

## Assimilation of Mythical and Political Issues in Absalom and Achitophel

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### ABSTRACT:

Absalom and Achitophel is a landmark political satire by John Dryden. The poem exists in two parts, the first part, of 1681 is undoubtedly by Dryden and the second part of 1682 was written by another hand, most likely Nahum Tate, except for a few pages including attack on Thomas Shadwell and Elkanah Settle expressed and doeg that Dryden wrote himself. The poem is an allegory that uses the story of the rebellion of Absalom against king David as the basis for discussion of the background to the Popish Plot (1678), the exclusion crises (1679-1681), and the Monmouth Rebellion (1685).

John Dryden claimed that Absalom and Achitophel was carefully planned to promote political reform. To gain this end, Dryden used satire, the true aim of which he defined as "the amendment of vices by correction". The particular vices he wanted to correct were those of whigs of his day, who were seeking to secure the succession of the duke of Monmouth, illegitimate son of Charles II, to his father's throne. Second realizing that direct satire might defeat its purpose by incurring resentment, Dryden chose to attack the Whigs by casting them as characters in the biblical story of Absalom's revolt against David. Third to increase his satire's effectiveness, he cast it in heroic couplet "for their sweetness in good verse, which tickles even while it hurts, and no man can be heartily angry with him who pleases him against his will".

There are many different ways of understanding Dryden's poem Absalom and Achitophel. The most common reading compares, "the connections between fatherhood and kingship". Throughout biblical allusions Dryden connects ancient fatherhood with current to not only show the precedent that was set but also to show how it connects with a royal's responsibilities. Dryden uses the fatherly indulgence of David to explore the legitimacy of the Achitophel's succession. Dryden uses an old story, the prodigal son, to create a clear picture of how self-indulgent love creates unfair conflict.

Written in heroic couplet, Absalom and Achitophel is often called Dryden's best poem. Its direct literary influence reaches us from Dryden's contemporary to Alexander Pope and Charles Churchill in the eighteenth century and to Lord Byron in the nineteenth century.

In the poem Dryden indicates similarities between the biblical story which tells the wicked Achitophel urged king David's illegitimate son Absalom to rise up against his father, and events in England between 1678 and 1681, when Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, a leader of the Whiggish opposition to the king, was accused of persuading James Scott, Duke of Monmouth and illegitimate son of Charles II to rebel against his father.

Achitophel is a brilliant wit touched by the madness of ambition. Unwilling to be remembered only for his distinguished career as a judge, he resolves "To ruin or to rule the state"

Using the king's alleged sympathy for the Jebusites as an excuse for rebellion Achitophel first uses flattery to win over Absalom proclaiming that the nation is clamoring for him - a "Second Moses". At first Absalom resists pointing out that David is a wise and just king, and that David's brother (the Duke of York) is the legal heir. These half-hearted objections Achitophel meets with sophistry. David's mildness, he claims, deteriorated into weakness, the public good demands Absalom's strength; the rightful heir is planning to murder Absalom; David secretly wants Absalom to be king and will support his claim as heir to the throne. Although David provides no cause for rebellion, as the wiser Jews (Tories) point out, a

cause is found in the alleged Jebusite (catholic) plot to convert the nation to Egyptian (French) religion. The plot miscarries, but it does create factions whose leaders are jealous of David and oppose his reign. Dryden wrote this poem to make his people aware of the bad corrupted politicians of his current time he tried to renarrate a historical and religious event in order to spare his people from a disastrous bloodshed. Therefore, satire art is a "Denunciation of a writer burning with indignation at some social wrong or abuse is capable of reaching the very highest level of literature". (Smeaton : XIII), from smeaton's description, a statement can be made : the good literature can be regarded as the one that is fully coutious of the soico-political events and outcomes of the country. It must provide a realistic reflection of the society.

English parliament was growing strong during the time of king Charles I. King charles managed to dissolve the parliament in 1629. However, the puritan opposition regained it strength in 1640; the conflict reached its point in 1642. Eventually, the civil war emerged between king's men and parliaments.

The war ended with decapitation of king Charles I in 1649. The problems did not end with the end of the civil war.

The parliament had to restore the English Monarchy so as to regain balance to the country. In 1660, King Charles II, son of king Charles I, was brought back to the English throne. King Charles II tried to persuade the parliament and tame it several times. King Charles II tried to overcome the power of the parliament. He started to seek power from the outside of the Island, especially from the french because the french monarchy was a catholic powerful kingdom during that time. King Charles II connection with Louis XIV was getting stronger as well as the parliament's suspicion. Meanwhile, the groups emerged in England; one of them was led by Anthony who claimed the power for parliament and protestantism. Later on, it was known as Whig. The other group was led by Darby who claimed power for the king and tolerance for catholicism. It was known as Tory. However, the trouble between the two parties continued. The conflict was getting serious as the king was getting old. King Charles II did not have a legitmate heir to ascend to the throne after his death. In such cases, the crown usually passes to king's brother if he had any. King Charles II brother James was catholic. The English parliament was completely against the Idea of having a catholic king. However, in 1678, a popish plot was devided by Titus Oates who spread a rumor saying that the catholic brother intends to dethrone King Charles II and restore catholicism in England.

