

Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel: An Analysis

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Abstract

Absalom and Achitophel is an epyllion, a 'little epic' containing satire and humorous element. An Occasional piece, Dryden raised the political satire from activist vehemence of a party pamphlet to epic grandeur. Dressing his satirical account, of the English political scene of the Restoration dispensation of King Charles II, in Biblical-allegorical mode, he makes a remarkable portrait gallery of the historical personages involved. A skillful use of Heroic line and couplet, an imaginative richness of metaphor and language mark his stylistic achievement. A blend of classical European literary traditions with the Old Testament-ecclesiastical manner, the inflexion of the colloquial too, enabled the Poet Laureate to speak home to his audience of Court, city and community. The epigrammatic wit, clarity, the Neo-classical poise and precision, resonates with modern poetry and popular contemporary Stand-up comedy.

Keywords: Satire, Heroic poem, Epyllion, Party pamphlet, Stand-up comedy

1. Introduction

Absalom And Achitophel (1681) is a satire based on a Biblical allegory and presents a series of remarkable pen-portraits of the political personalities of the day. The poem arises out of the contemporary political situation and Dryden wrote it to vindicate the cause of King Charles II, against the Whig rebels led by the Earl of Shaftesbury. Charles having no legitimate child appointed his brother James as the legal heir, which measure was vigorously opposed by the Whigs because James was a Catholic. Shaftesbury cleverly incited the King's illegitimate son, Duke of Monmouth to rebel against his father. As a Tory and Poet-laureate (1668), Dryden was called upon to espouse the King's cause. He uses the story of Absalom who revolted against his father King David on the advice of the cunning manipulator or scheming politician, Achitophel. The story was eminently suited to the political situation of England under the rule of King Charles II. The principal characters of the satire --- Charles II, Shaftesbury and Monmouth---were King David, Achitophel and Absalom respectively.

T.S. Eliot analyses how **"Dryden is distinguished primarily by his poetic ability"**; the value of Absalom and Achitophel **goes much above a political party pamphlet** as the poet's skillful expressiveness turns it into **"a literary triumph"** write Legouis and Cazamian (p. 636). A.W. Verall states: "the work is really unique; there is no parallel...It is best to call it **an 'epyllion'**, or epic in miniature, comprising satiric elements" (p. 59).

Though many writers of the day had used this comparison, Dryden incorporated many other Biblical characters which together with his remarkable style imparts an epic scale to the poem. Dryden's poem was an imaginative elaboration of such comparisons on a large scale. He brings in Michal for Charles II's wife, Zimri for the Duke of Buckingham, Corah for Titus Oates, Shimei for Slingsby Bethel, Nadab for Lord Howard, Balaam for the Earl of Huntingdon among others. He **brought English and Hebrew history together with ingenuity and wit** and devised a pattern enriching his allegory with a wealth of

secondary allusions to the Bible. Dryden said that the **Heroic style** was one in which “the Plot, the Characters, the Wit, the Passions, the Descriptions are all exalted above the level of common converse as high as the imagination of the Poet can carry them” (Discourses on Satire and on Epic Poetry, Project Gutenberg). Reuben Brower states “Dryden invented a style that gave an impression of **ancient epic grandeur**” (Schilling, p. 45). The Biblical **allegorical framework** elevates the poem and admits of a heroic style. The epic and allegorical mode distances the action and offers inoffensive satire and objectivity; the **biblical allusions lend authenticity, authority and grandeur**; the **political imbroglio** is transferred to a neutral set of circumstances--- such devices blend seamlessly to create a work of art full of the relish of the Mock Epic.

2. Discussion

Absalom and Achitophel can be analyzed as a **Poem**, as a remarkable **Portrait Gallery**, as **Satire**, as a **Heroic Poem** with the resonance of the **Epic**, as a **Party Pamphlet**, with the genius of the poet fusing and transmuting these diverse elements into a **work of art**.

