

Block

# 3

**JOHN DRYDEN : *MAC FLECKNOE***

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## BLOCK INTRODUCTION

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This Block will acquaint you with John Dryden who was the most important poet, satirist, critic, dramatist, translator, and prose writer of his time. The production as well as the criticism and enjoyment of literature was his passion and the biographical outline of his life will show how poetry or literature was the vocation and the profession of Dryden's life. The Age of Dryden (1660-1700) is so named because it was dominated by him.

We shall also study Dryden's poem *Mac Flecknoe*, the first literary satire and one of the great mock-heroic poems in English. We will begin our study of the poem with an annotated reading of the poem, going on to a detailed summary and explanations and then take a look at the theme and poetic diction through relevant extracts. This will enable us to see how the poem defines by negatives and discrepancies, undoes epic pretensions by playing with the mock-heroic and lets dullness express itself.



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# UNIT 1 JOHN DRYDEN: LIFE AND WORK

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Life of John Dryden (1631-1700)
- 1.3 Career
- 1.4 Life and Art
- 1.5 The Popish Plot
  - 1.5.1 *Absalom and Achitophel*
  - 1.5.2 *Mac Flecknoe*
- 1.6 Contribution to English Literature
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 Answers to Check Your Progress
- 1.9 Unit End Questions
- 1.10 Suggested Reading

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit will introduce you to John Dryden (1631-1700) – the man and the poet, and discuss the biographical and historical background. You will read a brief description of his life and by the end of this unit, you will be in a position to see how his writing was affected by not only his personal experiences but also the social and political conditions of his time. You will see how far whatever Dryden wrote was almost automatically suggested by events in his contemporary life.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this unit, we will not only read about John Dryden, but will also pay special attention to the manner in which his writings were generally conditioned by the historic events of his society. Dryden was the most important man of letters of Restoration England (1660-1700) and is said to have exercised a greater influence on the neo-classic age of English literature than any other poet and critic, and his own age exercised a greater influence on him than on any other poet of the time. John Dryden was appointed Poet Laureate in 1668 and Histriographer Royal in 1670. But on the accession of James II to the English throne, Dryden became a Catholic, and refusing to abandon his new faith after 1688, he was stripped of the Laureateship and other royal appointments. So this unit will highlight the criss-cross of attractions and revulsions that gradually emerged in John Dryden, the man and the poet.

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## 1.2 LIFE OF JOHN DRYDEN (1631-1700)

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**Birth and The Family:** John Dryden, the son of Erasmus Dryden, was born of puritan stock at Aldwinkle in Northamptonshire on August 9, 1631. John Locke

was born one year later, and Isaac Newton in 1642. These three great Englishmen of the same age gave English poetry, British philosophy and modern science respectively a new direction. Dryden's pride in his family is expressed in *To my Honoured Kinsman* (1700).

**At School:** He was taught by a famous scholar, Dr Busby at his Westminster school and was thoroughly trained by him in rhetoric. In Dryden's poetry and drama, the poet and his characters plead a case or argue a cause – we can see the influence of his school teacher behind it.

**Trinity College Cambridge:** In 1650 Dryden entered Trinity College, Cambridge on a Westminster scholarship. His interest in learning developed there, but he did not get a fellowship in the College.

**London:** After four years at Cambridge, Dryden came to London. There, he devoted himself to politics and literature. He became secretary to Sir George Pickering, his cousin on his mother's side who stood high in the Protector, Cromwell's favour. The death of Cromwell in 1658 gave Dryden his first opportunity to appear in the limelight by publishing a copy of verses to deplore the event. *The Heroic stanzas on the Death of the Lord Protector* was published early in 1659, and it inaugurated the poetical and political career of John Dryden.

In November 1662, Dryden became a member of the newly founded Royal Society.

**Marriage:** Dryden married Lady Elizabeth Howard, the sister of Sir Robert Howard, in 1663. He had three sons, Charles, John and Henry. Charles and Henry chose the religious profession, John was an author who wrote a comedy called *The Husband His own Cuckold*.

In the translation of *Juvenal* (1693), Dryden was assisted by his sons. He cursed marriage perhaps because he was not happy in his married life. Saintsbury mentioned a joke that the poet had at the cost of his wife. One day she said to him: 'I wish I were a book, and then perhaps you would pay me some attention.' He replied: 'Then, my dear, pray, be an almanac, that I may change you at the end of the year.'

Life and art were not far from each other in the case of Dryden. Look at the following lines that he wrote in the last year of his life:

Minds are so hardly matched that en'n the first  
Though paired by heav'n in Paradise, were cursed;  
For Man and woman though in one they grow  
Yet, first or last, return again to two  
Not that my verse would blemish all the fair,  
But yet if some be bad 'tis wisdom to beware,  
And better shun the bait than struggle in the snare.

