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John Dryden's Literary Commentary in *Mac Flecknoe*

Abstract:

This essay deals examines literary commentary in John Dryden's late seventeenth century mock-epic satire, *Mac Flecknoe*. I seek to establish the interpretation that Dryden's concerns regarding aesthetic values and literature's position in society convey themselves through prophecy and carnival. Dryden's role as a poetic prophet to his literary society is emphasized through his use of satirical form. Shadwell acts as "Lord of Misrule," leading carnivalistic crowds to disclaim the value of accepted aesthetics and "true wit." He confirms the presence of a public audience through *Mac Flecknoe*'s stage-like setting in the city. Like a prophet, his message is for the masses, and the carnival atmosphere serves to illustrate the presence of everyday readers. Poetic form, in addition to these mentioned themes, reflects a significant meaning in Dryden's work. Its disparity and humor display "true wit," the aim of any seventeenth century author.

"All human things are subject to decay." Thus begins John Dryden's poem, *Mac Flecknoe*. While few would argue this statement, it seems that the 300-year-old *Mac Flecknoe* has managed to resist the pull of natural decay. Although written largely in reference to late seventeenth century London, much of Dryden's political satire still holds interest for modern readers. After all, "true wit" has the ability to transcend time. Dryden employs a number of literary techniques to show off his wit, drawing on classical epic models, seventeenth century satirical forms, and fellow contemporary authors. Although on the surface level, this poem appears to only critique Thomas Shadwell's forced literary techniques, Dryden also succeeds in presenting more subtle criticisms of literature within the British hierarchical system. Allusions are prevalent throughout his entire work, and much of his symbolism relates to figures and issues of the literary world.

As a result, John Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* not only critiques the signs of bad literature, as illustrated in his contempt for Shadwell, but also examines literature's place in eighteenth century society through terms of prophecy and carnival.

In order to understand the content of Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe*, one must first examine its outward aesthetic. Form consumed all literary endeavors during the late 1600's and served as an important vehicle for the text itself. *Mac Flecknoe* represents the popularity of satire during Dryden's day. Clarence Hugh Holman and William Harmon define satire as "a literary manner that blends a critical attitude with humor and wit for the purpose of improving human institutions or humanity" (447). This literary convention, known for its use of clever and unusual conceit, seeks to both inform and educate readers about social decorum and moral values.

More specifically, Dryden's satirical poem takes on the added form of a mock epic. He uses classic epic conventions to highlight the subject of his work. This grandiose treatment of everyday themes makes those subjects border on the ridiculous. In fact, the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* even compares the mock epic to "breaking a butterfly upon a wheel" (514). Although such stylized drama may seem silly to a twenty-first century audience, poets such as Dryden, used the form to their advantage. A. L. Korn, author of "*Mac Flecknoe* and Cowley's *Davideis*," confirms that "the special case of satire and the poetry of ridicule" could attain "comic incongruity" (172), an unusual perspective which succeeded in giving authors the leverage they needed to convey specific criticisms regarding society.

However, this wit was not always easy to come by. Many writers, like Shadwell, found themselves criticized for their "false wit," exhibited by appearance without solid

content. Joseph Addison, an early eighteenth century critic, explains that Dryden's own definition of wit is "propriety of words and thoughts adapted to the subject" (*Norton Anthology* 2497). Although this definition is wide enough to encompass a variety of literature, one can assume through his criticism of Shadwell that unspecified rules for propriety existed in Dryden's consciousness. As such, the challenge of exhibiting "true wit" would not have been taken lightly.