Textual Analysis: Dryden called Absalom and Achitophel “**A POEM**”, addressed ‘To The Reader’. It has an Epigraph in Latin from Ars Poetica by the Classical satirist, Horace, meaning “Stand closer, it will charm you more”. Horace forms the famous analogy of poetry and painting: there are some paintings that strike the beholder more, when standing near it; while some others are better viewed at some distance. Dryden’s poem has the warp and weft of Biblical allegory, political satire and epic qualities.

The beginning of the poem is a masterly stroke of genius, blending tact, wit, ironical humour and epic elevation: “In pious times, e’r Priest-craft did begin/ Before Polygamy was made a sin...”. By setting the action in remote times, Charles II’s sexual promiscuity “Polygamy” is distanced and made less morally culpable. In urbane tones he tells us that the King had many illegitimate children: “scatter’d his Maker’s Image through the Land”. In a suavely sonorous tone, he writes of the barrenness of the Queen: “Michal, of Royal blood, the Crown did wear, / A Soyl ungratefull to the Tiller’s care”. Although “several Mothers” bore the King “several Sons”, yet they were “slaves” so “no true succession” could be theirs; but among these numerous progeny was Absalom “So Beautifull, so brave” that the “indulgent David” encouraged him in his various desires. This smoothly paves in the way for Absalom or Duke of Monmouth as a possible successor to King Charles II.

Portrait Gallery: A. Compton-Rickett writes that Absalom and Achitophel is a “**masterpiece of brilliant characterization**”.

Charles II is a dignified majestic personality and is “the Faith’s defender and mankind’s delight”, “good, gracious, just, observant of the laws” and “enclin’d to Mercy”. The epic mode makes a panegyric permissible and enables Dryden, admirably, to pay his respects to and also flatter his King. It also allows him propaganda of the Divine Right theory of kingship, the notion of the “Lord’s anointed” when God himself appears at the end and blesses “righteous David”: “The Almighty nodding gave consent / And peals of Thunder shook the Firmament”. This is a typical supernatural element of the Epic closure and abundantly clinches the issue in the King’s favour.

Absalom is conceived in heroic terms: “Paradise was open’d in his face”. He is the “Saviour” and “Messiah”, “Second Moses” of the “Israelites” and is “young Samson” and “warlike” having won fame on the battlefield in early youth itself. Absalom “like the Sun, the promis’d land surveys/ Fame runs before him as the morning star”. His followers treat him as “a guardian God/ And consecrates the place

of his abode". This charming brave good-hearted youth by Achitophel "unwarily was led from vertues ways;/ Made drunk with Honour and debauch'd with praise". His rebellion is passed over lightly as "warm excesses" natural to the boisterous hot-blooded vitality of youth. Dryden is mildly satiric with Absalom, politic enough to keep in mind a possible future reconciliation between King Charles and the Duke of Monmouth, his favourite son. Working for the King's Party, Dryden deliberately exalts Absalom and subtly paves the way for a reconciliation. The epic mode besides elevating the satire, serves practical considerations too.

Shaftesbury, like **the Biblical Achitophel**, was an evil genius and is "Hell's dire Agent". He like Milton's Satan is an unscrupulous intriguer and villain; he possesses an eloquence which tempts Absalom to sin. His subtle psychological persuasion and flattery to Absalom is reminiscent of Satan tempting Eve. The Biblical allusion heightens Shaftesbury's diabolicalness. Dryden builds up his evil grandeur and then deftly deflates: "Great wits are sure to Madness near ally'd; / And thin Partitions do their bounds divide." Some of the best lines are mordantly satiric: "A fiery Soul, which working out its way, / Fretted the Pigmy Body to decay/ And o'r inform'd the Tenement of Clay".

Other characters having Biblical analogy are Dryden's own ingenuity.