Dryden had started writing poems while still at school and began to write plays in the year of his marriage, 1663. For about ten years, he wrote poems, plays, prefaces to plays and poems, and critical essays. He became popular and famous as the writer of heroic plays in which he chose to use the decasyllabic couplet. But in 1671, a burlesque, *The Rehearsal*, which satirised Dryden as Bayes was staged. Dryden had been made poet Laureate in place of Sir William Davenant

and he was also made Historiographer Royal soon after, in 1670. He was already a member of the Royal Society. Thus, he was well-known, and the mockery of his talent not only hurt him deeply but also affected his reputation. It exaggerated the artificiality and unreason of his heroic drama - the rant and bombast, the mechanical plots and the grandiose speeches, and the constant harping on the conflict between honour and love. The running commentary of Bayes reveals the weakness of Dryden's critical attitude in respect of heroic drama and the manner in which he glories in the worthless character of Drawcansir.

Dryden's defence of heroic plays and his satirical portrait of Zimri in *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) were his revenge. Dryden's interest in poetry, poetic drama and literature was more than personal. He guided the younger writers and was generous with sharing poetical fame. He was highly influential as a poet and man of letters from the beginning, and his influence was greater after his death. During the Augustan Age, or the first half of the eighteenth century, his influence on English poetry was most powerful and dominant but the Dryden whose influence was so great emerged not before his fiftieth year (1681).

The development of Dryden from the heroic to the mock-heroic, from the serious to the serio-comic was a self-discovery. The control and complexity of the ironic tone in *Absalom and Achitophel* written at the age of fifty is the first sign of maturity. And there was no decline after that. But more than two decades of criticism, self-examination, and experiment, mainly dramatic, had to pass before Dryden could mature and discover his original genius and assert his poetic authority.

The story of Dryden's religious conversion has been a topic of debate among his biographers. *The Song for St. Cecilia's Day* (1687) composed in the heat of his recent conversion to Roman Catholicism, is pure in form and has a communicative musical beauty and sweetness. But his conversion from Protestantism to Roman Catholicism at a time when the latter was in favour at the Court, laid him open to suspicion as to his sincerity. The *Hind and the Panther* (1687), an allegory, states Dryden's personal drama, the state of his spirit in his mid-fifties and some critics feel that the poem dramatises the crisis in the poet's mind and spirit. However, this crisis was suspected to be merely mean opportunism.

The struggle to achieve genuine humility is endless for most of us. Dryden was a poet, not a saint. Charity and compassion were not easy for him to achieve. His ambition to write an English epic remained unrealized. But if he could not write an epic, he could translate one of the two greatest European epics, Virgil's Latin epic, *Aeneid*. Dryden's Virgil and Pope's Homer did not achieve the poetic success of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but they fall just short of that.

In the last decade of his life, Dryden translated, together with Virgil's *Aeneid*, satires and 'fables' from Ovid, Juvenal and Boccaccio. During the sixties and seventies, Dryden experimented with the art of drama, and wrote excellent drama criticism. He wrote his satires during the eighties which made him immortal as a great English poet. The nineties were the decade of translations.

This "man of letters" was also a dramatist, critic and translator, and his life was largely controlled by economic exigencies and dependence on the Court. He cherished as his first ambition, as an artist, the making of good verse.



Dryden's Odes and lyrical poems of the last fifteen years (1685-1700) are outstanding and reveal inspiration struggling to express itself, with an attention to style that is often too minute. In 1688 when King James II was driven from England by the Great Revolution which gave the throne to the Protestant William and Mary, Dryden lost all his offices including the Laureateship and the pension that had been conferred on him of late. Ironically enough, Thomas Shadwell whom he had lampooned in *Mac Flecknoe*, was appointed as the new Poet Laureate.

But still undaunted, John Dryden in his sixty seventh year once more devoted himself to classical literature which inspired him to undertake translations from the Latin of Juvenal, Perseus and Virgil – all of which opened up fresh sources of income. In 1697 came *Alexander's Feast* containing his best known poems including the *Second Ode*. His modernizations of Chaucer and Boccaccio under the title of *Fables*, and the translation of the Classics were two pieces of literary work (published in 1699) which were particularly suited to his temperament. The last decade of Dryden's life was devoted to the translation of Latin classics, to writing some of his best criticism e.g. the criticism of Chaucer and *The Discourse on Satire*, and some of his best poems were published during this period.

The seventeenth century in English literature is perhaps the greatest, because it produced the great plays of Shakespeare, the Metaphysical poets, Milton and Dryden.

Six months after the publication of his *Fables*, Dryden died in 1700.

### Check Your Progress 1

- a) Name the poem which inaugurated the poetical and political career of John Dryden.  
.....
- b) When did Dryden become a Member of the newly founded Royal Society?  
.....
- c) Discuss briefly the literary activities of John Dryden in his sixty seventh year.  
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## 1.3 CAREER

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The first half of Dryden's long poetic career was spent in experiment. He had been appointed Poet Laureate and Historiographer Royal in 1670, and, before that, nominated a member of the Royal Society. But his experiment with drama did not succeed. He had intended to leave the stage, 'to which my genius never much inclined me'. His desire to write a narrative epic 'for the honour of my native country, to which a poet is particularly obliged', was not likely to be realised. His fascination with the heroic, the romantic, the uncommon was over. He mocked heroes as 'a race of men who can never enjoy quiet in themselves, till they have taken it from all the world'.