Political circumstances of the late seventeenth century gave Dryden plenty of material for writing satirical verse. According to the *Penguin Dictionary*, this time period between the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century is widely identified as the "golden age of satire" (783). As many other poets of his time, Dryden's writings reflect the societal differences shaped during and after the Glorious Revolution. Thomas H. Fujimura, twentieth century Dryden critic, examines the historical context for Dryden's work in his article, "The Personal Element in Dryden's Poetry." Political and religious controversy saturated late seventeenth century England, and Dryden could not be immune from the turmoil surrounding him. Dryden's career began as a successful poet laureate and historiographer royal, appointed by Charles II during the early 1680's. After Charles II's death, Dryden staunchly supported James II and pledged his loyalty to the Catholic Church. However, trouble soon began to plague him, because he refused to convert to Protestantism after William and Mary's ascension to the throne in 1689. Consequently, Dryden was stripped of his titles and became "repudiated as a writer, ridiculed by younger men, and reduced to a condition of financial distress" (Fujimura 1008). Shortly afterward, Shadwell took over Dryden's former positions. Dryden turned to writing about political and societal ill, establishing himself as part of a fierce battle

between Tories (supporters of monarchy) and Whigs, including Shadwell, who promoted a more parliamentary government.

Interestingly, Dryden draws on Biblical imagery to present his views regarding literature. He portrays Flecknoe as a prophet, “sent to prepare [Shadwell’s] way” (l. 32). This close resemblance to John the Baptist suggests that Flecknoe is actually proclaiming Shadwell to be a Messiah for the literary world. Dryden refers to Shadwell in Christ-like terms as the “last great prophet” (l. 30), and Flecknoe acknowledges that he wishes to “teach the nations in [Shadwell’s] greater name” (l. 34), just as John the Baptist taught for Christ. Readers also see evidence of former prophets, such as Dekker, who long ago prophesied of Shadwell’s coming, thus establishing his long-anticipated reign over a new kingdom of literature.

In addition to Flecknoe as a John the Baptist figure, Margery A. Kingsley, professor of English at Cameron University and author of ““High on a Throne of his own Labours rear’d’: *Mac Flecknoe*, Jeremiad and Cultural Myth,” examines the possibility that he also represents another type of prophet. She believes that Flecknoe is not only John the Baptist, but also “Jeremiah denouncing the false priest, speaking an inspired truth which he need not comprehend” (331). This interpretation is entirely plausible, if we recognize Shadwell’s flaws as a seventeenth century literary leader. As an author, Shadwell clearly fails live up to Dryden’s expectations for a “true wit,” and even “wage[s] immortal war with wit” (l. 12). In light of this evidence, Flecknoe’s support of a “True-Blue-Protestant Poet” could very well be warning of the dangerous direction poetry was beginning to follow. Flecknoe praises Shadwell at the exact time he should

be mourning Shadwell's destruction of aesthetic laws, an action which pronounces doom on the future of high-quality literature (Kingsley 332).

Kingsley claims that this prophetic theme betrays Dryden's concern for the relationship between literature and social establishments (329). Dryden, as speaker of this poem, employs his satire as a way of preaching truth to a literary world often composed of unsuspecting readers. He uses Shadwell and Flecknoe to personify bad literature ("false wit") and offers his own verse as a piece of quality literature ("true wit"). Dryden indirectly compares himself to Shadwell, asserting his own authority and literary prowess above a poet "confirmed in full stupidity" (l. 18). Dryden sets himself up as a deliverer to the common readers of London, promoting his literature as a true example of literary superiority. Philip Harth, author of *Contexts of Dryden's Thought*, claims that it was not uncommon for a seventeenth century author to present himself as a type of "Law-giver" (42), elevating his own aesthetic style as the standard to reach. In a sense, Dryden says, "I am the truth. Come follow and obey me."

However, Dryden's role as prophet and savior is sometimes called into question by contradictions within his metaphorical content. For instance, even though he condemns Shadwell for statements such as "kiss my arse" (l. 181), Dryden does not hesitate to construct metaphors regarding "the morning toast that floats along" (l. 50) and Flecknoe's "subterranean wind" (l. 215). Such an unpleasant physical humor seems to place Dryden in the same literary arena as Shadwell. Late twentieth century critics, including Robert D. Hume, Cornell University English professor, recognize this discrepancy and use it to construct explanations for Dryden's poetic conventions. Hume claims that "Dryden's own assessments do not differ greatly from Flecknoe's" (84) and

possibly conveys Dryden's inability to hold himself to the high standards he sets for others. However, Laura Brown, former *PMLA* Advisory Committee member, claims that Dryden's form works a useful purpose in exemplifying his satire. She believes Dryden reasonably "strives to join disparate and usually contradictory sentiments, qualities, or effects" (398). This disparity in style exists to resemble the disparity found between Shadwell and the model of a true ruler (Brown 401). Harth supports this theory, stating that Dryden possessed perfect ability to "make up his mind" but simply chose not to (1). Considering the Restoration importance of aesthetics, Dryden may have even intended this disparity to communicate to readers the full meaning of his text.

