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THE ANTI-POET IN *MAC FLECKNOE*

While *Mac Flecknoe* is surely "the best lampoon" of the Restoration, an "excoriating piece of invective",¹ most critics realize that it is more—exuberant comedy, as Alan D. McKillop implies when he speaks of the poem's "magnificent unscrupulousness",² and literary satire. Earl Miner remarks that *Mac Flecknoe* continues Dryden's dramatic criticism into poetry—"an important subject of the poem is art—especially literature, and more particularly drama..."³ And George McFadden, in an illuminating investigation of the literary quarrels antecedent to the poem, calls it "the long-matured product, on the one hand of Dryden's conception of the true poet, and on the other of his experience with actual poets of his day, including Elkanah Settle as well as Thomas Shadwell".⁴ In the course of his discussion McFadden introduces the suggestive idea of the anti-poet, which he believes Dryden foreshadowed in an attack on Elkanah Settle in the "Preface" and "Postscript" (PP) to *Notes and Observations on the Empress of Morocco*: "...the germ of the great metaphorical conception of the anti-poet is presented in PP... What is basic here is the association of bad poetry with inertness, symbolized by the heavy elements of earth and water... In PP Settle is described as a poet whose labors bring forth stillborn progeny..."⁵ The anti-poet reaches full growth in *Mac Flecknoe*. In this poem, however, the anti-poet is even more than a metaphorical conception. He is also an analytical portrait of poetic incompetence created by a satirist who was also a serious critic. I want to point out some of the satiric implications of this portrait in the light of Dryden's criticism. The satire may be more systematic and lethal than one can quite realize from reading the poem apart from Dryden's thinking about the nature of the poet. McFadden implies as much, but his discussion of the anti-poet pursues a different direction.

¹ Charles E. Ward, *The Life of Dryden* (Chapel Hill, 1961), p. 129.

² *English Literature from Dryden to Burns* (New York, 1948), p. 42.

³ *Dryden's Poetry* (Bloomington, Indiana and London, 1967), pp. 78, 90.

⁴ "Elkanah Settle and the Genesis of *Mac Flecknoe*", PQ, XLIII (1964), 55.

⁵ McFadden, p. 66.

Some Beams of Wit on other souls may fall,
Strike through and make a lucid intervall;
But *Sh*—'s genuine night admits no ray.
His rising Fogs prevail upon the Day . . . (lines 21–24)
Let *Virtuoso's* in five years be Writ;
Yet not one thought accuse thy toyl of wit. (149–150)
A Tun of Man in thy Large Bulk is writ,
But sure thou'rt but a Kilderkin of wit. (195–196)⁷

The full seriousness of this deficiency becomes clear only when one recalls the several meanings Dryden attached to *wit* in discussing the qualifications of a poet. In the years preceding *Mac Flecknoe* he used *wit* synonymously with *imagination*, as in the character sketches of Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Jonson in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668);⁸ or in the preface to *Annus Mirabilis* (1667), where he explicitly equated wit with imagination ("wit in the poet . . . is no other than the faculty of imagination"), which he explained was characterized by three principle traits, invention, fancy, and elocution— or finding, shaping, and expressing the materials of a poem—all the major aspects of poetic creation.⁹ A few years later, in the preface to *An Evening's Love* (1671), he used *wit* to mean "genius, or literary ability"; "the conceiving faculty, that is imagination"; and "verbal agility".¹⁰ The last meaning predominates in Dryden's discussion, in the same preface, of the comedy of wit, a genre which requires more of the poet than "the representations of folly"; it demands "sharpness of conceit", and he would like to see in comedy "more of the *urbana, venusta, salsa, faceta*, and the rest which Quintilian reckons up as the ornaments of wit . . . As for repartie, in particular, as it is the very soul of conversation, so it is the greatest grace of Comedy, where it is proper to the characters".¹¹ *Sh*—'s lack of wit implies general literary ineptitude and would disqualify him from writing comedy of wit in particular.

