

Absalom and Achitophel: A Satire

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Abstract: Written in 1681, *Absalom and Achitophel* is a witty heroic poem. It is a grand satire by John Dryden. It is about the biblical rebellion of Absalom against King David. This story is used as an allegory to represent the then contemporary situation concerning King Charles II. The poem also has references to the Popish Plot and Monmouth Rebellion. The main purpose of writing the poem was “the amendment of vices by correction”. His satire is sharper as per the degree of corruption. Monmouth is Absalom, Charles is David and Shaftesbury is Achitophel. The most common reading of the poem is connection between the fatherhood and kingship. Through the biblical allusion Dryden is connecting fatherhood and the royal’s responsibilities. Dryden has used the fatherly affection of David and the legitimacy of Absalom’s succession. The object of the poem was to praise the king and his party at the same time satirizing his adversaries.

Index Terms: satire, heroic, rebellion, succession, allusion, Old Testament, allegory, witty, parallel, temptation, characteristics, panegyric

Absalom and Achitophel is a satirical poem written by John Dryden published in 1681 and is written in heroic couplet. It narrates the Biblical rebellion of Absalom against King David. It is an allegory used to represent the story that was contemporary to Dryden [1679-1681] that concerned King Charles II. It also has reference to the Popish Plot [1678] and the Monmouth rebellion [1685]. In 1681, a crisis occurred in the conflict between Shaftesbury and his followers, who wished to exclude the Catholic Duke of York from succession to the throne and those who stood with the King himself in favor of true succession. Towards the end of the year, Shaftesbury was to be brought before the Grand jury and Dryden was asked by the King himself to write a poem in opposition to the pamphlets stating the Whig case. Its publication was timed to influence the case of Shaftesbury’s trial but he was acquitted by the Grand jury.

Dryden wrote a narrative poem describing the events which had led to that particular situation in the manner in which the King’s followers wanted them to be viewed. He paints the official picture. The poetical intention of the poem is emphasized by the fact that the concluding speech from the throne summarizes several of the arguments put forward in the official defense of the dissolution of the Parliament.

In England, the use of political allegory increased greatly during the Civil War and the controversies which succeeded it. King Charles and his courtiers brought a taste for this species of writing with them from France. It is a narrative poem written in heroic couplet, in which an Old Testament allegory is used to describe contemporary events as they appear to a partisan.

King Charles likened himself to David early in his reign. Charles had the morals from the story of David drawn on his mind by the contemporary preachers. For the loyal subjects of the King, the story of David seemed too fit for the present times.

The analogy between David’s indulgent attitude to his son and Charles’s to Monmouth was so obvious that it Dryden just not needed the idea but the permission or encouragement to use it. The Old Testament allegory helped Dryden to raise his poem to a dignified level without collapsing into “bathos”. It also acted as an instrument of Dryden’s brilliant wit and helped the poem with an air of objectivity more impressive than the direct exclamations so common in political satires. The fact that the figures such as the King, The tempter and the mob are so readily recognized and carries the action a step further from the realm of mere political wrangling in the direction of universal philosophical or poetic truth. In the allegory that he took over and remodeled it he found a powerful ally in the task of raising the political satire to a new level. Although this poem is always known as a satire, the style in which it is written is by no means a characteristically satiric idiom. The object of his first official production as the Poet Laureate is not merely to attack the men who plotted against the King, but to present the whole constitutional position in a certain way. While the King’s enemies are represented in an unfavourable light, the Royal Party is egoistically portrayed. It is basically written in a heroic style with occasional baser details in the portraits of Shaftesbury’s followers. Like an epic or a heroic play, Dryden’s poems represent ‘Nature wrought up in a higher pitch’, as a natural consequence, 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 with due proportion to verisimilitude.

The verse is marked by what Dryden called “the smoothness, the numbers, and the turn of heroic poetry”. One finds dignified verse which rises as occasion offers to that long majestic march and energy divine. He devised a new heroic idiom and chose his diction as much for their music as for their meaning. Sounding words is a frequent phrase used throughout by his critics.

The elevation of the style is most evident when a speech is to be introduced. Once or twice as in the Miltonic description of the temptation, the unusual arrangement of the words makes it heroic. The whole poem is not uniformly elevated. When the characters such as Corah and Shimer are described, the style is accordingly lowered. Still the truth remains that the basis of the idiom is heroic. This can be verified by a glance at the imagery. It has lively and apt description dressed in colours of speech which sets before the eyes the absent object more perfectly and delightfully. An elaborate simile is used to emphasize the effects of the plot. The relation of Absalom and Achitophel to heroic poetry is particularly evident in the five speeches which can be easily compared to classical epics or 'Paradise Lost'. They are every bit as grand as the heroic characters. Achitophel's first speech to Absalom is fairly representative. It begins with flattery and passes to artful temptation to betrayal to his father. The imagery is perfectly adapted to the purpose of courtly oratory. It emphasizes that it was in the theatre that Dryden learnt the art of dramatic rhetoric. The magnificent hypocrisy in these lines are brilliant, the style that suits the speaker, the subject and circumstances simple and yet each line is like a blow on softened steel.

