus his argument moves too far away from the actual text of the History itself to be comfortably assimilated into a dominant interpretation of the book.

Instead, it is helpful to examine Sprat’s generalized attempts to advocate the benefits of the Royal Society as simply a general piece of rhetoric and persuasion without attempting to pinpoint the intent of the actual Society members themselves. After all, a great deal of the History was written without the supervision and input of many of the members who might have desired to contribute to the content of the book. Though evidence shows that Parts I and II underwent a process of review and revision under various members of the Society, more uncertainty exists about the status of Part III. Thus, to examine some of the more significantly defensive or advocatory sections within Part III requires an awareness of the large role that Sprat himself likely played in determining the finalized version of the text.

Sprat himself, though elected a Fellow of the Society in 1663, was better known for his accomplishments as an author; thus, he was “a self-conscious writer, brought in to serve a

32 Ibid., 206.
specific literary function.”34 With this emphasis on the literary profile of the History’s author, an examination of the specific role that rhetoric plays within the book is illuminating. The “self-conscious” traits of Sprat’s writing feature prominently within the book, as the author does not shy from speaking of himself in the first person or of making himself the center of the narrative focus. Sprat strategically represents himself as genial narrator, successfully distancing himself from an overly didactic tone. Even Part I’s rather heavy-handed exposition of the flaws in the contemporary method of learning comes across as harmless in Sprat’s capable hands. He jokingly alludes to his own long-windedness: “But to conclude this Argument (for I am weary of walking in a rode so trodden. . . ”35 And he frequently gives direction to his readers, reiterating what he has already written and explaining the direction he is about to go in: “But now it being a fit time to stop, and breathe a while, and to take a review of the ground, that we have pass’d.”36 With its engaging and playful tone, Sprat’s inclusion of the reader in his reference to “we” and his conspiratorial mention of needing to “breathe a while” addresses a general reader, one who may be uninitiated into the world of the new science.

In addition to the popularized tone through which he relates his story, Sprat also uses a particular rhetorical technique for adding to the persuasive power of his text. Throughout his description and defense of the Society’s activities, Sprat provides a lively, but rather unspecific, account of how the Society actually functions while maintaining the illusion of being particularly clear and detailed. He introduces the History by explaining why, within the first decade of the Society’s establishment, it might be considered necessary to write such a document. He uses the comparison of the architectural blueprint that forms a “model”

35 Sprat, 19.
36 Ibid., 46.
intended to show “by what Materials, with what Charge, and by how many Hands, that is afterwards to be raised.” Such an analogy suggests that the reader himself might be capable of being one of the “many Hands” necessary to achieve this new project; however, the rest of the text fails to follow through with this promise. For example, in describing the experimental method used by the members, Sprat writes that they engage in “Directing, Judging, Conjecturing, Improving, [and] Discoursing upon Experiments.” He gestures at clarifying and expanding upon this information by writing that, in theory, Society members are diametrically opposed to the method of Descartes: followers of the Royal Society begin not from Cartesian nothingness and solitude but by a “Praeliminary Collection of research” that is done by “joint labours of the whole Society.”

However, aside from the rather scattered pieces of Royal Society writings included within the actual text, Sprat fails to provide any particular examples that convey an idea of what the Society intends to accomplish on a practical level. As he himself acknowledges, the written reports and “Instances” offered leave the responsibility to the readers to “ghess…how all the rest are performed.” Such vague answers to the question of what, exactly, the Society actually does suggests that Sprat’s aim is not to write a how-to manual on becoming a member of the Royal Society, but to search for support amongst a wider audience. As such, it is more effective for him to use broad, positive terms whose very indistinctness maintain the innocuousness of the Society. After all, despite the fact that Society’s membership was somewhat exclusive (though claiming that the Society practiced “a Philosophy of

37 Sprat, A1.
38 Ibid., 95.
39 Ibid., 96-7.
40 Ibid., 155.
Sprat also notes that “the farr greater Number are Gentlemen”\footnote{Ibid., 63.} it seems that the readership was encouraged to burgeon to a much larger number. In the History, Sprat maintains that the Society has received a large amount of support both abroad and at home, “from our citizens, physicians, nobility, statesmen, soldiers, churchmen, Royal Family. . . ”\footnote{Ibid., 124.}

Given this diverse group of people, it seems that Sprat’s strategy in recruiting support for the Society involves casting as large a net as possible, linking the institution to all parts of English society in the hopes that at least one will find resonance. Once again, an analysis of the audience of Sprat’s book reveals that the History goes beyond being a mere apologia to critics and attempts to persuade a much more general audience of the Society’s benefits.