Almost equally damaging is the charge that *Sh*— lacks sense. He succeeds by right of merit Richard Flecknoe, who has reigned "... without dispute Through all the Realms of *Non-sense*, absolute" (5–6). He "stands confirm'd in full stupidity" (18), is "thoughtless" (27), and reveals in his

⁶ I have chosen to use, in most instances, Dryden's abbreviation "*Sh*—" in place of "Shadwell". While there is much in the poem to identify Shadwell as the target, it seems worthwhile to emphasize that Dryden's satiric portrait is a caricature of the real man and a symbol of poetic ineptitude the meaning of which transcends the historical Thomas Shadwell. *Sh*— refers to the symbolic caricature in the poem rather than to the London playwright who sat for it.

⁷ Quotations from the poem follow the text of *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley, I (Oxford, 1958), 265–271.

⁸ *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker, I (New York, 1961), 79–83.

⁹ *Essays*, I, 14–15.

¹⁰ According to the careful analysis of John M. Aden, "Dryden and the Imagination: the First Phase", *PMLA*, LXXIV (1959), 37.

¹¹ *Essays*, I, 138–139.

foolish characters his own "want of sense" (156). This charge complements the first, since in neoclassical criticism imagination (wit) and judgment were the two poles of the creative process, and since Dryden, though never constructing a formal and invariable system, always associated sense with reason, learning, observation, and judgment. He wrote in the preface to *Troilus and Cressida* (1679), translating Rapin with evident approval, that rules "'are founded upon good sense, and sound reason, rather than on authority... 'tis evident, by the ridiculous mistakes and gross absurdities which have been made by those poets who have taken their fancy [used here in the sense of *imagination*] only for their guide, that if this fancy be not regulated, it is a mere caprice, and utterly incapable to produce a reasonable and judicious poem'".¹² Dryden associated sense with judgment again in the "Dedication of the *Aeneis*" (1697), although he was there speaking of these qualities in readers, who will improve their taste as they "improve their stock of sense (as they may by reading better books, and by conversation with men of judgment)..."¹³ Dryden used *wit*, *imagination*, and *fancy* most frequently in connection with the inventive, creative aspects of writing, necessary for producing vigorous, moving literature; and *good sense*, *reason*, and *judgment* in connection with the disciplinary aspects of literary creation, necessary for probability, propriety, and order. Both elements—order as well as energy, justness as well as liveliness—he thought essential for good writing.

Dearth of sense, and thus presumably of judgment, becomes a particularly significant defect for *Sh*—when we recall that Thomas Shadwell considered himself Ben Jonson's successor in the comedy of humor, and that Dryden, in the preface to *An Evening's Love* (1671), had called observation and judgment the two requisite qualities for writing comedy in Jonson's vein: "To make men appear pleasantly ridiculous on the stage, was... [Jonson's] talent; and in this he needed not the acumen of wit but that of judgment. For the characters and representations of folly are only the effects of observation; and observation is an effect of judgment".¹⁴ Again in the same essay: "For, to write humor in comedy (which is the theft of poets from mankind), little of fancy is required; the poet observes only what is ridiculous and pleasant folly, and by judging exactly what is so, he pleases in the representation of it".¹⁵ In the light of these statements certain lines may acquire added significance:

Nor let thy mountain belly make pretence
Of likeness; thine's a tympany of sense. (193–194)

Vacuity of sense is the defect cited to challenge *Sh*—'s kinship to Jonson, perhaps because it is the principal deficiency that would preclude *Sh*— from continuing the Jonsonian tradition in comedy.

To Dryden good sense and learning went together, as he implies in remarking on Chaucer: "He is a perpetual fountain of good sense; learn'd

¹² *Essays*, I, 228–229.

¹³ *Essays*, II, 224.

¹⁴ *Essays*, I, 138.

