

Close Readings of John Dryden's "Mac Flecknoe" and "Alexander's Feast"

"Mac Flecknoe"

"Mac Flecknoe" is one of the most famous mock-heroic verses in the English tradition. In it, Dryden attacks his one-time friend Thomas Shadwell as the rightful heir of Richard Flecknoe, a recently deceased playwright and poet whom Dryden depicts as having long ruled "Through all the realms of Nonsense" (6). Written in heroic couplets—iambic pentameter couplets—the poem evokes classical figures, such as Augustus in line 3, and forms in order to satirize Shadwell's pretensions to poetic glory. Dryden's feud with Shadwell derived from a number of differences; for example, Dryden was a Catholic Tory, while Shadwell was a Protestant Whig.

The poem begins with a conventional couplet about everything in human life declining, including the lives of monarchs. After mockingly comparing Flecknoe to the Roman emperor Augustus, the poem describes how Flecknoe was "blest with issue of a large increase" (8). Literally, the line suggests he has had many children, but it conveys the idea that he has had many followers in "prose and verse" (5) in the "realms of Nonsense" (6), i.e., that many other writers have attempted to be as nonsensical as he has been. Now, "Worn out with business" (9), Flecknoe turns to deciding "which of all his sons was fit /To reign, and wage immortal war with wit" (11 and 12). Here, Dryden takes the conceit of the succession of a king, a matter of immense importance during this time, and uses it to make fun of Flecknoe and his successors who war against wit—the neoclassical term for good sense, decorum, and proper imagination. At this point, the mock-Flecknoe speaks, and in what follows he proclaims that only he "whom most resembles me" (14)—only the poet who lacks sense as much as he does—should take his place. Maintaining the thin veneer of not naming names, though the poem is subtitled "A Satire upon the True-Blue Protestant Poet T.S.," the lines that follow refer to Shadwell as alone being "Mature in dullness" (16) and "confirmed in full stupidity" (18). Drawing on the figure of light to speak of intellectual and rational insight—the figure that would give the coming period, the Enlightenment, its name—Dryden (through Flecknoe) insists that no such light ever breaks upon Shadwell: no "beams" (21) of intelligence "strike through" (22), as Shadwell's "genuine night admits no ray" (23) and instead "His rising fogs prevail upon the day" (24). Shadwell's dimness obscures even the light of day.

After attacking Shadwell's intellect, the poem moves to his large body, i.e., "his goodly fabric" (25), comparing its "thoughtless" nature to that of a dumb "oak" (27). Flecknoe then goes on to proclaim that, in fact, Shadwell so far succeeds him that he has only come (as John the Baptist preceded Jesus) "to prepare thy way" (32). The lines that follow provide an image of Shadwell coming up the Thames to accept his reign, alluding to a number of Shadwell's works along the way and making fun of his versification, especially with the reference to poetic feet and rhyme (54). Flecknoe's speech then ends with the poetic voice concluding that everything, but especially Shadwell's plays,

points to his being “made” for “anointed dullness,” i.e., to be crowned as stupid or insipid.

The following lines then describe Shadwell’s reign over the city of Augusta (London), continuing the poem’s mock-heroic quality of diminishing Shadwell by sarcastically equating him with greatness. Dryden sets his reign in a brothel district, aligning prostitution with the low theatre that Dryden associates with Shadwell’s productions (64–93). With his coronation, his way through the streets is paved with the “scattered limbs of mangled poets” (99) and their works, suggesting that Shadwell’s reign depends on the destruction of true poetry. Shadwell takes the throne, vowing to “maintain” “true dullness” (115) and to ever make war “with wit” and “sense” (117). At this point, Dryden again recurs to his mock-heroic framework, returning to his opening lines’ reference to Rome. As legend has it, Dryden tells us, twelve owls—which represent symbols of darkness and imbecility—flew from Shadwell’s “left hand” (129) as he begins his reign. The reference is a mocking echo of Romulus’s founding of Rome when he saw twelve vultures or crows. Flecknoe then speaks again, asking for heaven’s blessing on his “son” in his advancing “in new impudence, new ignorance” (146). He offers his advice to Shadwell, encouraging him to make sure that all his “issue” (160), i.e., his writings, be all his own. He should rely on his own natural talents as noted in line 166, and he will then be able to produce verse as his father has: “Like mine they gentle numbers feebly creep” (197). Towards the end, Flecknoe seems to change his position, advising Shadwell to stop writing plays (205) and instead settle on lower forms of poetry like acrostics. In a concluding flourish, Flecknoe then disappears through a trap-door, his monarchical robes flying up and settling upon their rightful heir.