Still, it is important to keep in mind the danger in moving too much to any extreme by saying that Sprat’s History is either primarily an apologia or primarily a popularization of the Society. A more accurate description would take into account the tensions that exist within the book, particularly between the extremes that attempt to bill the Society as revolutionary versus those that attempt to portray it as more conservative. For, on the one hand, it is important to keep in mind the fact that the History does truly attempt to establish the innovativeness of the new experimental science. As Sprat explains, those who choose to support the Royal Society “will not only injoy the cold contentment of Learning, but that which is far greater, of Discovery. . . ”\footnote{Ibid., 436.} The feeling that this is a “Discovery” holds connotations of something new and significant, something never before attempted in the history of science and philosophy.

\footnote{Ibid., 63.}
\footnote{Ibid., 64.}
\footnote{Ibid., 124.}
\footnote{Ibid., 436.}
At the same time, it is important to note the tempered tone of this statement of novelty. The discovery of which Sprat speaks does lead to “injoy[ment]” for the reader, but it is of a “cold,” and not overly enthusiastic, nature. Such a depiction of restraint is reminiscent of the abhorrence for passion expressed elsewhere in the History, and fits in with the apologetic and defensive tone directed toward the ecclesiastical critics of the Society. In this sense, it is prudent for Sprat to represent the Society as being a conservative institution, which he addresses at various points throughout the book. For example, he writes, “While we are raising new Observations upon Nature, we mean not to abolish the Old, which were well, and judiciously established. . .”45 In fact, Sprat goes even further, explaining that the work of the Society will not only “not. . . abolish” the earlier study and veneration of the philosophy of Antiquity, but that it will in fact “restore the Truths, that have lain neglected.”46 Thus Sprat actually depicts the Society’s activities as being the opposite of a rebellion – as, in fact, a return to the “Truths” of the original.

One of the harshest criticisms that Sprat holds for the methodology of those who support the philosophy of Antiquity rather than that of experimentalism is that such reverence for the old is, in reality, merely a vain veneration of the self. As he writes, “Nay, what if I should say, that this horror for the dead, which such men pretend to, is rather a worshiping of themselves, than of the Antients? It may well be proved, that they are more in love with their Commentaries, then with the Texts of those, whom they seem to make their Oracles.”47 For Sprat, then, a return to the truth is a return to the “Texts,” and as practiced in the Royal Society, a reading of the texts is akin to the Society’s method of “raising new Observations upon” – in other words, reading – Nature.

45 Ibid., 50.
46 Ibid., 61.
Peter Dear, in his discussion of the rhetoric of the Royal Society, has indicated that Sprat’s opinions are symptomatic of contemporary attitudes about “literary forms in natural philosophy.” As he explains:

The older forms of experience and authority were paradigmatically embodied in the genre of commentary. The new forms were embodied in a research report that provided details of discrete events. . . . During the course of the seventeenth century, within the scholastic tradition itself, commentaries on Aristotle’s natural philosophical works increasingly gave way to textbooks and compendia organized along thematic lines.

In applying this description to the format of Sprat’s own text, it becomes possible to see how the *History* itself serves as a subtle example of an application of the new method of thought to the literary form. Sprat’s own book often reads as one long string of historical and descriptive facts, divided into various categories “along thematic lines.” And with the inclusion of such items as the roster of members of the Society and the writings of the Fellows themselves, the *History* often reads like the prototype of an annual report on the performance of the organization.