The rumor was soon blowen out, and the catholic threat faded away for a while. But Anthony Ashley Cooper, the first earl of saftsbury and head of the Whigs issued the exclusion plan to deprive James succession to the throne in favour of James, King Charles II's illegitimate son. He played a double plot on king Charles II by tempting both his son, and his brother against each other over the throne. King Charles II was obliged to declare the illegitimacy of duke of Monmouth in order to spare his brother therefore the balance of power seemed to be on kings side once more, King Charles II exploited the chance to dissolve the parliament, arrest shaftsbury for high treason and locked him up in the tower untill his trail. However, shaftsbury escaped to Holland and died there. King Charles II managed to control the situation. The rebellious son was defeated by the royal army. Monmouth was executed other the death of King Charles II. Duke of York ascended to throne shortly after the death of the king.

The only account of the story of king David and his rebellious son (Absalom) is Bible. The story of Absalom's revolt is told in the second book of samual in the old testament of the Bible (Chapter's 14 to 18).

The conflict starts when King David's son Amnon (Half-brother of Absalom) apes his half-sister Tamer (Absalom's sister). Absalom was known for beauty and strength. He was favored by the king. He was raged when he heard the story of her sister. He, later on, plans to invite all his brothers for a banquet, Amnon is among the invites. They celebrate and drink till Amnon is almost drunk Absalom Signals his servants to stay Amnon savagely, and the rest of the guest run away to save their lives although Absalom had no intention to harm them. Absalom flees to his mother's family in Geshur, where he dwells for three years.

Joab, the Nephew of King David, convinces the king to permit Absalom to come back to Jerusalem. King David prevents Absalom to see him for two years, which makes Absalom hate him. Absalom becomes disappointed of his father's forgiveness. He, then, thinks of a plan to dethrone his father. Absalom, with the aid of Achitophel (advisor of the king), revolts against his father and seizes Jerusalem king David and his followers the to Mahanaim and he was welcomed warmly by Shobi, one of the Ammonite princes. Later on, the news reached Ahitophel who induced Absalom to revolt against his father. Achitophel realized that king David will destroy all those who revolt against him. He goes to his house and hangs himself dead.

King David prepares his army to end the conflict. He divides them into three groups and they go to face his rebellious son. He is so miserable that he does not want to harm neither his son nor his followers, but he is obliged to make a choice. Before they go to the battle, he asks his commanders "Deal gently, for my sake with the young man, with Absalom".

The battle in the forest of Ephraim occurs, and his son is caught by Joab. Joab order to kill Absalom in order to stop the battle The peace is restored in the kingdom but not in the heart of David. He mourns the death of his son so bitterly, that the victory seems of no importance for him. He gets angry with Joab for not sparing the life of his son. Nevertheless, he forgives all those who fought on Absalom's side and goes back to Jerusalem.

The essential theme of the poem is the origin of several fractions against the government and the king as the popish plot of the Titus Oates. Dryden explains the political condition of England at the beginning of the poem. The rest of the poem deals with the beginning of rebellion under the leadership of shaftsbury of whose speeches are calculated to persuade the Duke of Monmouth (Absalom) to lead a revolt against his father, King (David). The replies of Absalom are also set forth in the poem. The power of the poem essentially lies in the Mechanism of Biblical allegory. Every contemporary character is given a Biblical name. The principal political personage are: Monmouth (Absalom); Shaftesbury the fals tempter (Achitophel); the Duke of Buckingham (Zimri); Charles II (David); Titus Oates (Corah); Slingsby Bethel, Sheriff of London (Shimei).

The English nation is Israel and English men are the Jews. The political situation in England is paralleled with the rebellion of the Jews against their king David. The first 45 lines of the poem provide an introduction to King David (i.e. King Charles II), Owen Michal (i.e. Catherine of Braganza) who was childless, the illegitimate son Absalom (the Duke Monmouth) and James. The duke of Monmouth was loved by the King as well as the public:

With Secret Joy, indulgent David viewed  
His youthful Image in his son renew'd ;  
To all her his wisher Nothing he deni'd (31-33)

Dryden uses the reference of King David to describe king Charles II. King David is well known for his endless desire and lust in women which brought him a large number of illegitimate children, so is king Charles II. Dryden intentionally compare between the two kings in order to show people that even kings, and prophets can be misled by lust and desire which leads them to greater troubles and suffering. He tries to tell us that both kings made a mistake when they did adultery. However, they did not notice it because they were infatuated with desire. The illegitimate sons that they made from this affair were favoured by the two kings to a degree that they saw themselves in their sons (Absalom, and James II).

Dryden, then makes a comparison between Hebrew, English people for being lavish, and wicked that no "No king would govern nor no God could pleasure". They are so wild and troublesome that they, sometimes, deviate from God's path if they are allowed to do so. Dryden was on the side of king Charles II and he was member or at least favoured by the Tory Party. They emphasized catholicism. Thus, Dryden seemed to ridicule protestantism which is a deviation from catholic Church.