Dryden varies his treatment of different characters which is more remarkable than anything else. He makes clear about the complexity of his object in the poem rather than being a mere lampooner. The measure of a man's merit or guilt, the nature of Dryden's own relations, his social position, the degree of royal favour which he enjoyed are taken into consideration before treating them. The presentation of Absalom is a good example. It is done so suavely that we hardly notice what a remarkable case of special pleading such a contention is, so in the poem itself Dryden lays emphasis on the cunning of Achitophel. He refrains from inventing a conclusion to the story which would show Absalom unfortunate. Not content with this, he lavishes some of the most brilliant lines of panegyric on Absalom. He emphasizes his 'goodly person' and describes his reception by the crowd as 'their Messiah'.

None of the members of the King's party receives such eloquent praise. Yet in their brief characterizations, a proper need of praise is allotted to each. Although they lack the tremendous power which has immortalized the hostile "characters", these portraits are done very skillfully. Dryden was under personal obligations to several members of the King's party. He repays one of his debts by describing Barzillai in an exalted style. In these lines, which form a brief funeral panegyric on the Duke's son, the usual characteristics of the genre-exclamations, the heavenward flight of the soul, the fiction that the poet's life has terminated with that of the dead man and even the circle image beloved of Donne and his imitators. He wishes to praise the King's friends while censuring his enemies.

Like the Royal Party, Shaftesbury and his followers are introduced as characters in a heroic poem. With the exception of the cruel couplet about his son, there is no trace of the low style in the description of Achitophel. Practically there is no ridiculing. Dryden is intent on portraying Achitophel as an evil man whose existence is a perpetual threat to the safety of the state. At several points or parallel is suggested between Shaftesbury's temptation of Monmouth and the fall of man with Charles himself in the background as the representative of the Deity. He follows the lead of a hundred Tory preachers and pamphleteers in casting Shaftesbury as "Hell's dire Agent", the Satan of the plot. The description of Achitophel is a reminder that satire can exist without humor.

The portrayal of the Duke of Buckingham is very different. Achitophel is essentially a picture of an individual, and secondly a representation of ruthless Ambition is the character of Zimri. It is general rather than particular. It is a humorous character of an inconstant man. He wanted to avoid any mortal offence to Buckingham. He claims for Zimri, a subtlety and indirectness which cannot be justified. The style is slightly lowered as it is emphasized by the presence of two pairs of feminine rhyme.

Serious scorn distinguishes the characters of Shimer and Corah from that of Zimri, while an indirectness of approach involving some degree of humour marks them off even more clearly from the unsmiling Achitophel. There is a contemptuous humour in the lines devoted to Bethel and Titus Oates which is completely absent from the description of Shaftesbury. The character of Shimer begins with explicit and emphatic criticism. The effect of irony which informs the whole portrait, however, modulates from pure scorn to scornful ridicule. The portrait of Corah, that "Monumental brass" is a similar compound of direct name calling and devastating irony. Such irony is found in the hostile characters of the poem, practically directed at religious non conformists.

Absalom and Achitophel has characteristics which are largely akin to those of heroic poetry. It is because of this poetic quality that the poem owes its supremacy amongst the political satires in English language. The structure of Absalom and Achitophel has little in common with a heroic poem. Except in the speeches there is practically no portrayal of character in action or of the development of character and motive.

Most part of the poem is not concerned with characters or speeches. They are more of dignified moralizing. The poem as a whole may be compared to a masterpiece of historical painting. It is written solely with the purpose of pleasing its patron. The canvas which is a very large one is crowded with figures, clearly divided into two opposing groups painted in varying perspectives.

The blending of the heroic basis with wit gives the poem its characteristic tone. The main object of his poem is to praise the king and his party, at the same time he satirizes his adversaries. It was deliberately written in this manner as King Charles was a witty man. Dryden was free to use a new alloy for his poem, a skillful blend of panegyric, satire, discourse and witty commentary. The whole poem is a consummate example of adaptation of means which have been perfectly mastered to a perfectly mastered to the achievement of a clearly conceived end. The close relationship between the art of oratory and the art of poetry is maintained throughout.

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