Restoration Politics and Dryden's Allegory in *Absalom and Achitophel*

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The complex interplay of issues and personalities late in Charles II's reign was the object of John Dryden's attention in *Absalom and Achitophel.* As Historiographer Royal and Poet Laureate, Dryden was called upon in 1681, probably by the King himself, to produce a poem to counter Whig propaganda in the aftermath of the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis. In fact, the timing of the publication of the poem suggests that it was intended to influence the trial of the Earl of Shaftesbury, the leader of the Whig opposition. In the process of imposing his interpretation on the recent past and of conveying these views to his readers, Dryden exercised drastic selectivity and compression. As Laureate, Dryden was more a propagandist for the Stuart monarchy than an historian; and as a poet, he could use language and imagination in ways alien to a conventional historian, or even to a propagandist. Recent studies have examined Dryden's sources for *Absalom and Achitophel,* and some of the details of the analogy based on II Samuel, but the question remains of precisely how, by his use of language and his methods of characterizing the principal historical figures, Dryden generated political allegory out of his compression of the recent past.[1]

The problems facing Dryden in portraying Charles II (David in *Absalom and Achitophel*) were more complex than they might at first appear. Questions concerning the morality of the King's fathering of many illegitimate children were neatly obviated by setting the poem in pre-Christian times, thus transforming the profligacy of a king who "Scatter'd his Maker's Image through the Land" [2] into a positive, even

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heroic virtue. The metaphor which attributes to the King nearly divine procreative powers—"Godlike *David*" [3]—suited well the praise of a King who ruled by divine right, and in whose reign Sir Robert Filmer's tracts on the near-divinity of English kingship received widespread posthumous publication. Although the problem of the King's personal morality was solved simply by the chronological setting of the poem, there remained the more sensitive question of his moral responsibility for a succession crisis largely of his own making. This issue Dryden sought to resolve by a favorable assessment of the King's character and motives.

Until 1679, the Duke of Monmouth occupied a position of great importance, since Charles II had given him not only the peerages usually held by the illegitimate progeny of kings, but also the Captain Generalship. Monmouth was promoted to this office in 1670, on the death of the incumbent, George Monck, first Duke of Albemarle, and was thereby elevated to a military rank equal to that of the King's brother, James, Duke of York, who was Lord High Admiral. For lack of legitimate children of the King, the Dukes of York and Monmouth became the leading contenders for the succession during the 1670's. Charles quite deliberately built up Monmouth as a possible Protestant successor, as a pawn to be played off against the Roman Catholic Duke of York, while he waited to see which way the political winds would blow. With the passage of the Test Act in 1673, which excluded Roman Catholics from public office, the Duke of York had to resign as Lord High Admiral and was temporarily eclipsed at Court by his nephew.

The Whigs circulated a rumor that Charles had been married to Monmouth's mother, Lucy Walter, and thus that Monmouth was legitimate. Charles made no effort to refute these rumors until it became evident that the Whigs represented a threat, not only to the principle of hereditary succession, but also to the institution of the monarchy itself. Not until 1679 did Charles publicly deny that he had ever been married to Monmouth's mother. At this time, Monmouth was deprived of the Captain Generalship. This had been no merely honorary post, and it was allowed to lapse, as an office too exalted for a

subject, until the reign of Anne, who bestowed it on the Duke of Marlborough.[4]

As Poet Laureate, Dryden faced the considerable problem of giving Charles's conduct a respectable appearance. The succession crisis could not appear to have been precipitated by the opportunism of the King himself. Thus, the succession crisis in *Absalom and Achitophel* is the result of David's fatherly indulgence towards Absalom (Monmouth). Far be it from David ever to have actively encouraged Absalom to covet the throne; rather, the crisis develops as the result of David's kindness and leniency. Absalom is ungrateful and plots his father's overthrow. Finally moved to action in defense of his throne, David announces:

> Then Justice wake, and Rigour take her time,
> For Lo! Our Mercy is become our Crime.[5]

Throughout the poem, the selectivity which Dryden exercised over the recent past—his choice of what to include and what to exclude—was guided by the political interest of his patron, the King.