While “Mac Flecknoe” is full of specific allusions to the literary scene of the 1670s, its overarching point should be accessible to most careful readers. It is a vicious, if well-wrought attack on a literary opponent, displaying Dryden’s tools and talents at their sharpest. It illustrates one of the many different uses of poetry during the period, in this case the gamesmanship of reputation, suggesting the intersection of poetic quarrels with religious and political ones. Given Dryden’s reputation now as the most important literary figure of the age, it may seem strange that he would expend such vituperation upon someone who rates only a footnote in most literary histories. However, while Dryden has come down to us as the victor of this quarrel (Shadwell is only known now because of this poem), Shadwell was the more immediate victor. With the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Parliament deposed James II and Dryden lost his place as poet laureate to be replaced by Shadwell. Further, although Dryden’s attack may seem personal and parochial, he uses the satire to articulate a more important, broader point about the importance of good taste and poetic talent to the nation through his representation of Flecknoe and Shadwell as emperors. Shadwell’s dullness, from such a perspective, has the potential to enfeeble the nation and to undermine its good sense.

“Alexander’s Feast”

“Alexander’s Feast, or the Power of Music” was written for the London Musical Society on the occasion of the feast day of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music, in November 1697. Similar to the poem that Dryden wrote on the same occasion 10 years earlier, “Alexander’s Feast” is usually classified as a Pindaric ode. Pindar was an ancient Greek poet, whose *odes*—ceremonial poems of praise or celebration—featured lines of differing length and meter. For many Restoration writers, the Pindaric ode allowed a certain liberty in versifying, but Dryden, by most accounts, maintains more restraint here, even as his lines and stanzas vary quite bit. While some critics have found fault with it, Dryden agreed with his contemporaries that it was probably “the best of all my poetry.”

The poem celebrates the power of music by recounting how Timotheus, a celebrated Greek musician, is able to control, or perhaps manipulate, the emotions of Alexander the Great during a banquet celebrating his victory over Darius and his conquest of Persia. The poem thus harkens back to Greek antiquity through its form—the Pindaric ode—and its content—an incident from the history of Alexander the Great. The first stanza sets the scene, a “royal feast” on the occasion of “Persia [being] won” (1) “By Philip’s warlike son [Alexander]” (2). In “godlike” (4) fashion, Alexander sits above everyone (awful in line 3 means filling everyone with awe, not its contemporary meaning of horrible), around him his lieutenants are “crowned” (8) for their victory, while next to him sits “The lovely Thais” (his concubine) (9), “like a blooming Eastern bride” (10). In Dryden’s development of the Pindaric form, he concludes the stanza with a series of lines that summarize the overall point of the stanza—that martial bravery deserves the rewards of love and happiness—lines that are then echoed in the chorus.

Timotheus is introduced in the second stanza, playing his “lyre” (23), sending his “trembling notes” (13) upward to “inspire” “heav’nly joys” (14). His first song focuses on Jove, which is another name for Jupiter or Zeus, the king of the gods, who taking the shape of a dragon, impregnated Alexander’s mother (“round her slender waist he curled, / And stamped an image of himself, a sov’ reign of the world” [32-33]). The crowd responds to Timotheus’s song enthusiastically, cheering the “present deity” (i.e., Alexander himself), who takes on the role of a god. Timotheus begins his performance, then, by playing to Alexander’s vanity, as he “Assumes the god” (39). In the next stanza, Timotheus continues to play on Alexander’s pride at his great victory. First, he sings the praises of Bacchus, the god of wine, whose face, “Flushed with a purple grace” (50) reveals his identity. Bacchus, “ever fair and young” (54), gives his blessings to the soldiers (“Drinking is the soldier’s pleasure” [57]), a sweet pleasure indeed after the pain of battle.