Zimri: The characterization of Zimri, in Dryden's own words, is "worth the whole poem: 'Tis not bloody, but it 'tis ridiculous enough" (Discourses). Zimri is the Duke of Buckingham and a Quixotic ridiculous character: "a man so various....all Mankind's epitome", a "Blest madman"; a "chemist, fiddler, states-man and buffoon" by turns. Dryden makes Zimri "die sweetly" without using "opprobrious terms" and this portrait is **a masterpiece of raillery, wit and humour.**

Shimei: The portrait of Shimei, Slingsby Beethel, is rich in **antithesis and sardonic humour.** Shimei possesses "zeal to God" but "Hatred to his King" who is the Lord's anointed. In a derisive tone, Dryden states he "never broke the Sabbath, but for gain" and would never "curse unless against the Government". By a witty twist of the Biblical "Love thy neighbour as thyself", the poet asserts that Shimei "lov'd his Wicked neighbour as himself". In a master-stroke of ingenuity, he tells us that Shimei, in extreme miserliness, gave "spiritual food" to his servants but would not light a kitchen fire, alluding anecdotally to the Great Fire of London says: "For towns once burnt, such Magistrates require".

Corah: The portrait of Corah abundantly exhibits Dryden's **technique of deflation.** At first, he inflates the status of Corah calling him a "prophet" having "saintlike Grace" and "a Moses' face" so that it seems his evidence of the existence of the Popish Plot must be true. A string of adjectives---"prodigious", "arch-attestor", "Levite"---is akin to a **Homeric catalogue** except for the underlying **irony** of **Parody**. The poet instantly deflates by stating: "His zeal to Heaven, made him his Prince despise, / And load his person with indignities". Thus, Dryden neatly severs Corah's head off his body. Working within a fairly narrow range of allusion, the poet maintains a declamatory tone that is both Biblical-ecclesiastical and Roman heroic. This blend is most subtle in lines of the greatest imaginative variety: "Erect thyself, thou monumental brass, / High as the serpent of thy metal made, / While nations stand secure beneath thy shade". "Monumental" has high Latinate-Virgilian suggestions; and Moses had made a brass serpent to protect the Israelites of snake bites, but Corah is "base" born and the "brass" suggests he is a vulgar and cheap cheat. Corah is mercilessly exposed as having no redeeming quality, There is devastating Irony in Corah having a sunken eyes, a loud harsh tone of voice yet was neither arrogant nor ill-tempered : "sure signs he neither choleric was nor proud"; the ruddy complexion is like that of "Moses' Face"; his noble deed as "arch-attestor for the public good" is like the "martyrdom" of St. Stephen but the use of Religion is for entirely devious purposes---only "Israel's foes" could "suspect his

heav'nly call" and "judge his writ apocryphal" or dubious and fictitious.

With reference to the art of characterization, T.S. Eliot states: "when Pope alters, he diminishes; he is a master of miniature.... But the effect of the portraits of Dryden is to transform the object into something greater" (Schilling p.12). The Epic and Allegorical mode has a distancing effect and endows his satire with the quality of objectivity and impersonality and makes his characters universal types. Moreover, this tone of objectivity is in keeping with Dryden's ideal of impersonal satire: "anything though never so little which a man speaks of himself, in my opinion is still too much". He detests lampoons calling them "a dangerous sort of weapon, and for the most part unlawful" (Discourses). Dryden defines the best Satire as that which "tickles even while it hurts", that "sharp well-mannered way of laughing a folly out of countenance"; and that "the true end of satire is the amendment of vices by correction" (Prologue to *Ab & Ac*). While condemning Shaftesbury as a dangerous politician, he also praises him as a Judge possessing a fine sense of justice. Imparting a sense of complete impartiality, objectivity and sophistication the Poet Laureate, Dryden, exemplifies rhetorical excellence. If the darkest of rebels have some positive qualities, the King's supporters are presented as embodiments of virtue possessing "Ancient Honour", such as---- Barzillai and his son, Zaddock the pious priest, Sagan of Jerusalem, Dean John Dolben, Adriel, Jotham, Hushai and Amiel.