Another example of Dryden's politic selectivity is his portrayal of the Duke of York, who historically was Monmouth's rival for the throne. He is given much less clear characterization than any of the other principal figures of the poem. In fact, he is given no name at all—an omission unique among the principal characters of *Absalom and Achitophel*—and is always referred to merely as "the heir." Dryden praised him for his military exploits and administration of Hebron (Scotland), but the references are brief and general.[6] This is not particularly surprising since although York was the legitimate heir, he was a political embarrassment to Charles because of his Roman Catholicism. Dryden no doubt concluded that the less said about the Duke of York the better.

But Dryden's political commentary is distinguished not only by what it excludes, but also by what it includes. His portrayal of Absalom incisively and accurately probes the complexity of Monmouth's political position, character and motivation. The leader of the Whigs, the Earl of Shaftesbury (Achitophel), never openly supported Monmouth's claim to the throne,

and saw in him only a convenient figurehead for the Whigs.[7] Monmouth's willingness to side with the Whigs, without expecting their leaders to support him, revealed the weakness of his political position. Thus Dryden's representation of the relationship between Absalom and Achitophel is true to the facts of Monmouth's vulnerable political position and dependence on Shaftesbury.

> Achitophel still wants a Chief, and none
> Was found so fit as Warlike *Absalon*:
> Not, that he wish'd his Greatness to create,
> (For Polititians neither love nor hate:)
> But, for he knew, his Title not allow'd,
> Would keep him still depending on the Crowd,
> That Kingly pow'r, thus ebbing out, might be
> Drawn to the dregs of a Democracy.[8]

Later, Dryden even more succinctly summed up his view of the relationship between Monmouth and those with whom he had cast his political fortunes.

> The Peoples Brave, the Politicians Tool:
> Never was Patriot yet, but was a Fool.[9]

The Whig leaders in fact distrusted Monmouth and regarded him with some justification as an aristocratic representative of the system they were combatting. By the time Dryden was writing *Absalom and Achitophel*, many Whigs were looking to William of Orange, rather than to Monmouth, as the solution to the succession problem. With masterly insight into complex motives, Dryden conveyed Monmouth's anxiety to retain his rapidly disintegrating position of leadership in opposition politics:

> Strong were his hopes a Rival to remove,
> With blandishments to win the publick Love,
> To Head the Faction while their Zeal was hot,
> And Popularly prosecute the Plot.[10]

In one line—"To head the faction while their zeal was hot"—a model of concision and precision, Dryden captured the desperation of a man who thought he had nothing to lose by gambling all or nothing.

Dryden's purpose in writing *Absalom and Achitophel* was to praise the King and his supporters, and to ridicule his enemies. In heroic verse, Dryden chose a vehicle particularly well suited for the accomplishment of his purpose. The King's enemies could not logically be portrayed as negligible or despicable, otherwise they could hardly pose a serious threat to his rule. As Ian Jack has pointed out, the heroic tenor of the poem, reinforced by the antique dignity of the biblical allegory, aided Dryden "in the task of raising political satire to the level of high art." [11] Thus even when Dryden was ridiculing an arch-villain like Achitophel, the subject of the ridicule was, in the process, given heroic dimensions, even if those dimensions were of a negative sort.[12]

> Of these the false *Achitophel* was first:
> A Name to all succeeding Ages Curst,
> For close Designs, and crooked Counsels fit,
> Sagacious, Bold, and Turbulent of wit
> Restless, unfixt in Principles and Place;
> In Power unpleas'd, impatient of Disgrace.[13]

In his treatment of Achitophel, Dryden did not scruple to indulge in the traditional literary convention of using physical deformities as an emblem of twisted character and morals.