Dryden then, criticizes the politicians who are ready to do whatsoever to achieve their goals. He refers to the civil war that occurred in England during king Charles I. Next, Dryden refers to the 'devil' who induced Adam and Eve to disobey God and eat from the apple tree, the same devil (Achitophel) who

Induced Absalom to revolt against his father, king David and the same devil who lured James, the Duke of Monmouth, to revolt against her father king Charles II.

Dryden makes clear reference to the popish plot that was coined by Oates which caused a severe opposition to the catholics in the country. He explain the consequence of the rumor which divided the country into two parts." believing nothing or believing all". (117). Dryden tries to make people aware of the consequence of this plot. He says, "This plot, which fai'ed for want of common sense./Had yet a deep and dangerous consequence : (134-135). He says that such rumours will change into serious problems that effect the whole country. The popish plot made way for many false characters to act on the political stage of England among them lord of Shaftsbury whom Dryden describes a Architophel. Shaftsbury is, as cross describes, "a born agitators and demagogue, a forerunner of the modern party leader. (548).

However, "the girt of Dryden's charge against Shaftsbury is not that represented the people, but that he deceived them". Shaftsbury (like Achitophil) used people, and prince to dethrone the king and fulfill his goals of attaining power over kingdom.

Achitophel, grown weary to possess

Alawful fame, and lazie Happiness.

Disdan'd the Golden fruit to gather free

And lent the crowd his Arm to shake the tree

Now, manifest of Crimes, Contriv'd Long since,

He stood at bold Definace with his prince

Held up the Buckler of the peoples cause

Against the crown and Sculk'd be hin'd the laws.

The wished occasion or the plot he takes;

Some circumstances finds, but more he makes.

By Buzzing Emissaries, fills the ears.

of Listening Crouds, with Jealousies and fears

Or Arbitrary counsels brought to light,

And proves the king himself a Jebusite (200-13)

Achitophel (Shaftsbury) was not of the royal blood. There was no hope for him to become a king. Therefore, he looked for someone who can reinforce his plan to take the throne. Achitophel still wants to chief and none/was found so fit as war like Absalom" (220-1)

Achitophel uses policy to induce the young man and make him revolt against his father king David (i.e. King Charles II). Achitophel uses a Language that is similar to the language that was used by Devil when he lured Adam and Eve. Achitophel works smoothly and successfully upon the psycho of the young man. He asks Absalom, how long wilt thou the general Joy detains", (244). Achitophel further explains the subject in terms of fate. He says that it is your destiny to rule but if you do not take chance, you will regret it for the rest of your life. Achitophel talks of the chance that his father king David (Charles II) took and became king of Israel (England). Absalom (James) must do the same as his father.

Our fortune rolls as from a smooth Descent.

And from the first impression, takes the Bent;

But, if unseized the glides away like wind;

And leaves repenting folly for behind (256-59)

Achitophel further works on his plan. He makes a revolutionary spirit within the heart of the young man through his masterly use of language and his clear way of dealing with circumstance of the country. Achitophel is well aware of the religious conflict in the country and he advises Absalom to exploit the situation, and reveal himself as a savoir of the people.

Absalom is "Fired with near possession of a crown" but he is hesitant and confused at the same time. He reluctantly uses the art of his false master and persuades the people easily.

Absalom continues to put the blame on fate and his father that he had to revolt, and conquer his throne. He praises the trickery of Achitoptel,"

Youth, Beauty, graceful action seldom fails;  
But common interest always will prevail. (723-24).

He simply admits that they had to fake peace in order to achieve their goals and so they did. Lines 753-810 can be regarded as the most important part of the poem. It seems to reflect the Ideas and thoughts of king Charles II as well as Dryden himself. It criticizes the naivety of the Israeli people (English people) that they never learn the lesson. They all are familiar with the stories of Absalom and Achitophel that is mentioned in Bible (the Old Testament) yet they took the "Bait" of the devil (incarnated in Achitophel and Shaftsbury) one more time.

In the last part of the poem, the king speaks. He says that my enemy might question my ability to apply the necessary laws". They seem to regard my kindness as weakness! The King says that these who are revolting and doing terrible things will be faced to the law. They will face death not because of the king's wish, but their own bad deeds.

The king however, claims that God is on his side, and victory will be on his side. He also claims that the thunder is the sign of God's consent of the battle that must take place in order to restore the righteous law. Dryden concludes the poem "with David then was Israel's peace restored, Crowds mourn'd their error and obey'd their Lord.

Dryden adapts the biblical story to defend the king by earning people's favour and support. He presents the king as a sacred guard of people and the country. Dryden suggests that the king is put in his place by the consent of God. Dryden indirectly tells people if they rebel against the king, they are rebelling against God's will. They will be cursed, and doomed in the end. Dryden uses the image of King David to exemplify King Charles II's silence, passivity and lack of action. He says that King Charles II's passivity is out of love and kindness toward his son and people. He also reminds people that the king is favoured by God, and he will overcome any rebellion or crises.

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