As a Poem: Poetic Metre and Style of Heroic Poem

Absalom and Achitophel is written in **Heroic Couplets**. Dryden refined the Heroic couplet by making it flexible, and endowing it with form, variety, smoothness, speed, vitality, strength and musically rhythmic. Pope aptly states: "Dryden taught to join/ the varying verse, the full resounding line/ the long majestic march and energy divine". Edmond Gosse writes that it became "a rapier of polished and tempered steel" (p.15). According to Matthew Arnold, Dryden is the puissant and glorious founder of the indispensable eighteenth-century literature. Dryden had the power to condense his meaning without losing clarity as seen in his pithy couplet: "His courage Foes, his friends his Truth Proclaim;/ His loyalty the King, the world his Fame". He is a consummate technician and the strategic placement of "proclaim" lights up the entire meaning in this couplet. At times he uses triplets and alliteration: "**p**opularly **p**rosecute the **p**lot"; "**w**ould tyre a **w**ell breath'd **w**itness...". Dryden spoke of himself as one who had done his best to improve the language, especially the poetry. He freshened the language by doing away with the baroque and gave it point and actuality. His mastery over the language allowed him a scrupulous attention to form and the result is a robust vigour and clarity of expression. He possessed to a supreme degree the power of reasoning, psychological persuasion and arguing in verse--- a quality best seen in the speeches of temptation of Absalom by Achitophel; the rebuttal by Charles II; the depiction of the English as "The Jews, a Headstrong, Moody, Murmuring race", the wit and polished statement of the satiric portraitures.

Dr. Johnson writing his Life of the poet, stated: "To him we owe the improvement, perhaps the completion of our metre, the refinement of our language, and much of the correctness of our sentiments" (Lives of Poets, I, p.345). **Bonamy Dobree** writes the "chief work" of his "long patiently arduous life consisted in creating a language fit for civilized Englishmen to use" (Dobree, p.9). **T.S. Eliot** aptly states: "Dryden found the English speechless and he gave them speech" ('John Dryden', p.24).

As an Epyllion:

The unique feature of his satire is the mingling of the classical and a late Renaissance exuberance and imaginative vitality. Ian Jack analyses how "the idea of the heroic poem, in particular, was central in all discussion of poetry" in "the silver age of the European Renaissance" (i.e. 1660-1750); that Spenser,

Milton, Dryden and Pope “shared the Renaissance ambition to write one supreme poem comparable to the great classical epics” (p.5, I. Jack). Dryden perfected a new **heroic idiom**. The poem is a witty piece written to please the witty monarch Charles II, and is “a skilful blend of heroic panegyric, satire, ‘discourse’ and witty commentary”. “The Epick Poem” according to Le Bossu, “is a discourse invented by art, to form the Manners, by such instructions as are disguised under the allegories of some one important Action, which is related in verse, after a probable, diverting and surprising manners” --- this description aptly fits Dryden’s poem (I. Jack p.75,71). Dryden’s **versatility** is remarkable---“**his compositions are the effects of a vigorous genius operating upon large materials**” (Lives of Poets, I p. 336). Though the poem originates as a Party pamphlet dedicated to the hour, it is yet “immortal” writes J. C. Collins (p.xli). As Poet Laureate, spokesman for the aristocracy, the established Church and monarchy, Dryden rightly assumes the Roman dignity of the epic. He reaffirmed the public role of the poet, the Greco-Roman conception of poet as the voice of society, upholding universal values. **Dryden declared “Poesy only instructs as it delights”**. Sir Philip Sidney declares in The Defence of Poesy how the poet finds a world of brass and delivers a world of gold. Dryden’s wonderful genius transmutes the brass into gold or as Dr. Johnson writes “**he found it brick, and he left it marble**” (Lives of Poets. I p. 345).

As a Satire:

In A Discourse on the Original and Progress of Satire, written in 1692 as a Preface to a translation of the satires of Juvenal and Persius, Dryden defined Satire as:

“Satire is of the nature of moral philosophy, as being instructive. It is undoubtedly a species of heroic poetry itself, finely mixing the majesty of the heroic with the venom, and raising the delight, which otherwise would be flat and vulgar, by the sublimity of the expression.”

