

MAC FLECKNOE AS A SATIRE

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1. Introduction to *Mac Flecknoe*

The poem '*Mac Flecknoe*' is a formal/direct satire written by the renowned poet *John Dryden* (1631-1700). It is written in iambic pentameter and is in rhymed couplet which makes it a poem in heroic couplet. '*Mac Flecknoe*' is considered as one of the finest satires in the English language. The poem is considered as the first English Mock-heroic poem by many critics and also an immediate ancestor of *Alexander Pope's* '*The Dunciad*'. The subtitle of the poem is '*A Satire upon the True-blue Protestant Poet T.S.*', here T.S. stands for none other than Thomas Shadwell, another poet of great importance in the Restoration era of Neo-Classical period. The poem is both the *mock-epic* as well as *mock-heroic*. It targeted Thomas Shadwell in the most astounding manner. It is believed to be written around 1678 and was published in 1682 anonymously and apparently without Dryden's permission.

2. What is a Satire?

According to M.H Abrams "Satire can be described as the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation." (Abrams, pg.352).

A satire is different from the comedy in the sense that a comedy evokes merely laughter at its end, but a satire uses laughter as a weapon to ridicule or mock an individual, a class, an institution, a nation, or even the entire human race. The ultimate objective of a satire is to bring about a moral or political change in its victim. A satirist chooses the person with faults and use humor to make his faults obvious. For example, if a politician is applying heavy taxes on its citizens then he may be represented as a monkey stealing food items from a group of picnickers.

3. Background to the Conflict Depicted in *Mac Flecknoe*

John Dryden was born eleven years before the English Civil War (1642-1651) and Thomas Shadwell was born during the English Civil War. Dryden's parents supported the Parliamentarians, but Dryden's own sympathies were not known in his youth. However, later we got to see many royalist panegyrics in praise of restoration of the monarchy. This shows Dryden was a supporter of king and those people who were in support of the king were known as Tories.

On the other hand, Thomas Shadwell was in favour of Parliamentarians and was pro parliament and those who supported parliament were known as Whigs.

Dryden and Shadwell used to be good friends but because of different political interests, they became rivals. According to Britannica online Encyclopedia, Dryden's friendship with Shadwell ended with the political crisis of 1678-79, when Shadwell espoused the Whig cause, producing '*The Lancashire Witches*'. The period of 1678-1680 was a period of quarrel between Charles and James for Kingship. Earl of Shaftsbury was set guilty of the Popish Plot and was a supporter of Whigs. Shaftsbury had tried to bring James to trial and also had brought armed followers to the Parliament at Oxford. The Whig grand jury and the Parliament rejected the charges on Shaftsbury and he was released. When Shaftsbury was released his followers struck a medal in his honour. John Dryden then criticizes Shaftsbury by creating a work called '*The Medal*'. This provoked the supporters of Shaftsbury especially Shadwell and he responded it with another poem '*The Medal of John Bayes*'. The poem '*Mac Flecknoe*' is a response to Shadwell against '*The Medal of John Bayes*'. Dryden satirizes Shadwell brutally through his mock-heroic poem '*Mac Flecknoe*'.

4. Satire in *Mac Flecknoe* (1682)

John Dryden's poem '*Mac Flecknoe*' is a product of personal as well as literary rivalry. His poetry, unlike Romantics, was not merely to express, but also to criticize and ridicule his opponent. Here the victim

in *Mac Flecknoe* is Thomas Shadwell. Dryden would take a position, he would judge things, he would comment on them and he would have an angle from which to comment on. So it was a new kind of poetry and was a perfect example and essence of neo-Classical poems. Neo-Classical poetry was more like an art of wit and deliberate attempt to create, instead of “spontaneous overflow of emotions”, which emerged in the later period of Neo-classicism.