¹⁵ *Essays*, I, 147.

in all sciences; and, therefore, speaks properly on all subjects".¹⁶ Learning is the third essential endowment of the poet that Dryden denies to *Sh*—:

... my Son advance
Still in new Impudence, new Ignorance. (145–146)
Thou art my blood, where *Johnson* has no part ...
Where did his wit on learning fix a brand,
And rail at Arts he did not understand? (175, 177–178)

The poet's need for both learning and general experience is stressed in the Postscript to *Notes and Observations* (1674): "A man should be learned in several sciences, and should have a reasonable, philosophical, and in some measure a mathematical head, to be a complete and excellent poet; and besides this, should have experience in all sorts of humours and manners of men; should be thoroughly skilled in conversation, and should have a great knowledge of mankind in general".¹⁷ Again, in the preface to *Troilus and Cressida* (1679): The manners "are likewise to be gathered from the several virtues, vices, or passions, and many other commonplaces, which a poet must be supposed to have learned from natural Philosophy, Ethics, and History; of all which, whosoever is ignorant, does not deserve the name of poet".¹⁸ The implications for *Sh*— are obvious.

Sh— is depicted, finally, as lacking not just the talent and learning but even the character necessary for producing significant literature. Instead of possessing the sociable objectivity that enables the poet's observation to extend meaningfully outside himself and learn from men and books permanent truths about human nature (later a central theme in *Battle of the Book and Essay on Criticism*), *Sh*— evinces pride, impudence, barren introspection, and eccentric individualism. He is "swelled with pride" (40). His pride is associated with lack of learning when Flecknoe enjoins: "... my Son advance / Still in new Impudence, new Ignorance" (145–146). In a distortion of the traditional literary imperative, Follow Nature, Flecknoe exhorts Shadwell to excell as a poor writer by relying exclusively on his personal, subjective resources:

And when false flowers of *Rhetoric* thou would'st cull,
Trust Nature, do not labour to be dull;
But write thy best, and top; and in each line,
Sir *Formal's* oratory will be thine ... (165–168)

With noteworthy adroitness Dryden even implies that *Sh*—'s pretense to write comedy of humor is *his* humor, or eccentric deviation from the balanced human norm:

By which one way, to dulness, 'tis inclin'd,
This is that boasted Byas of thy mind,

¹⁶ *Essays*, II, 257–258.

¹⁷ Quoted in *The Critical Opinions of John Dryden: A Dictionary*, ed. John M. Aden (Nashville, 1963), p. 185.

¹⁸ *Essays*, I, 214. See also p. 220 and the preface to *Sylvae* (1685) in *Essays*, I, 253.

Which makes thy writings lean on one side still,
And in all changes that way bends thy will. (189–192)

But *Sh—*'s lack of sense and objectivity imply his incapacity to succeed even here; without judgment and observation his pretense to write humor can merely evince his own humorous pride ("boasted Byas").

This portrait of supreme poetic incompetence is intensified by a number of degrading images. *Sh—*'s corpulence sometimes implies intellectual heaviness. His "goodly Fabrick" (25) "seems design'd for thoughtless Majesty" (26):

Thoughtless as Monarch Oakes, that shade the plain,
And, spread in solemn state, supinely reign. (27–28)

Other times Dryden uses *Sh—*'s "mountain belly" (193) to connote intellectual vacuity: "thine's a tympany of sense" (194):

A Tun of Man in thy Large bulk is writ,
But sure thou'rt but a Kilderkin of wit. (195–196)

The image of empty swelling is connected with pride and with the metaphor of pregnancy:

Swell'd with the Pride of thy Celestial charge;
And big with Hymn . . . (40–41)