In his *Discourse on Satire* (1693), he stated at length his views on the epic. With the publication of *Absalom and Achitophel* in November 1681, he had turned to satire. His familiarity with Greek and Latin Satire shows not only his learning but also the literary source of his inspiration as a satirist. He traced the etymology of the English word Satire to the Roman word 'Satura' 'which signifies full, and abundant; and full also of variety, in which nothing is wanting to its due perfection'. About his own taste, he said, 'I owe more to Horace for my instruction, and more to Juvenal, for my pleasure'. His admiration for the French Satirist, Boileau, was great and he said that Boileau wrote 'the most beautiful, and most noble kind of satire'. He found 'the majesty of the heroic, finely mixed with the venom of the other, and raising the delight which otherwise would be flat and vulgar, by the sublimity of the expression'. He admitted he was 'naturally vindictive', but claimed that he had suffered in silence, and 'possessed my soul in quiet'. The source in personal experience of what Arnold called 'some touch of frost to the imaginative life of the soul' and 'some repression and silencing of poetry' is remarkable. But it was not merely personal. A concern for social order, poetic excellence and spiritual balance is reflected, respectively, in *Absalom and Achitophel*, *Mac Flecknoe*, and the two philosophical poems *Religio Laici* and *The Hind and the Panther*. 1682 is a year of special importance in Dryden's poetic achievement. *The Medal*, *Religio Laici*, and *Mac Flecknoe*, were all published in this year. The personal drama of Dryden is enacted in *The Hind and the Panther* (1686). Humility and Charity - the Christian virtues - confront pride and malice. A belligerent and proud poet finds, and states, how difficult it is to live a religious life in the world. The sects of Christianity - Puritan, Protestant and Roman Catholic - were hostile to each other in Dryden's England.

## 1.4 LIFE AND ART

Life and art are not separable in the case of Dryden. He began his poetic career during the civil war and his elegy on the death of the 'Protector', Oliver Cromwell, in 1658, is one of his earliest poems. His 'public' spirit gave his poetry public themes, and his greatest work is political satire. The shifting loyalties of his life as a person and poet have caused much critical confusion. He changed, as Dr. Johnson said, 'with the nation' at the time of the Restoration. His religious conversion to Romanism towards the end of his poetical career has been a controversial topic. It should not, however, be difficult for us to appreciate these changes - political, religious and in versification as signs of catholicity and a liberal spirit rather than of mere opportunism. The Revolution of 1688 affected his poetic career somewhat as the Restoration of 1660 affected Milton's.

The dedications, the prefaces and the epilogues of Dryden tell the sad story of the subservience to which his genius had to stoop to get patronage. His love for his country and his society, however, is hidden behind this surface. The independence of spirit of a poet who was something of a hero lionised by the contemporary elite or literary circle is revealed behind his formal encomiastic (bestowing praise) prose and verse. If he is not visionary like the later English poets, e.g. Blake, Wordsworth and Shelley, he has the advantage of being more social. His love as well as his indignation and hatred was more real and lifelike than theirs.

No doubt Dryden's best poetry (which is mock-heroic satire) is essentially social in the positive sense. He valued the commendation of adversaries as 'the greatest triumph of a writer, because it never comes unless extorted'. The best judge of a poem, according to him, however, is the impartial reader. The transmutation of life into art succeeds in *Mac Flecknoe*, because the mock-heroic ceremony (the coronation) is a comic drama, transforming personal experience into literary criticism. 'There is a sweetness in good verse' (said Dryden, in the *Preface to Absalom and Achitophel*) 'which tickles even while it hurts'. The rhetorical power of the poem lies as much in its verse as in its argument which simplifies, exaggerates and distorts.

Dryden's interest in public life and affairs was great and it inspired his creative imagination better than anything else. It is not purely chance that *Absalom and Achitophel* happens to be the greatest political poem in English.

It is worth noting here that nearly everything that Dryden wrote was almost automatically suggested by events in his contemporary life. The first group of Dryden's poems was brought to a close by *Annus Mirabilis* (1667). In 1670, Dryden was made Histriographer Royal in the Court of Charles II. After some time, he found in the aims and methods of the Whig intriguers a subject made for his poetic genius. Soon the big question arose: who should succeed Charles II? The anti-Catholics led by the brilliant and unprincipled Shaftesbury tried to set aside the succession of James, the Catholic brother. The infamous Popish plot of Titus Oates and the tragi-comic attempts to place Monmouth on the English throne were incidents in the conspiracy.

