



'THE BLENDING OF MOCK EPIC, IRONIC TOUCH AND FANTASY IN JOHN DRYDEN'S MAC FLECKNOE'

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ABSTRACT

John Dryden (1631 –1700) was an English poet, literary critic, translator and playwright. He received the recognition of England's first Poet Laureate in 1668. He was one of the dominating literary writers of Restoration England which is ultimately known as 'Age of Dryden' among literary circle. Therefore Walter Scott calls him as 'Glorious John.

The prime objective of this paper is to focus on the blending of mock epic, fantasy and irony in John Dryden's Mac Flecknoe. The researcher has elaborated the several aspects of Dryden and his skill of introducing mock epic genre. 'A mock- heroic poem employs the ceremonial components which characterize the epic genre to depict a trifling situation. It thus creates a difference between the form and content that results in a satiric and absurd effect, ridiculing the characters in the plot and their actions.

INTRODUCTION

'A mock epic' makes the mockery of the poem and makes the reader laugh by exalting trivial and by treating in a heroic manner who deserves only scorn and contempt.'

'MacFlecknoe' or 'A satyr upon the True-Blew-Protestant Poet, T.S.' (1678) is the first mock heroic poem in English written by John Dryden. This mock epic is a poetic form which uses the epic structure on a miniature scale. It deals with a trivial subject through which the poet makes the subject ridiculous in a framework entirely inappropriate to its importance. It is a



highly entertaining lampoon on Shadwell's religious opinions. Its mock heroic framing suggests Pope's *'Dunciad.'* Dryden refers scenes in Shadwell's plays, quotes bit of dialogues, mentions the names of characters and parodies, lines from Shadwell's epilogues. The poem is the outcome of a series of disagreements between Thomas Shadwell and Dryden. Shadwell was a Whig while Dryden was an outspoken supporter of the Stuart monarchy. The poem illustrates Shadwell as the heir to a kingdom of poetic dullness, represented by his association with Richard Flecknoe, an earlier poet satirized by Andrew Marvell and disliked by Dryden. The poem is a direct invasion on Thomas Shadwell in a satirical manner. The poem has the quality of grave and pompous irony, expressed in solemn and sounding verse. The design of the poem is remarkably pure, strong and classical. In mock-heroics, other formulaic standards are followed, such as the ritual dressing for battle, processions of valor, calling upon the aid of gods, and victory celebrations. John Dryden is the greatest master of mock-heroic poem. In his poem, the fate seems to be the source of inspiration. The poem opens with the lines:

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

The poem begins in the tone of an epic masterpiece and presents Shadwell's defining characteristic as dullness. Dryden subverts the theme of the defining characteristic by giving Shadwell a negative characteristic as his only virtue. Dryden uses the mock-heroic through his use of the heightened language of the epic to treat the trivial subjects such as poorly written and largely dismissible poetry. The juxtaposition of the lofty style with unexpected nouns such as *'dullness'* provides an ironic contrast. Dryden's purpose is to defend good literature against bad.

The very beginning of the poem is characterized by epic inflation which has a comic effect. Flecknoe, a worthless poet, compared to Augustus Caesar, was entrusted with the responsibility of governing an empire entitled as *'the realms of nonsense'*. He was an aged monarch who decided to appoint an heir to his throne. The language such as empire, governed, prince, realms, succession of state, to resign is exalted but the theme Flecknoe: as an inferior poet. The irony used in the poem is obvious and polite. Throughout the poem, the mock epic vein is continued in the portrayal of Shadwell as MacFlecknoe. MacFlecknoe is regarded by his father as the fittest person to succeed to the throne of dullness because he looks majestic with his huge bulk, like the huge oak trees and is at the same time devoid of the power to think like them. Dryden recalls that glorious day on which MacFlecknoe sailed on the river Thames, ready to produce a song in honour of the king. On that day, MacFlecknoe felt swelled with the pride of his celestial charge and he was a commander of a host.