Satire is a corrective of follies and vices, whether of an individual or societal trends; it is a literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation, or scorn. The two types of formal satire are the Horatian and Juvenalian, after the style of the famous Roman Satirists, Horace and Juvenal. Horatian satire is witty and urbane evoking wry amusement at the spectacle of human folly, hypocrisy and absurdities. The Juvenalian satire is indignant and strikes out trenchantly at moral aberrations and vices. In the Prologue to the reader, Dryden averred: “the true end of satire is the amendment of vices by correction”. He aimed to write a poem in which characteristically there is “a sweetness in good verse, which tickles while it hurts”. Further he writes: “he who writes honestly is no more an enemy to the offender than the physician to the patient, when he prescribes harsh remedies to an inveterate disease”. In his Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire, he considers suave chastisement, continually witty and entertaining attitude of Horace as a good style: “the nicest and most delicate touches of satire consist in fine raillery”; yet he praises Juvenal’s “more vigorous and masculine wit”. He suggests that while raillery is suited more to bring folly to disrepute, the vices of society need to be castigated severely.

Satire was to Dryden “**a species of heroic poetry**”. Ian Jack in Augustan Satire writes how Absalom and Achitophel “has practically nothing in common with the classical Satira and has marked similarities to a heroic poem”; rather “it is the prominence of the element of attackthat makes it a satire in the English sense of the word” (p. 75). Ian Jack calls it “**a witty heroic poem**”. Dryden desired to write an Epic and avidly followed a path of extensive learning and the honing of literary skills. In the Defence of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy, he wrote: “I am of opinion that they cannot be good poets, who are not accustomed to argue well.....for moral truth is the mistress of the poet as much as of the philosopher;

Poesy must resemble natural truth, but it must be ethical” (Essays, I). It was necessary for “**a complete and excellent poet**” to have vast and diverse knowledge of men, manners, experiences of life and be well- versed in philosophy as well as the sciences. This would enable the poet who “may build a nobler, a more beautiful and more perfect poem, than any yet extant since the Ancients” (Essays II. p. 36). The epic poet requires “universal genius” and “universal learning” (Works, XV, p. 43).

As Party Pamphlet:

As Poet Laureate and Historiographer Royal, a public servant, and a concerned citizen, Dryden felt he was the conscience of his time, a custodian and interpreter of traditional values. He expressed a deep devotion and dignified loyalty to Charles II. When accused of being a “mercenary scribbler”, he defended himself and asserted that: “I speak of my morals....that only sort of reputation ought to be dear to every honest man, and is to me (Essays, II. P80). Further: “I am resolved to stand or fall with the cause of my God, my king, and country”. His fervently believed the safety and security of the English nation and its allies depended on the defeat of the Whigs and the madness of a headstrong rabble (Works, VII, P 173-4).

Its Contemporary Resonance

Dryden while writing on Horace, Juvenal, Persius and Lucretius stated that style is more than technique, that it must proceed from a genius, and a particular way of thinking. His own readings took him from the most unlitrary to the realm of philosophical observation and there is a wealth of the anecdotal, the imaginative, of allusion and learned quotations, as well as colloquial idiom in his writings.

The vigour, hardness and clarity of his poetry resonates with readers of **Modern verse**. T.S. Eliot has praised Dryden as “**a master of comic creation**”. The satirical edge and bite of Juvenal, along with the ‘fine strokes’ of Horace, the delicate thrusts of Wit annihilating the enemy with Raillery--- all these provide the relish and entertainment of **Popular Culture, the ‘Stand-Up Comedy’ mode** so prevalent today. Stand-up comedy is observational and Impressionist, witty, insulting, satirical, topical, anecdotal, deadpan, wordplay comedy through the medium of prose or poetry, colloquial, parodic, musical and entertaining.

3. Conclusion

In the words of T.S Eliot: “We cannot fully enjoy or rightly estimate a hundred years of English poetry unless we fully enjoy Dryden...He remains one of those who have set standards for English verse which it is desperate to ignore” (Schilling, p. 8; 16).

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