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## 1.5 THE POPISSH PLOT

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The Popish Plot was disclosed by Titus Oates in 1678. Oates, the son of an Anabaptist preacher, had first been an Anglican clergyman, then he switched to the Catholic faith, but was expelled from Jesuit College where he was undergoing training for a religious profession in the new order. He claimed that he was present at a Jesuit conference held in London in April 1678 where a plot to kill the king and usurp the British throne was hatched by the Catholics. The revelation of what came to be called the Popish Plot led to the passing of the Exclusion Bill by the House of Commons and opinion turned in favour of the king who wanted his Catholic brother, the Duke of York, to succeed him to the British throne. He summoned a meeting of the parliament at Oxford in March, and soon dissolved it. In July, the principal leader of the opposition, the Whig Earl of Shaftesbury was arrested and imprisoned in the Tower on a charge of high treason. His trial was to be held in November, and Dryden brought out his *Absalom and Achitophel* on the 17<sup>th</sup> of that month, a week before the commencement of that trial. The king described Shaftesbury as the weakest and wickedest of men, and Dryden's portrait of Shaftesbury as Achitophel has become one of the most famous satirical portraits in English. Interestingly, John Locke had hailed him as a brave defender of civil, religious and philosophical liberty. Dryden's portrait is of course mixed.

### 1.5.1 *Absalom and Achitophel*

By giving his satire a Biblical setting and presenting Monmouth and Shaftesbury as the rebellious Absalom encouraged by the wily counsellor Achitophel

respectively, Dryden caught the ears of the Whig and Puritan citizens of London who had been Shaftesbury's strongest supporters.

Part II of was published in 1682. Both the parts had appeared anonymously, and in the second part, written mainly by Nahum Tate, Dryden's contribution was short portraits of Doeg and Og. But Shaftesbury had been released and a medal was struck in his honour. However, soon after that, Shaftesbury accepted defeat and fled to Holland. *The Medall, A Satire Against Sedition*, was published by Dryden in 1682. It pursued Shaftesbury, the Whig medalist, with relentless vigour. One of the replies, *The Medal of John Bayes*, was attributed to Shadwell, his former associate. Dryden replied with *Mac Flecknoe, or a Satyr upon the True-Blue-Protestant Poet, T.S* in 1682.

### 1.5.2 *Mac Flecknoe*

Dryden's literary opponents who had concocted the *Rehearsal* in 1671 were active, and Elkanah Settle wrote an amusing parody of *Absalom and Achitophel*. Its title was *Absalom Senior, or Achitophel Transposed*. But it was ineffective, whereas Shadwell's *The Medal of John Bayes* was a brutal and repulsive attack. Dryden's reply (*Mac Flecknoe*) was of course great poetry and satire.

Shadwell became the object of Dryden's satire purely as a result of his political affiliations, but more directly as a result of an increasing unfriendly rivalry in the theatre. Shadwell's operatic adaptation of *The Tempest; The Enchanted Isle* (1679) was a particularly galling success. Dryden's bitter distaste for the flippancy and shoddiness of Shadwell's work as a poet reached its peak in the lampoon which he had begun in 1670s but published only in 1682.

## 1.6 CONTRIBUTION TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

The heroic couplet or rhymed decasyllabic verse is Dryden's major contribution to English prosody. Pope said: 'I learned versification wholly from Dryden's works'. We know that Dryden and Pope are the greatest masters of the heroic couplet in the English poetic tradition. Blank verse, the most important verse form in English poetry, was nearly completely replaced by rhymed verse for more than half a century during 1680-1750.

Regarding the language or poetic diction of Dryden, there is no critical consensus, Dryden believed, and Dr. Johnson agreed, that the language of poetry was improved and refined by him. But Wordsworth and Arnold described the language of Dryden's and Pope's poetry as unpoetical or prosaic. TS Eliot described the difference that Dryden brought about in the language of poetry as due to a dissociation of sensibility (intellectual thought separated from the experience of feeling) reflected in crude poetic feeling. The earlier complexity of vision and language was lost. The rise of science, the stress on the clarity and simplicity of expression, made the language of poetry in English less connotative or suggestive. Generally, the eighteenth century critics valued Dryden very highly, but the nineteenth century romantic critics depreciated his poetry as unpoetic or prosaic.

In the *Dedication to the Rival Ladies* (1664) Dryden regretted that the English had no Academy as they had in France. The Royal Society appointed Dryden as a member of a small committee set up in the same year to consider means for

improving the English language but nothing concrete could be done. Defoe had also expressed a similar wish for an Academy, and Swift made a plea for an Academy in 'A proposal for correcting, improving and Ascertaining (i.e. fixing) the English tongue'. He taught by example and precept that good style was 'proper words in proper places'. The Dictionary of Dr. Johnson (1755) finally fixed and standardised the language.

Dryden had criticised the language of the age of Shakespeare as less elegant and refined than that of his own age. Johnson is closer to Wordsworth than to Dryden in his attitude to poetic diction and common speech, but in poetic practice Dryden was less abstract than Johnson. In other words, Dryden was more rational both in his use and view of language, Johnson was more theoretical. However, Dr. Johnson admired Dryden for having refined the language. Contemporary standard usage was accepted as the norm but Dryden approved of the language of the aristocratic upper class, the courtly wit, the conversation of courtiers and nobles.