Such a categorical, straightforward account of the Royal Society seems to be consciously achieved by the author, as he makes repeated claims about the detrimental effects of wordiness and “eloquence” in philosophical writings. However, such a renunciation of flowery style should not be confused with a rejection of rhetorical persuasion in Sprat’s writing. Rather, Sprat’s writing style lends itself to simultaneous consideration of the *History* as a piece of rhetorical persuasion and an expression of the Society’s methodology through the literary form of a compendium. Thus the hybridized document of

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49 Ibid., 160-1.
50 Sprat, 111.
the *History* can be understood through Sprat’s own conception of the new science. He describes the relationship that should be held with the Ancients:

> There are two principal ways of preserving the names of those, that are pass’d: The one, by *Pictures*’ the other, by *Children*. The *Pictures* may be so made, that they may far nearer resemble the Original, then *Children* do their Parents: and yet all Mankind choose rather to keep themselves alive by *Children*, then by the other. It is best for the *Philosophers* of this Age to imitate the *Antients* as their *Children*: to have their blood deriv’d down to them; but to add a new Complexion, and Life of their own. \(^{51}\)

Through this description, Sprat reveals once again the intended conservative nature of the work he depicts the Society as doing. Rather than simply finding a copy that accurately achieves the “resemblance” of the original, Sprat depicts a preservation of the “blood deriv’d down to them,” averring that more truth can be found in the new method than in the old.

Ultimately, the wider audience to which Sprat’s book is addressed and the specific advocacy of the Royal Society that he attempts combine to form a reflection of the society that produced the text in the first place. Indeed, Sprat himself notes how important historical events are in the shaping of the book, indicating in his introductory address to the reader the disjunction that may be apparent from the fact that “much of this Discours was Written and Printed above two years before the rest.” \(^{52}\) So significant is the interruption to the creation of this book that Sprat even feels obliged to indicate within the text where the break occurs, and how the “*fatal Infection.* . . and the *dreadful firing* of the City itself” \(^{53}\) delayed the book’s publication. Sprat thus shows an acute consciousness of the effects that outside events such as the plague and the fires of London have upon his book and upon his country. The fact that the *History* is peppered with allusions to events of the outside world becomes more understandable in light of the volatile circumstances faced by England at the time. As Hunter

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 51.

\(^{52}\) Sprat, “An Advertisement to the Reader.”

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 120.
writes, “a broader background to the quest for permanent, public institutions of the kind that the Royal Society represents is a deep sense of instability that was widely shared in the aftermath of the Civil War, an event that crystallized an awareness of rapid and often disturbing change which characterizes mid-seventeenth century England as a whole.”\textsuperscript{54} In this light, it becomes possible to see how such a feeling of profound uncertainty permeates Sprat’s \textit{History} and informs the manner in which it is written.

Throughout the book, notes of anxiety about affairs of the state of England arise at various points, from the claim that the Society’s activities may lessen the “\textit{Tempests}” of society to the exhortation to Charles II that domestic natural Philosophy may prove to bring more “Glory” than the endeavors of Empire-building or nation-conquering.\textsuperscript{55} Concerns creep into the general language of the book as well, as when, in attempting to demonstrate the conservative nature of the Society, Sprat repeatedly appeals to the idea that such studies will “restore” truth to the field of natural philosophy. Such rhetoric brings to mind the other Restoration that occurred in the era, one that brought monarchy back into power after the Civil War. Indeed, even the choice of his analogy that the Society members intend to create “\textit{Children}” and a direct lineage to the past demonstrates a desire to establish a stable dynasty both for England’s monarchy as well as for its natural philosophy.

From this angle, it becomes clear that a great deal of the significance of Sprat’s \textit{History} is not necessarily in its ability to portray the inner ideology and mechanisms of the Royal Society in its early formation. By examining the general audience to which Sprat addresses his book alongside the particular rhetoric he uses to underscore the importance of the Society, it becomes clear that Sprat’s \textit{History} demonstrates with more poignancy the

\textsuperscript{54} Hunter, \textit{Establishing the New Science}, 8.
\textsuperscript{55} See footnotes 23 and 24.
mental state of England during an unsteady time. Despite its ostensible focus on the functions and importance of the early Royal Society, Sprat’s book often belies motivations that are more preoccupied with the general political and social circumstances of the times. Thus for all its professed intentions to introduce the novel institution of the Society with the aim of making it accepted by the English public, the conservative tones in the History reveal the book to be a more generalized product of Sprat’s contemporary milieu, a way to find stability in an era in which change was a loaded word.
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