Even more significantly, Dryden writes about people who are not necessarily part of the upper class, setting the action for his poem in the city, rather than close to court. Brown claims these "local manifestations only give substance to a structure that, in its characteristic disjunctivity, expresses the contradiction...of contemporary reality" (404). In light of this understanding, it is important to realize the effects that Dryden's local focus may have on one's interpretation of Shadwell's mock coronation. Kirk Combe, author of "Shadwell as Lord of Misrule: Dryden, Varronian Satire, and Carnival," claims that *Mac Flecknoe* can be read in terms of carnival, thus emphasizing Dryden's mock-epic form and further establishing a public setting for the poem. Combe identifies carnival themes through four main clues: a mix of social classes, the acceptability of normally offensive actions, a uniting of unlike things, and an irreverent attitude towards sacred tradition (4-5). In effect, carnival is an "inversion of everyday life" and at its head stands a "Lord of Misrule," who oversees all revelries (Combe 4).

Shadwell plays the part of the “Lord of Misrule.” As the text indicates, he is presented with undignified objects such as “a mighty mug of potent ale” (l. 121) in his left hand and Flecknoe’s drama, *Love’s Kingdom* (l. 122), in his right. These items take the place a customary globe and scepter. Even his crown consists of poppies, flowers which may represent an opium addiction. This mocking costume closely aligns itself with the common portrait of the carnival ruler decorated in symbolically royal materials (Combe 5). Shadwell likewise supervises the activities of his coronation ceremony and acts as a leader to all followers tricked by his “false wit.”

Dryden’s carnival aspects display themselves further, as we note the location of Shadwell’s ceremony. As Combe points out, Dryden carefully places his characters near the Inns of Court, a place which held Christmas Commons, an annual ceremonial display of misrule (6). This ceremony commonly presented crowning ceremonies similar to the one illustrated in *Mac Flecknoe*. Dryden places Shadwell in a similar position to the Christmas Prince, a character that commonly paraded through London in a public pageant (Combe 9). Shadwell participates in a comparable procession as he and Flecknoe float down the Thames in a display complete with music from “warbling lute” (l.35) and “[e]choes from Pissing Alley” (l. 47). This “prince of thy harmonious band” (l. 51) leads his followers forward. Combe even suggests that the papers he holds could represent more than scripts for his dramas and might even suggest “mock-decrees” of his carnival kingdom (10). With such imagery, Dryden firmly establishes Shadwell as a leader to the public masses. In fact, Shadwell is caught in the cycle of misrule. As we see near the end of the poem, Shadwell’s ascent is only due to the death of another carnival ruler (Flecknoe). Hence, bad literature appoints more bad literature.

Ultimately, Dryden uses these conventions to comment on the values of the seventeenth century. As Brown observes, his form does not defer condemnation, but rather “asserts a conviction” (405). Therefore, Dryden recognizes the role of literary technique in commenting on the world around him. Some critics, including Patrick J. Daly, assistant professor of English at Indiana University – Southeast, insist that Dryden uses “the poem’s fundamental matrix” to subtly hint at political issues (670). Others, such as Harth, maintain that he used form to comment on religious issues. We must understand, as already stated, that satire allows an author to educate the public on issues of behavior. Consequently, it is not surprising that political and social themes can be located within his text. In fact, the mock-epic only serves to bring such issues to the forefront, as Dryden primarily focuses on literary values and structures. However, even Dryden seems to sometimes contradict standards of his time.

