

Seventeenth & Eighteenth-Century Poetry
Third Year /First Course/ Morning Classes 2020-2021
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John Dryden's poem "Mac Flecknoe": Analysis

Mac Flecknoe Literary Elements

Speaker or Narrator, and Point of View

The poem is told in the third person point of view of an unnamed narrator who is certainly Dryden. In some lines the poet switches to first person, as he quotes directly from characters, such as Flecknoe.

Form and Meter: Heroic couplets

Protagonist and Antagonist in the poem

The protagonists are "The King of Nonsense" (i.e., Richard Flecknoe) and "S.T--" (i.e., Thomas Shadwell). Thomas Shadwell is the target of Dryden's satire. The tensions with Dryden began with the political crisis of 1678-79. Shadwell affiliated himself with the Whigs and wrote a play, which attacked the Anglican clergy. Dryden responded with "Absalom and Achitophel" and "Mac Flecknoe". Shadwell succeeded Dryden as poet laureate and continued to emulate Ben Jonson and his comedy of humors.

Major Conflict: Richard Flecknoe, The King of Nonsense, is looking for an heir to replace him; he settles upon the dullest of all of his sons, Thomas Shadwell. The satire reveals the conflict between witty good poets and dull poets.

Tone : Satirical and ironic

Genre of the Poem: satire; mock-heroic

John Dryden's poem "Mac Flecknoe"
A Satire upon the True-blue Protestant Poet T.S.

**All human things are subject to decay,
And, when Fate summons, monarchs must obey:
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.**

Analysis of Lines (1- 6):

In these first lines, Dryden establishes his satiric voice. He is using grand language and tone to describe the king of the realm of Nonsense.

The first line of the poem creates the illusion of its being an epic poem about a historical hero. Dryden begins with a mock-heroic statement about the death of all things, including kings, in the grand style of epic poems. Then the poet introduces Flecknoe, a monarch who instead of ruling an empire, rules over the realm of Nonsense. Like the Roman ruler Augustus, Flecknoe was called to rule when he was young.

Comparisons to Rome, the evocation of such universal themes such as death and fate, and the use of heroic couplets serve to discomfit and amuse the reader, Dryden , through this mock-heroic style, suggests just how lacking in merit his subject is.

Figures of Speech :

In line two, there is figure of speech which is personification. Fate is personified as a general or god-like figure who "summons" all things to death, especially kings, and they have to obey this command. Thus, Fate wants Flecknoe to choose a heir to the throne of dullness before he dies.

In line three, the poet uses simile to compare Flecknoe to a great king of ancient Roman empire, king Augustus. The mock-heroic satire is pointed out by comparing small men to great men, as Dryden sets Flecknoe's name beside that of Augustus, and he defines Flecknoe's kingdom as one of 'Verse and Prose'. Here the poet uses the language of epic poetry and cleverly transforms it into the world of mock-heroic.

Another figure of speech that Dryden uses is irony. The poem is utterly filled with irony; its tone and imagery are ironic. Firstly, it is ironic that the realm of Nonsense is compared to the great Roman empire. Secondly, it is ironic that Flecknoe is so proud of someone who is dull and has no sense.

**This aged prince now flourishing in peace,
And blest with issue of a large increase,
Worn out with business, did at length debate
To settle the succession of the State:
And pond'ring which of all his sons was fit
To reign, and wage immortal war with wit;
Cry'd, 'tis resolv'd; for nature pleads that he
Should only rule, who most resembles me:
Shadwell alone my perfect image bears,
Mature in dullness from his tender years.**

Analysis of Lines (7- 16):

Dryden says in these lines that Flecknoe has ruled the kingdom of Nonsense prosperously and peacefully for a long time. However, the king is old and thus must choose a successor to his throne. Dryden wonders whether the king will choose a poet who has talent and wit or if he will choose someone like him, a man with no literary talent.