After the Restoration, correctness and elegance, clear and graceful sentence structure, cadence in speech and writing were stressed as a necessary sign of good breeding. Affectation, pedantry, rusticity and crudeness were to be avoided. Language was required to be a useful, clear, easy and precise means of communication. Dryden suggested that words should be chosen not only for elegance but also for sound in poetry. Dialect forms were to be avoided; archaisms were discouraged while Latin borrowings were encouraged. Dryden disliked compound words and admired the introduction into English of the turn of words and thoughts in which Virgil and Ovid had excelled.

Dryden's dramatic experiment helped him master the medium of the heroic couplet which was used to great poetic effect in his satire of the sixteen eighties. His criticism is at once that of the father of English criticism and of a growing poet groping for the discovery of the form of expression that would suit his experience and that of his age. His translations fostered in him and in his age an awareness of European and universal standards of poetry. The most striking development was from the 'heroic' to the mock heroic in his poetry.

'Wit' as a term of literary criticism was undergoing a change of meaning in Dryden's own use of the term. In 1666, Dryden identified wit with imagination. He also defined wit as 'a propriety of words and thoughts'. Pope's famous description 'True wit is nature to advantage dress'd What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed' has been described as the wittily summarised dilemma of the classic mind in confrontation with the scientific.

Dryden, Defoe, and Swift were the early prose writers. The literary criticism of the age of Dryden and Pope is a part of the moral and cultural humanism of the time. The literary criticism of Dryden is in prose, while Pope's essay on criticism, *The Dunciad*, *Epistle to Arbuthnot* and other Horatian satires are at once social and literary criticism. Moral and aesthetic values were not separated in their minds, and the creative imagination was controlled by the critical faculty. Dryden is no doubt the greater critic in the modern sense.

Reason and imagination are not separated in Dryden's account of the poetic process, but Eliot supposed that the age of Dryden was 'beginning to suffer a death of the spirit'. Fanaticism and dogmatism no doubt declined, and the spirit



became more critical and rational. Dryden began the line of inquiry on critical aims and methods. According to Dr. Johnson, he ‘first taught us to determine on principle the merits of a composition’.

As a writer Dryden was the best representative of his age which was named after him. His drama and drama criticism, his verse-satire and his translations show the variety and richness of his talent. His respect for tradition was no less than his championing the cause of modernity.

Thus Dryden’s literary achievements were enormous. And though in verse the next generation was to improve upon his model, the model was actually his. He is almost as strong in blank verse as he is in his chosen instrument, the heroic couplet. In non-dramatic verse, he has scarcely left any kind of poetry unattempted except the epic proper. His satirical and didactic poems can be regarded as among the most successful attempts ever made to conduct arguments and deliver attacks in a polished metrical form. A clear thinker, he has pondered over the rules of his art, and has sought them in the works of the ancients, in those of the French. His various essays, prefaces, epistles, prologues and epilogues inaugurate in England modern literary criticism, and propound, not without certain strong personal touches, the doctrine of Classicism – then in the opening stage. The new age that followed owed no less to Dryden than to Milton in poetry.

### Check Your Progress 2

- a) In which year did Dryden write *Annus Mirabilis*?  
.....
- b) Which poem written by John Dryden regarding the successor to Charles II, angered Whigs?  
.....
- c) What religion did Dryden convert to in 1686?  
.....
- d) Who took over for Dryden as Poet Laureate in 1688?  
.....
- e) Why is Dryden’s literary significance threefold?  
.....

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## 1.7 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we have studied the important phases of John Dryden’s personal life, political and literary career. We have also observed how Dryden’s writings were generally conditioned by the historic events of his society. We have acquainted ourselves with some of the elementary details of Dryden’s life and literary activities and can see how his way of life, the way of his world, and his cultural practices have influenced and transformed our own. We notice that as a man of letters he

was a realist. The social and historical reality of his time shaped his perception and experience, and the private and the public aspects of his creative imagination should be appreciated in the light of this fact. He described 'the last age' as less refined than his own, but, he admitted 'what we gained in skill we lost in strength'. The interpretation of Dryden's poetry has led to a critical debate on the nature of poetry between the classicists and the romanticists. Satire, language and verse are all controversial. We shall see that, despite the debate, *Mac Flecknoe* belongs no less to the mainstream of English poetry than the romantic lyric of the next century.

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## 1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- a) *The Heroic Stanzas on the Death of the Lord Protector* inaugurated the poetical and political career of John Dryden.
- b) Dryden became a Member of the newly founded Royal Society in November 1662.
- c) In his sixty seventh year, Dryden devoted himself to classical literature which inspired him to undertake translations from the Latin of Juvenal, Perseus and Virgil.