Now “Soothed” by these songs (66), Alexander has grown “vain” (66), as he remembers “all his battles o’er again” (67), recalling all the foes he has defeated. Timotheus (“the master” [69]) recognizes Alexander’s growing vanity (“the madness” [69]), through “His glowing cheeks, his ardent eyes” (70), and decides to check Alexander’s “pride” (72),

which has “defied” both “heav’n and earth” (72). He does so by changing the tone of his song to a “mournful” one (73), seeking “to infuse” Alexander with “pity” (74) for the defeated Darius. Recalling that Darius was “great and good,” Timotheus describes him as not deserving so “severe a fate” (76), from having been “Deserted” (80) by “those his former bounty fed” (81), or those he had taken care of in the past. Timotheus’s power is revealed by the swift change to Alexander, as now “With downcast looks,” Alexander sits “joyless” (84), considering the fickle nature of “chance” (86) as he “sigh[s]” (87) and his “tears began to flow” (88).

Timotheus, referred to as “the mighty master” in line 93, now realizes his power and smiles to consider that he will now move to love, a small step from the mournful tone he has taken. He sings of war as “toil and trouble” (99) and honor as merely “an empty bubble” (100), suggesting that instead it is love—in the form of Thais—that is the “good the gods provide” (106). Where Timotheus starts out by celebrating Alexander’s martial prowess, he reveals his own power in his ability to reverse his audience’s evaluation of war by leading them to accept that the honor won in battle is never enough, as it is “Never ending, still beginning” (101), it has to be won again and again. His audience responds enthusiastically, but while it is love they celebrate, it is in fact “music [that] won the cause” (108). With this line—which might embody the poem’s theme as a whole—Dryden makes music the victor as it displaces Alexander’s success in war, as Timotheus has replaced Alexander as master. Again, Timotheus’s power and music’s power are revealed, as Alexander’s mood shifts at his command and turns to Thais; now “oppressed” by love (114), he becomes “The vanquished victor” (115) as he buries his head on “her breast” (115).

The sixth stanza brings Timotheus’s last song, which is the most problematic. He strikes his lyre again in a “louder strain” (124), as he moves his audience to vengeance on behalf of the Greeks who have been slain: “Grecian ghosts, that in battle were slain/ And unburied remain/ Inglorious on the plain” (138–140). He envisions the ghosts as pointing their torches towards “the Persian abodes” and their temples (144–145), as they call upon their living comrades to “Give the vengeance due” (141). With a “furious joy” (146), Alexander and his princes respond, as Thais leads them to destroy the Persian community as the Greeks in the Trojan War destroyed Troy.

The last stanza then brings us back to the present day, reflecting that if music so “long ago” (155) had so much power, to “swell the soul to rage, or kindle soft desire” (160), it has even greater power after Cecilia came and invented the organ (“Inventress of the vocal frame” [162]). Doing so, she “Enlarged the former narrow bounds” (164) of music, and thus Timotheus must “yield the prize” to her (167) or, at least, share “the crown” (168).

“Alexander’s Feast,” then, by most accounts, is a virtuosic performance of Restoration era poetic effects, even as it tells the story of music virtuosity and its power. Some commentators have reflected that the power of the music as portrayed in the poem is not necessarily a good thing—that it seems as though Timotheus can so easily

manipulate Alexander's emotions so as to accomplish anything, including moving him from pitying and crying over Darius, to, within 100 lines, leading his troops to burn the homes and temples of Darius's defeated populace. While the poem celebrates aesthetic power, explicitly in the form of music and implicitly in the form of the poem itself, it hints at that power being a double-edged sword.

Summary

- "Mac Flecknoe" is one of the best-known and most successful mock-heroic poems of the era, exemplifying the use of classical references to grandeur and heroism as a way to satirize an unworthy modern person or institution (in this case Dryden's rival poet, Thomas Shadwell).
- Through its figuration of Shadwell as the heir to throne of dullness, "Mac Flecknoe" comments on the importance of poetic wit for the proper maintenance of the actual kingdom, suggesting the importance of poetry even as it mocks Shadwell's pretensions.
- "Alexander's Feast" represents Dryden's best known Pindaric ode, a poem dedicated to the elaborate celebration of something, in this case music or, more broadly, poetry.
- "Alexander's Feast" reveals the great power of poetry and music through its account of Timotheus's ability to direct Alexander's emotions, suggesting that the poet or musician may have as much or more power than the king or emperor.