Despite the seeming uniformity of Dryden’s structure, he occasionally deviates from prescribed form to show personal creativity. He utilizes heroic couplets throughout much of *Mac Flecknoe*, yet every so often advances an idea with three corresponding end rhymes. Lines such as “Full on the filial dullness: long he stood, / Repelling from his breast the raging god; / At length burst out in this prophetic mood” (l. 136-138) emphasize important moments within the story. For example, this phrase signals the end of Shadwell’s procession and introduces the beginning of Flecknoe’s final speech at Shadwell’s coronation. Dryden also censures Shadwell’s complete reliance on form and instructs him “[n]ew humors to invent for each new play” (l. 88). Rather than using the same conventions time after time, authors must display a subtle show of originality. Recent Dryden analysis found on a Goucher College English department webpage

(http://faculty.goucher.edu/eng211/john_dryden_macflecknoe_.htm) even goes so far as to suggest that “the slightest deviation from the stultifying norm is a clear sign that somebody’s got poetic talent” (1/3). As evidenced, “true wit” clearly requires thinking outside the box.

Dryden also uses *Mac Flecknoe* to present his opinion regarding literature’s place in his surrounding society. An article about Dryden as a critic in the online *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* mentions his worry surrounding not only objective truth in art, but also reader appreciation for that form (1/5). As Kingsley points out, Dryden saw literary publication as a system that only led to literature that is distanced from its writer (333). Dryden uses phrases such as “scattered limbs” (l. 99) to describe the effects of authors who sought only publication. As expected, these authors follow Shadwell, a prolific writer with works that “in number...excel” (l. 55). Kingsley maintains that such a fate is “salvageable only, the poem implies, by the strict enforcement of critical laws rather than market values” (333).

Although Dryden may not have supported authors who were solely motivated by publication, he was by no means shy about literature for the public. Because *Mac Flecknoe* deals with public themes, such as carnival and prophecy, one may deduce that he intended literature to relate to community issues. Barbara M. Benedict, Trinity College professor of English literature, declares: “Dryden exemplifies the fusion of high and low culture” (659). Dryden’s classic epic form relates to local events, demonstrating his response to Britain’s changing literary culture. Like a prophet, Dryden presents literary truths for all people and warns of impending doom, if Shadwell continues to “rule” and promote poor-quality literature.

Dryden also paints the scene for *Mac Flecknoe* as one would a drama. His construction of setting reveals a metaphoric stage for Shadwell and Flecknoe's coronation production. Precise description lays out even miniscule details regarding location and atmosphere. Sites such as "Pissing Alley" (l. 47) and "Aston Hall" (l. 48) characterize the common public whose presence surrounds literature. By presenting *Mac Flecknoe* in terms of carnival, Dryden also acknowledges active public participation in literature. Unfortunately, the uneducated follow a "Lord of Misrule," as quickly as a witty poet like Dryden. Consequently, Dryden uses Shadwell's situation to show his concern for readers' responses. Perhaps satire is the most effective way of reaching those who cannot fully comprehend the separation of good literature from poor literature.

As one can see, *Mac Flecknoe* asserts Dryden's important literary truths in regard to seventeenth century British literature. He focuses on the value of aesthetics and theme, as well as literature's place in society. Although this poem directly attacks Shadwell, it also criticizes all authors of bad literature and those who follow in their footsteps. Just as "[a]ll human things are subject to decay" (l. 1), the value of good poetry can also decay. Dryden illustrates his concern for this issue through textual allusions, metaphors, and terms of prophecy and carnival. By setting himself up as a prophet, Dryden foretells the doom awaiting the quality of literature if authors like Shadwell are permitted to continue influencing the masses. Shadwell as "Lord of Misrule" paints a picture of unacceptable decorum in the world of literature, allowing Dryden's satire to educate readers regarding this decline. Although discrepancies exist within his own use of form, the online *John Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory* emphasizes that Dryden's poetry and criticism of literature was "descriptive rather than definitive" (3/5). His use of form allows him to

offer commentary in a playful way that is both in accordance with accepted structure and original in subtle ways. Dryden sees his role of a poet as “a leader of men, the inspirer of all to high goals, the cherisher and creator of cultural and moral values” (Fujimura 1021). In the end, “true wit” grants Dryden influence in the literary world, allowing him to critique both literature and its place in his society. As a result, *Mac Flecknoe* has not yet proved Dryden’s prediction of its “subject[ion] to decay.”

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