### Check Your Progress 2

- a) Dryden wrote *Annus Mirabilis* in 1667
- b) The poem *Absalom and Achitophel* mocked the choice of the Duke of Monmouth as Charles's successor who was supported by the Whigs.
- c) He converted to Roman Catholicism, a subject of debate and controversy as it raised questions regarding his sincerity and was attributed to opportunism.
- d) Dryden's successor was Thomas Shadwell and this was particularly ironic in view of how Dryden had mocked him in *Mac Flecknoe*.
- e) Dryden's literary significance is threefold as it is expressed in his prose, his dramas and his verse.

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## 1.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1. Discuss the change that Dryden and his age brought about in English poetry.
- 2. Public themes are more important than private ones in Dryden's poetry. Exemplify.
- 3. How did the Popish Plot affect social, political and literary life in England?
- 4. Discuss Dryden's contribution to English literature in your own words.
- 5. In what ways did the political events of his time influence Dryden's work?

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## 1.10 SUGGESTED READING

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1. Hammond, Paul, *John Dryden: A Literary Life* (London, 1991)
2. Hopkins, David, *John Dryden* (Cambridge, 1986)
3. King, Bruce, *Dryden's Mind and Art* (Edinburgh, 1969)
4. Kinley, Helen, *Dryden: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1971)
5. Sanders, Andrew, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2004)
6. Winn, James Anderson, *John Dryden and His World* (New Haven, 1987)





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## UNIT 2 *MAC FLECKNOE*: READING THE POEM

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### Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Reading *Mac Flecknoe*
- 2.3 Notes
- 2.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.5 Answers to Check Your Progress
- 2.6 Unit End Questions

---

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

---

In this unit you will read the poem, *Mac Flecknoe* - the first literary satire and one of the great mock-heroic poems in English. By the end of this unit, you will be familiar with the text and acquainted with the various references that are associated with the theme and characters. You will be able to appreciate the mock-heroic design and the verse-form of the heroic couplet.

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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*Mac Flecknoe* is the first significant mock-heroic poem and Thomas Shadwell is the hero of this epic. The poem amply illustrates the qualities that Dryden's satire is known for. There is the foundation of truth, the practiced and dexterous fine-tuning of the satire which is used to turn those merits which are acknowledged, into faults; the brilliant power and range of the poetry itself, and the relentless stance of a sort of superior contempt which however, never sinks into ordinary criticizing or loses out to inconsequential malice. The poem is both a personal and literary satire and Dryden has made use of the heroic couplet to present Shadwell as a dull poetaster and a plagiarist.

Now that you have an idea of what the poem is about, let us read it for ourselves. The Notes that follow will help you to understand all the references that Dryden brings in.

Words in **bold** are explained in the **Notes** in the section **2.3**.

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### 2.2 READING *MAC FLECKNOE*

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*Mac Flecknoe*:

A Satyr upon the Trew-Blue-Protestant Poet **T.S.**

By John Dryden

Edited and annotated by Jack Lynch

*Mac Flecknoe* appeared in an unauthorized edition in October 1682; it describes the king of Nonsense, Richard Flecknoe, looking for a successor to his throne, and settling on Thomas Shadwell. This text reproduces the version of 1684.

Mac Flecknoe:  
Reading the Poem

All humane things are subject to decay,  
And, when Fate summons, Monarchs must obey:  
This **Fleckno** found, who, like **Augustus**, young  
Was call'd to Empire, and had govern'd long:  
In Prose and Verse, was **own'd**, without dispute [5]  
Through all the Realms of Non-sense, absolute.  
This aged Prince now flourishing in Peace,  
And blest with issue of a **large increase**,  
Worn out with business, did at length debate  
To settle the **succession of the State**: [10]  
And pond'ring which of all his Sons was fit  
To Reign, and wage immortal War with **Wit**;  
Cry'd, 'tis resolv'd; for Nature pleads that He  
Should onely rule, who most resembles me:  
**Sh—** alone my perfect image bears, [15]  
Mature in dullness from his tender years.  
**Sh—** alone, of all my Sons, is he  
Who stands confirm'd in full stupidity.  
The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,  
But **Sh—** never deviates into sense. [20]  
Some Beams of Wit on other souls may fall,  
Strike through and make a lucid interval;  
But **Sh—**'s genuine night admits no ray,  
His rising Fogs prevail upon the Day:  
Besides his **goodly Fabrick** fills the eye, [25]  
And seems design'd for thoughtless Majesty:  
Thoughtless as Monarch Oakes, that shade the plain,  
And, spread in solemn state, supinely reign.  
**Heywood and Shirley were but Types of thee**,  
Thou last great Prophet of **Tautology**: [30]  
Even I, a dunce of more renown than they,