But, as McFadden has noted, *Sh—*'s poetic pregnancy is false, causing "Pangs without birth, and fruitless Industry" (148). *Sh—*'s lack of genius is emphasized also by recurring imagery of night, fogs, and damps (23–24, 110, 135–136) and by such signs of sovereignty as "twelve reverend Owls" (129), the bird of darkness; "a mighty mug of potent Ale" (121); and a wreath of poppies instead of laurel (126), an emblem having "three significances: the poppy is soporific (e.g. *Aen.* iv. 486), parching and sterilizing (*Georgics*, i. 78), and aphrodisiac but not fertilizing (see Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, vii. 7)".¹⁹

Although Dryden concentrates on *Sh—*'s deficient genius, the attack extends beyond the writer to his work and its effect on the audience. Defective genius, education, and character predestine the writer to produce inept and ineffectual work; without "wit writing" there can be no "wit written".²⁰ Instead of wit and sense *Sh—*'s work manifests tautology (30, 56), flippant indecency (181), plagiarism (183–184), and feeble versification (197). Such work inevitably misses the intended effect:

Thy Tragick Muse gives smiles, thy Comick sleep . . . (198)
Thy inoffensive Satyrs never bite. (200)

¹⁹ *The Poems of John Dryden*, IV, 1919.

²⁰ *Essays*, I, 14.

For the future, *Sh*— is enjoined to reign, according to his genius, over the realm of literary absurdity and triviality (203–210). Thus Dryden rounds out his portrait of the anti-poet, a surprisingly systematic anatomy of poetic dullness. Fittingly, the metaphor of dullness descends on *Sh*— throughout the poem as Dryden's most ironic benediction.

Dryden's portrait of the anti-poet has a paradoxical satiric effect. It intensifies the invective to the utmost, yet the obvious exaggeration causes it to transcend the historical Thomas Shadwell and to become a comic satiric symbol of Literary Incompetence. Dryden's criticism illuminates the ramifications of the symbol, which implies as its opposite the Augustan ideal of the poet, the norm of the satire.

Editorial Note

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V Ý T A H

P A B Á S N Í K V S A T I Ř E M A C F L E C K N O E

Záměrem autora této studie je poukázat na některé satirické implikace portréту básnické neschopnosti, který vytvořil Dryden ve svém zžiravém útoku na Thomase Shadwella. Neboť *Mac Flecknoe* není jen průhlednou osobní invektivou na Drydenova literárního soupeře a politického odpůrce Shadwella, ale i nepřímým zrcadlem vyzrálých kritických názorů Johna Drydena, zejména jeho koncepce pravého básníka a pabásníka.

Z výtek adresovaných Shadwellovi jako člověku i spisovateli je nejvážnější nedostatek vtupu, čímž Dryden rozumí nedostatek imaginace, tj. invence, fantazie a výmluvnosti, které jsou pro literární tvorbu nezbytné. Neméně vážnou výtkou je nedostatek smyslu, tj. rozumu a soudnosti. Jen zdravý rozum a úsudek mohou totiž udržovat fantazii a jazykový projev v mezích pravděpodobnosti, slušnosti a řádu.

Z vlastností nezbytných dobrému básníkovi však chybějí Shadwellovi i vědomosti a zkušenosti.

Drydenův portrét básnické neschopnosti je v satirě *Mac Flecknoe* ještě posílen a konkretizován četnými obrazy, v nichž se využívá i tělesných a povahových rysů Shadwellových, zejména jeho otylosti a domýšlivosti jako symbolů a dokladů duševní těžkopádnosti na jedné straně a tvůrčí prázdnoty a sterility na straně druhé.

Ačkoli se Dryden soustředil především na Shadwellovu duchaprázdnotu, útočí i na jeho tvorbu, zvláště dramatickou a na její vliv na obecenstvo. Shadwellovy tragédie vyvolávají úsměv a jeho veselohry uspávají.

Drydenův portrét pabásníka je tak očividně nadsazený, že už překračuje historickou postavu, která mu stála modelem a přerůstá v komický satirický symbol umělecké neschopnosti. A ze satiry i z ostatních kritických prací Drydenových vyplývá, že logickým protikladem tohoto portrétu byl klasicistický ideál básníka.