Dryden uses heroic couplet throughout the poem. He has treated Thomas Shadwell with humorous contempt in *Mac Flecknoe*. Dryden portrays Shadwell as a “dull”, “fat” and a “Plagiarist” poet. His tone in the poem is ironical and fills the reader with laughter instead of anger and agony however we cannot say the same for his victim Shadwell. Shadwell is brutally thrashed in from the very beginning of the poem. Dryden not only satirizes Shadwell but all who supports Shadwell in any form. Everyone associated with Shadwell was a matter of ridicule. People like Richard Flecknoe, Sir George Etherge, Sir Sedly and “Herringman” who was the publisher of both Shadwell and Dryden also became the victim of Dryden’s satire. According to Britannica online encyclopedia, ‘Dryden uses the persona of bad poet to criticize the decline of literary standards of his time. Thus *Mac Flecknoe* doesn’t remain a mere lampoon on a personal rival, however, becomes a pleasant work of art – a satire on a bigger social scale’. Dryden lampoons his political and literary antagonist, the playwright Thomas Shadwell, by depicting him as heir to the throne of literary dullness left him by the notoriously bad poet Richard Flecknoe.

*This Flecknoe found, who, like Augustus, young
Was call'd to empire, and had govern'd long:*

In prose and verse, was own'd, without dispute

Through all the realms of Non-sense, absolute. (Dryden, line 3-6)

Richard Flecknoe is satirized in the above lines and is said that he is a ruler of non-sense without dispute. Here, Dryden ironically mocks Flecknoe as a poet and ridicule him as a worthless writer.

Dryden says as Flecknoe is going to retire, he needs a prince to handover his throne. So Flecknoe is pondering which of his son to choose. There is only one condition to be fit to rule the “realms of non-sense” and that condition is the heir must be equally dull as the emperor Flecknoe. Flecknoe thinks that only Shadwell bear’s the perfect image of the kind and hence he should be made the ruler in his place.

*Shadwell alone my perfect image bears,
Mature in dullness from his tender years.*

Shadwell alone, of all my sons, is he

Who stands confirm'd in full stupidity. (Dryden, line 15-18)

According to Dryden Shadwell is the only candidate suitable to sit on the throne of stupidity as he is “mature in dullness”. People get matured as they grow, but here Shadwell is getting dull as he grows. Dryden further criticizes Shadwell and says “*But Shadwell Never deviates into sense:*” (Dryden, line 20).

Dryden uses scatology in many lines of the poem in order to criticize Shadwell. Lines like,

“About thy boat the little fishes throng,

As at the morning toast, that floats along” (Dryden, 49-50)

Describes the dirt and waste which Shadwell sees when he goes out on his boat in the morning.

“From its old ruins brothel-house rise,

Scenes of lewd loves, and of polluted joys” (Dryden, 70-71)

The above line shows lewdness as Shadwell’s realms of nonsense is characterized by prostitution as well as bad poetry. Shadwell is taking the throne of a brothel district by becoming the emperor of realms of nonsense. Dryden clearly uses here the scatological humour in order to ridicule Shadwell. Another line where Dryden uses scatology is:

“From dusty shops neglected authors come,

Martyrs of the pies, and reliques of the bum” (Dryden, 100-101)

This line state that Shadwell's friends and supporters like John Heywood, James Shirley, and John Ogleby come from the dusty shops (brothels) and their works were no more valuable than toilet paper (*reliques of the bum*). Dryden uses toilet humour here and it also contrast the elevated tone of the poem with such lowbrow humor. Dryden even in line 181 writes "*kiss my arse*", which is an excellent example of scatology.

Dryden also criticized Shadwell's way of writing apart from personal attacks by writing line like "*And torture one poor word ten thousand ways*" (Dryden, 208).

Dryden's personal attacks are mildly portrayed but the impact is quite harsh.

Dryden wrote: "*So Shadwell swore, nor should his vow be in vain,
That he till death true dullness would maintain;*

*And in his father's right, and realm's defence,
Ne'er to have peace with wit, nor truce with sense*" (Dryden, 114-117)

5. Conclusion

Mac Flecknoe is a satire by Dryden which reflects upon his wit and his talent to create such an art. *Mac Flecknoe* is a Satire on Shadwell, a contemporary of Dryden. It is one of the first mock-heroic poem written in heroic couplet. This style, heroic couplet, had its own position in English literary history. The poet in the whole poem attacks the weakness of his opponent, either Flecknoe or Shadwell, in a mock and humorous manner. Dryden love to apply the intellectual approach in all his works whether it is poetry, drama or an essay on criticism. This made Dryden a bold satirist and *Mac Flecknoe* is one of his satirist masterpieces. This poem is considered as one of the magnum opus of Dryden.

Works Cited

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