

**MAC FLECKNOE**

*Mac Flecknoe* is a mock heroic poem, written to ridicule Thomas Shadwell. The poem was the result of various disagreements between Thomas Shadwell and John Dryden.

CIRCUMSTANCES THAT LED TO THE POEM ARE :-

1. Political : Dryden and Shadwell were on good terms until the nation got bifurcated into two political camps – the Whigs and the Tories. The Whigs followed the Earl of Shaftesbury, who brought up the Exclusion Bill before the Parliament. The Bill intended to exclude the Catholic James II, Duke of York from succeeding to the throne of his brother, Charles II. The Whigs, in turn, favoured the Protestant Duke of Monmouth, an illegitimate child of Charles II. It was on these political grounds that the bitterest disagreement evolved between Dryden and Shadwell.

Dryden had attached himself to the Tories, the Royalist cause and Shadwell, on the other hand, favoured the Whigs, i.e., the Anti-Royalists. The contention between the two parties intensified with the passing of the Exclusion Bill. The Exclusionists and the Anti- Exclusionists were at loggerheads. The literary men countered each other through their works. Dryden attacked the Whigs in *Absalom and Achitophel* ; wherein Shadwell was made the subject of harsh reference. Shadwell, in his turn, replied through the comedy, *Lancashire Witches*. This literary war continued with the publication of *The Medal* by Dryden. It was a satire written on the occasion of the commemoration of Lord Shaftesbury.

However, the most caustic attack was *The Medal of John Bayes* by Shadwell. *The Medal of John Bayes* has a preface "Epistle to the Tories" that mocked the Tories. *The Medal*, likewise, had a preface "Epistle to the Whigs" attacking its counterparts. This, along with Dryden's estimation of Shadwell's poetic talents led to the publication of *Mac Flecknoe*.

2. Quite in coherence of the age in which the genre of satire developed, religion and politics were considered appropriate subjects to be written about. Dryden, however, projected his satire as being defensive rather than being offensive. As he wrote against the plagiarists, witless writings, ephemerality in order to defend high literature. Shadwell offended Dryden when he satirized the Catholic priests in *The Lancashire Witches*. Dryden was considering becoming a Catholic at that time, which he did in 1686. In 1688, James II was deposed, and Dryden, as a Tory and a staunch Catholic lost both favour at court and the position of the Poet Laureate. His successor was none other than Shadwell himself, a Whig and a convenient rather than a devout Protestant.
3. The literary points of contention were their different estimates of the genius of Ben Jonson as well as their contrasting opinions about the true purpose of comedy and about the value of rhymed plays. The preference of Dryden for the comedy of wit and repartee, while Shadwell preferred Ben Jonson's Comedy of humours.
4. The issue of plagiarism.

Furthermore, Dryden's neo classicism foregrounded two major characteristics. He appreciated and recommended the theory of the ancient Greek and Roman writers. He critically handled the topical and realistic themes having a direct bearing upon his society and times.

The neo classicists were inspired by the rediscovery of classical works of ancient Greece and Rome. They espoused the ideals of order, logic, restraint, accuracy, "correctness", decorum and so on. For the neoclassical writers, literary composition was a rational, rule-bound and practiced art, that demanded a great deal of craft, labour and study.

Two central concepts of the neoclassical literary theory and practice were :-

- A.) Imitation of the classical models.
- B.) Nature : The hierarchical and therefore, the harmonious order of the Universe, that also paralleled the social and political hierarchies.

Dryden looked towards the Roman satirists, the likes of Horace, Juvenal, Persius and Boileau. He presented the negative traits of dullness of Shadwell in a positive light. By elevating the objects of satire, Dryden could demean them. Although, he is being scornful towards Titus Gates, Slingsby Bethel and Shadwell, it is the use of heroic couplets that lends it dignity. Through this very technique of elevating a trivial subject matter, the mock-heroic effect is consequently produced, that is further enhanced by the incongruity generated because of the use of high idiom and imagery; the use of Biblical and classical allusions for an allegedly 'dull' Shadwell.

Dryden himself classifies *Mac Flecknoe* as a Varronian satire, that is, a satire whose vehicle is a narrative invented by the poet. Although, Flecknoe and Shadwell do represent real people, the crowning of Shadwell as an heir to the "Realm of Nonsense" has no real life references. Dryden himself dismisses personal satire or lampoonery, that however, seems out of place while considering the case of Shadwell. Satire, for Dryden, was a mode for moral reformation.

*Mac Flecknoe* represents an important link between the English mock-heroic poem and the ancient traditions of satire. The use of heroic couplets, its many parodic allusions to the epic, references to Shadwell's own works, ludicrous effects generated by contemporary place names and references, its elevated subject matter, that is, the transference of power. The irony, however, is conveyed through the positive evaluation of such qualities as "dullness" and "nonsense".