Was sent before but to prepare thy way;  
And coarsely clad in **Norwich drugget** came  
To teach the nations in thy greater name.  
My warbling Lute, the Lute I **whilom** strung [35]  
When to **King John of Portugal** I sung,  
Was but the prelude to that glorious day,  
When thou on silver Thames did'st cut thy way,  
With well tim'd Oars before the Royal Barge,  
Swell'd with the Pride of thy Celestial charge; [40]  
And big with Hymn, Commander of an Host,  
The like was ne'er in **Epsom blankets toss'd**.  
Methinks I see the new **Arion** Sail,  
The Lute still trembling underneath thy nail.  
At thy well sharpned thumb from Shore to Shore [45]  
The Treble squeaks for fear, the Bases roar:  
Echoes from **Pissing-Ally**, Sh— call,  
And Sh— they resound from **A— Hall**.  
About thy boat the little Fishes throng,  
As at the Morning **Toast**, that Floats along. [50]  
Sometimes as Prince of thy Harmonious band  
Thou wield'st thy Papers in thy threshing hand.  
**St. André's feet** ne'er kept more equal time,  
Not ev'n the feet of thy own Psyche's rhyme:  
Though they in **number** as in sense excell; [55]  
So just, so like tautology they fell,  
That, pale with envy, **Singleton** forswore  
The Lute and Sword which he in Triumph bore  
And vow'd he ne'er would act **Villerius** more.  
Here stopt the good old Syre; and wept for joy [60]  
In silent raptures of the hopefull boy.  
All arguments, but most his Plays, perswade,  
That for anointed dullness he was made.  
Close to the Walls which fair **Augusta** bind,

(The fair Augusta much **to fears inclin'd**) [65]  
An ancient fabrick, rais'd t' inform the sight,  
There stood of yore, and **Barbicanit hight**:  
A watch Tower once; but now, so Fate ordains,  
Of all the **Pile** an empty name remains.  
From its old Ruins Brothel-houses rise, [70]  
Scenes of lewd loves, and of polluted joys.  
Where their vast Courts, the Mother-Strumpets keep,  
And, undisturb'd by Watch, in silence sleep.  
Near these a Nursery erects its head,  
Where Queens are form'd, and future Hero's bred; [75]  
Where unfledg'd Actors learn to laugh and cry,  
Where infant **Punks** their tender Voices try,  
And little **Maximins** the Gods defy.  
**Great Fletcher never treads in Buskins here,**  
**Nor greater Johnson dares in Socks appear;** [80]  
But gentle **Simkin** just reception finds  
Amidst this Monument of vanisht minds:  
Pure **Clinches**, the suburban Muse affords;  
And Panton waging harmless war with words.  
Here Fleckno, as a place to Fame well known, [85]  
Ambitiously design'd his Sh—'s Throne.  
For ancient **Decker** prophecied long since,  
That in this Pile should reign a mighty Prince,  
Born for a scourge of wit, and flail of sense:  
To whom true dullness should some Psyches owe, [90]  
But worlds of **Misers** from his pen should flow;  
Humorists and hypocrites it should produce,  
Whole Raymond families, and Tribes of Bruce.  
  
Now Empress Fame had publisht the renown,  
Of Sh—'s coronation through the town. [95]  
Rous'd by report of fame, the nations meet,

From **near Bun-Hill, and distant Watling-street.**

No Persian Carpets spread th'imperial way,

But scatter'd limbs of mangled poets lay:

From dusty shops neglected authors come, [100]

Martyrs of Pies, and **Reliques of the Bum.**

Much Heywood, Shirly, Ogleby there lay,

But loads of **Sh**—— almost choakt the way.

**Bilk't Stationers** for Yeomen stood prepar'd,

And **H**—— was Captain of the Guard. [105]

The hoary Prince in Majesty appear'd,

High on a Throne of his own Labours rear'd.

At his right hand our young **Ascanius** sat

Rome's other hope, and pillar of the State.

His Brows thick fogs, instead of glories, grace, [110]

And lambent dullness plaid arround his face.

As Hannibal did to the Altars come,

**Sworn by his Syre a mortal Foe to Rome;**

So **Sh**—— swore, nor should his Vow bee vain,

That he till Death true dullness would maintain; [115]

And in his father's Right, and Realms defence,

Ne'er to have peace with Wit, nor truce with Sense.

The King himself the sacred **Uction** made,

As King by Office, and as **Priest by Trade:**

In his **sinister hand**, instead of Ball, [120]

He plac'd a mighty Mug of potent Ale;

**Love's Kingdom** to his right he did convey,

At once his Sceptre and his rule of Sway;

Whose righteous Lore the Prince had practis'd young,

And from whose Loyns recorded Psyche sprung, [125]

His Temples last with **Poppies** were o'er spread,

That nodding seem'd to consecrate his head:

Just at that point of time, if Fame not lye,

On his left hand twelve reverend Owls did fly.

So Romulus, 'tis sung, by Tyber's Brook, [130]

**Presage of Sway from twice six Vultures took.**

Th' admiring throng loud acclamations make,

And Omens of his future Empire take.

The Syre then shook the honours of his head,

And from his brows damps of oblivion shed [135]

Full on the filial dullness: long he stood,

Repelling from his Breast the raging God;

At length burst out in this prophetick mood:

Heavens bless my Son, from Ireland let him reign

To farr Barbadoes on the Western main; [140]

Of his Dominion may no end be known,

And greater than his Father's be his Throne.