In imitation of Homer, Dryden includes references to Greek gods and mythology as in his reference to Arion, the mythological Greek poet who was borne across seas by dolphins. Dryden concludes his mock-heroic with a celebratory calling of the Homeric-like champion to arms where Flecknoe passes the mantle and departs. The mock epic and ironic touch follows when Mac Flecknoe is compared to Arion. Basically Arion was a celebrated ancient musician whose music attracted dolphins but MacFlecknoe attracted only 'little fishes'. The name Shadwell was sounded from several localities but the localities named by Dryden were sordid and inhabited by uncultured people. MacFlecknoe is ironically called 'prince of thy harmonious band'. His music excited the jealousy of the famous musician, John Singleton, who renounced the triumph he had won. All arguments led Flecknoe to the belief that his son Mac Flecknoe was the fittest person for anointed dullness, i.e. king of dullness. The phrase anointed dullness contributes to the ironic, mock-heroic effect.

The poet uses ironic style and technique and describes a place which has chosen as the site of Mac Flecknoe's coronation. This was a place where ageing prostitutes lived. The great news of Shadwell's coronation was spread all over the city by 'empress fame'. The news caused a lot of excitement among the nations to witness the coronation. Here the ironic politeness is expressed through high flown phrases such as 'empress fame', 'the renown of Shadwell's coronation', 'the nation's meet' etc. These phrases are used in connection with a dull headed and foolish man and they make him look even more stupid. The ceremony of the coronation is described in inflated language. Flecknoe is rightly called as 'the hoary prince' who appeared 'in majesty, high on a throne.' The mockery is reflected in the lines:

*'His brows thick fogs instead of glories grace,
And lambent dullness played around his face.'*

The example of another epic touch can be described in the form of Hannibal's early life. Hannibal had early in life been made to swear that he would wage perpetual war against Rome. Shadwell swore that he would maintain genuine dullness in his kingdom throughout his life and would never establish any link with wisdom. Dryden tells in a mock epic style that Shadwell held a large mug of strong beer (which makes a man muddle headed) in one hand and a worthless book (Love's Kingdom) written by Flecknoe. Actually, he has to hold globe and sceptre in his hands which are the symbols of king's sovereignty. Again twelve aged owls appeared over Shadwell to promise an empire of dullness for Shadwell to rule over. MacFlecknoe's coronation speech is couched in language which befits in epic which conveys mockery when applied to Shadwell:

*'Heavens bless my son! From Ireland let him reign
To far Barbadoes on the western main'*



The speech begins with epic style in which Shadwell is ridiculed and his sterility of mind is revealed. Flecknoe calls upon his son to keep progressing in the field of ignorance and exhorts him:

*'Success let others teach, learn thou from me
Pangs without birth, fruitless industry.'*

The speaker attacks on Shadwell's play *'The Virtuoso'* and *'Epsom Wells'* and links Shadwell with John Ogleby. He denies that there is any resemblance between the work of Shadwell and Ben Jonson. Thus the mockery continues till the end of the poem. Flecknoe says that Shadwell's tragic scenes are amusing rather than pathetic and his comic scenes are so dull as to send an audience to sleep. Shadwell's satire is utterly ineffective:

'Thy inoffensive satires never bite.'

Flecknoe's last words could not be heard because Bruce and Longville had prepared a trap door through which Flecknoe slipped and fell. As he fell, his coarse woolen robe was carried upwards by a wind. This robe descended upon the *'young prophet'* Shadwell and brought him the dullness of his father, Flecknoe. Thus the mock epic tone occurs in the closing couplet:

*'The mantle felt to the young prophet's part,
With double portion of his father's art.'*

The poem contains mock-heroic and direct satirical imagery. Flecknoe's second speech can be cited as:

*'A turn of man in thy large bulk is writ,
But sure thou art but a kilderkin of wit.'*

To conclude, the technique of the mock-heroic genre consists in worshipping the characters for their trivial and vulgar behaviour. Here Dryden never directly attacks Shadwell; rather he obtains his result of understating him by exalting his ignorance and bad writing. Thus Dryden invents the skill of introducing mock heroic form, its characteristics cadence, its subtle attack through this poem.



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