Flecknoe ponders which of his sons should succeed him in his war with wit. It will be the one who resembles him most: Shadwell, who even while young in years is mature in dullness. He is confirmed in full stupidity.

Figures of Speech :

In the last two lines, Dryden uses irony as figure of speech. Flecknoe expresses one meaning by using a language that signifies the opposite meaning, typically for humorous or emphatic effect.

Thus, Flecknoe uses a flattering tone to introduce his son as a man who wages war with wit and has been dull practically since he was born. This is very ironic. Flecknoe praises his successor or son, Shadwell, as a person who very much resembles him in dullness. By this statement, ironically, Flecknoe is actually dispraising or criticizing Shadwell for lack of wit and dullness.

The father-son relationship of Flecknoe and Shadwell is itself a good example of irony. Throughout the poem, Dryden carefully develops the ironic and humorous parallel between Shadwell and Flecknoe; as the son of a dull poet.

Shadwell alone, of all my sons, is he
Who stands confirm'd in full stupidity.
The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,
But Shadwell never deviates into sense.
Some beams of wit on other souls may fall,
Strike through and make a lucid interval;
But Shadwell's genuine night admits no ray,
His rising fogs prevail upon the day:
Besides his goodly fabric fills the eye,
And seems design'd for thoughtless majesty:
Thoughtless as monarch oaks, that shade the plain,
And, spread in solemn state, supinely reign.
Haywood and Shirley were but types of thee,

Analysis of Lines (17- 29):

Dryden says in these lines that Flecknoe chooses Shadwell as his heir to the throne of dullness because he is “confirm’d in full stupidity” (line 18), and while some of his brothers occasionally grasp meaning, he never has any sense at all. Therefore, Shadwell will rule over those who have no literary talent.

Figures of Speech :

In lines 21-23 Dryden uses metaphor as a figure of speech to illustrate Shadwell's stupidity. Wit is compared to rays of light that brighten someone's mind. Thus, other poets may be illuminated by beams of wit sometimes, but Shadwell’s “genuine night admits no ray” (line 23). His mind is like a dark night which does not allow any light of wit to pass through or illuminate it. No beam of intelligence or wit can reach him in his "genuine night." In other words, he is a complete stupid. This image emphasizes Dryden's satire about Shadwell's stupidity and dull mind.

Here, the irony present in Dryden's mock-heroic style becomes clear. Dryden drops insult after insult, berating the intelligence and substance of his victim—but in the lofty language and style that might be used to exalt the many virtues of a Homeric hero.

In the next line (line 24) "His rising fogs prevail upon the day", Dryden uses metaphor as a figure of speech to satirize Shadwell's stupidity. The poet compares Shadwell's mind to a foggy day that prevents any light and causes it to be blurred as if by fog; not clear and vague. Dryden uses a metaphor of night and fog to show how Shadwell is all darkness, admitting no light or sense.

In lines 25-27 Dryden uses metaphor as a figure of speech to satirize Shadwell's senselessness as he is compared to a king dressed in elaborate majestic clothing specially designed for the throne of stupidity or thoughtlessness.

In lines 27-29 Dryden uses simile as a figure of speech to compare the royal clothing of Shadwell to the thoughtless monarch oaks that solemnly rule over the plain. Firstly, he means by this simile that Shadwell is thoughtless just like a tree that is rooted to the same spot. The oak tree likes to "reign," but does so lazily. He's thoughtless as an oak, Dryden says that Shadwell does not probably have more intellect than a tree.

In the last line Dryden uses irony again to stress Shadwell's lack of talent. He refers to two earlier English poets and playwrights: John Heywood and James Shirley, who had no talent or merits during their day. Shadwell as a king of the throne of stupidity is no better than Heywood and Shirley. This comparison to untalented writers emphasizes Dryden's satire of Shadwell's dullness.

Sound Devices in the Poem:

Alliteration:

- 1."And, spread in solemn state, supinely reign" (line 28).
2. "...did at length debate / To settle the succession of the State" (lines 9-10).