> A fiery Soul, which working out its way,
> Fretted the Pigmy Body to decay:
> And o'r inform'd the Tenement of Clay.[14]

The hunchbacked Achitophel contrasts with the handsome, affable Absalom, whom he gradually corrupts, or rather, in whom he brings out a latent evil. A contrast between Achitophel and David is even more evident in the sons which each produces. David's progeny includes the physically attractive Absalom, while Achitophel's son is as physically deformed as the father.

> And all to leave, what with his Toyl he won,
> To that unfeather'd, two-Leg'd thing, a Son:
> Got, while his Soul did huddled Notions try;
> And born a shapeless Lump, like Anarchy.[15]

Dryden's simile in this last line links the deformity of Achitophel's physical product—his son—with the deformity of his political product, seen by Dryden as anarchy.

Other examples of Dryden's use of ridicule in the poem can be seen in his treatment of the poet Thomas Shadwell (Og, recalling *MacFlecknoe*), Ben Jonson, and the Scots. In each case, the subject of derision is, in the very process of derision, given negative or ludicrous qualities of monumental proportions. And, in each case, the ridicule is also poetry, for, as T. S. Eliot noted,

> We prize him, as we do Mallarmé, for what he made of his material. Our estimate is only in part the appreciation of ingenuity: in the end the result *is* poetry. Much of Dryden's unique merit consists in his ability to make the small into the great, and the prosaic into the poetic, the trivial into the magnificent.[16]

In fact, it is probably the heroic dimensions given to Dryden's characters which distinguish them, more than their positive or negative qualities. To one of the lesser figures satirized by Dryden, Robert Ferguson, Shaftesbury's dissenting chaplain, are attributed qualities no less exaggerated than those of his more important conspirators.

> Shall that false *Hebronite* escape our Curse,
> *Judas* that keeps the Rebells Pension-Purse;
> *Judas* that pays the Treason-writers Fee,
> *Judas* that well deserves the Namesake's Tree;
> Who at *Jerusalem's* own Gates Erects
> His College for a Nursery of Sects.[17]

Of course, by portraying Ferguson as Judas and thereby conferring upon him the status of an arch-traitor, Dryden was indulging in an anachronism, since the name of Judas would have carried no such connotation in the pre-Christian setting of the poem. But Dryden's poetic license was unruffled by his use of anachronisms, as is evident elsewhere in the poem, and the point of the metaphor carried with it some insight into the workings of Ferguson's character, since Ferguson later turned full circle and became a Jacobite.[18]

When one turns from Dryden's characterization to his use of language in *Absalom and Achitophel,* one is struck by the way puns and whimsy reinforce Dryden's purpose and meaning. When the Old Testament analogy broke down, Dryden parried anticipated criticism with a whimsical treatment of anachronism.

> Some thought they God's Annointed meant to Slay
> By Guns, invented since full many a day:
> Our Authour swears it not; but who can know
> How far the Devil and *Jebusites* may go? [19]

The Old Testament setting was intended to be nearly transparent, and here Dryden appears to be taking delight in deliberately exposing the transparency of the analogy. Later, in his treatment of Ben Jonson, Dryden indulged in further self-deprecatory whimsy.

> And Such he needs must be of thy Inditing,
> This Comes of drinking Asses milk and writing.[20]

Absalom and Achitophel abounds in puns which convey political or religious double meaning. The Jews brought David back from exile "And, with a Generall Shout, proclaim'd him King." [21] Dryden's readers would of course recall that the Restoration had been in great part brought about by General Monck and the army. And when the Jews greeted David's return,

> The Joyfull People throng'd to see him Land,
> Cov'ring the *Beach,* and blackning all the *Strand* [22]

Here Dryden's readers would again recall that the Strand had formed part of the route of Charles II's procession through the streets of London upon his return in 1660. During the Jebusitic (Popish) Plot, Corah's (Titus Oates's) lies are "swallow'd in the Mass, unchew'd and Crude," [23] and, thereafter, Achitophel corrupts young Absalom:

> Who now begins his Progress to ordain;
> With Chariots, Horsemen, and a numerous train:
> From East to West his Glories he displaies:
> And, like the Sun, the promis'd land surveys.[24]

Englishmen who read *Absalom and Achitophel* when it was first published in 1681 would remember that only a year before, Monmouth had made his triumphant "Progress," accompanied by bands of aristocratic horsemen, to the West of England, where his reception was so tumultuous that King Charles had him arrested for disturbing the public peace. Shaftesbury despaired when Monmouth declined, at that critical moment, to raise the rebellion they had been planning.[25]

But Dryden made the most telling use of puns and whimsy in his triplets. The triplets were bound to stand out in a poem dominated by couplets, and Dryden often used them as special vehicles for double or triple entendres, sometimes incorporating some form of numerical reference to set off the triplet.

> When two or three were gather'd to declaim
> Against the Monarch of *Jerusalem*,
> *Shimei* was always in the midst of them.[26]

In this triplet is a deliberate reference to the passage in the Gospel of Matthew, which would have been familiar to most of Dryden's readers, of Jesus's promise "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." [27] But of course the gathering of rebels is an absolute perversion of a religious gathering. The ambiguity of "the monarch of Jerusalem" adds to the plausibility of the double meaning, especially in the context of the attitude, inherited from medieval times and still advocated by Royalists in the seventeenth century, that rebellion against God's anointed ruler was rebellion against God himself. In this view, rebellion was not just a civil crime, but also a grievous sin.[28]

A similar numerical reference in a triplet appears in Dryden's characterization of Achitophel:

> To compass this the Triple Bond he broke;
> The Pillars of the Publick Safety shook:
> And fitted *Israel* for a Foreign Yoke.[29]

The "Triple Bond" refers to the Triple Alliance of 1668 between England, Holland, and Sweden, which was abandoned

by Charles II in the Treaty of Dover with Louis XIV in 1670. Here Dryden is indulging in true historical sleight of hand in blaming England's abandonment of the Triple Alliance on Shaftesbury. The Earl was a member of the Cabal Ministry which negotiated the Treaty of Dover and favored war with the Dutch in 1672. But Shaftesbury did not at first know of the secret articles of the Treaty, by which Charles agreed to re-establish Catholicism when he deemed appropriate in return for subsidies from Louis XIV. The import of these articles did not remain a secret for long; Shaftesbury and the Whigs were adamantly opposed to the policies which the articles advanced.[30] If anyone fitted England "for a Foreign Yoke" in this period, it was Charles II, whose subsidies from Louis XIV insured his military and diplomatic support abroad, and his independence from the Parliamentary power of the purse at home. Just as Dryden had earlier shifted blame for the succession crisis away from Charles, here, even in his use of triplets, he is similarly shifting the blame for an unpopular foreign policy away from the King.

Dryden wrote this poem with a clear eye to the political interest of his patron, Charles II. The poet's life and works have been subject to charges of opportunism during his own lifetime and since, but these have been largely refuted by the greater understanding which has been fostered by recent careful studies.[31] Dryden's poems on affairs of state, like Shakespeare's history plays, transcend historical revisionism. His allegory in *Absalom and Achitophel* spoke to the political experience of his readers. His interpretation of that experience, cast in an Old Testament analogy often deliberately transparent, was a didactic equivalence designed to persuade Englishmen to identify with the High Church Tory view of kingship and divine right of hereditary succession.

NOTES

1. Critical interest in Dryden was revived in this century by Mark Van Doren in *The Poetry of John Dryden* (New York, 1920), and by T. S. Eliot's *Homage to John Dryden* (New York, 1920). Subsequent Dryden scholarship is reviewed by Samuel Holt Monk in "Dryden Studies: A Survey, 1920-1945," *English Literary History*, XIV (1947), 46-63. Maynard Mack provides a general historical background of *Absalom*