Beyond loves Kingdom let him stretch his Pen;

He paus'd, and all the people cry'd Amen.

Then thus, continu'd he, my Son advance [145]

Still in new Impudence, new Ignorance.

Success let other teach, learn thou from me

Pangs without birth, and fruitless industry.

Let Virtuoso's in five years be Writ;

Yet not one thought accuse thy toyl of wit. [150]

Let gentle **George** in triumph tread the Stage,

Make Dorimant betray, and Loveit rage;

Let Cully, Cockwood, Fopling, charm the Pit,

And in their folly show the Writers wit.

Yet still thy fools shall stand in thy defence, [155]

And justifie their Author's **want** of sense.

Let 'em be all by thy own model made

Of dullness, and desire no foreign aid:

That they to future ages may be known,

Not Copies drawn, but issue of thy own. [160]

Nay let thy men of wit too be the same,

All full of thee, and differing but in name;  
But let no alien **S—dl—y** interpose  
To lard with wit thy hungry Epsom prose.  
And when false flowers of Rhetorick thou would'st cull, [165]  
Trust Nature, do not labour to be dull;  
But write thy best, and top; and in each line,  
**Sir Formal**'s oratory will be thine.  
Sir Formal, though unsought, attends thy quill,  
And does thy **Northern Dedications** fill. [170]  
Nor let false friends seduce thy mind to fame,  
By arrogating **Johnson**'s Hostile name.  
Let Father Fleckno fire thy mind with praise,  
And Uncle Ogleby thy envy raise.  
Thou art my blood, where Johnson has no part; [175]  
What share have we in Nature or in Art?  
Where did his wit on learning fix a brand,  
And **rail** at Arts he did not understand?  
Where made he love in Prince **Nicander**'s vein,  
Or swept the dust in Psyche's humble strain? [180]  
Where sold he **Bargains, Whip-stitch, kiss my Arse,**  
Promis'd a Play and dwindled to a Farce?  
When did his Muse from Fletcher scenes purloin,  
As thou whole Eth'ridg dost transfuse to thine?  
But so transfus'd as Oyl on Waters flow, [185]  
His always floats above, thine sinks below.  
This is thy Province, this thy wondrous way,  
New **Humours** to invent for each new Play:  
This is that boasted Byas of thy mind,  
By which one way, to dullness, 'tis inclin'd, [190]  
Which makes thy writings lean on one side still,  
And in all changes that way bends thy will.  
Nor let thy mountain belly make pretence



Of **likeness**; thine's a **tympany** of sense.  
A **Tun** of Man in thy Large bulk is writ, [195]  
But sure thou'rt but a **Kilderkin** of wit.  
Like mine thy gentle numbers feebly creep,  
**Thy Tragick Muse gives smiles, thy Comick sleep.**  
With whate'er gall thou sett'st thy self to write,  
Thy inoffensive Satyrs never bite. [200]  
In thy felonious heart, though Venom lies,  
It does but touch thy Irish pen, and dyes.  
Thy Genius calls thee not to purchase fame  
**In keen Iambicks, but mild Anagram:**  
Leave writing Plays, and choose for thy command [205]  
Some peaceful Province in Acrostick Land.  
There thou maist wings display and Altars raise,  
And torture one poor word Ten thousand ways.  
Or if thou would'st thy diff'rent talents suit,  
Set thy own Songs, and sing them to thy lute. [210]  
He said, but his last words were scarcely heard,  
For Bruce and Longvil had a Trap prepar'd,  
And down they sent the yet declaiming Bard.  
Sinking he left his Drugget robe behind,  
Born upwards by a subterranean wind. [215]  
**The Mantle fell to the young Prophet's part,**  
With double portion of his Father's Art.

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## 2.3 NOTES

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**T.S.** - Thomas Shadwell, a poet and playwright.

**Fleckno** - Richard Flecknoe, an Irish Catholic priest and minor poet. Why Dryden singles him out for ridicule isn't clear.

**Augustus** - Augustus became emperor of Rome when he was still young, and ruled during Rome's greatest age.

**Own'd** - "Admitted" or "acknowledged."

**Large increase** - That is, "blessed with many offspring."

**Succession of the State** - In other words, to settle who was to succeed him as king.

**Wit** - “The powers of the mind; the mental faculties; the intellects” (Johnson).

**Sh——** - Shadwell.

**Goodly Fabrick** - “Significant body.” Shadwell was fat.

**Heywood and Shirley were but Types of thee** - Thomas Heywood and James Shirley, seventeenth-century playwrights not widely admired in Dryden’s day. *Types* is a technical term from theology, a kind of foreshadowing of a future figure.

**Tautology** - A redundancy or a logical error in which the obvious is stated: for instance, “Either it will rain or it won’t rain.”

**Norwich drugget** - Coarse woolen cloth. Shadwell came from Norfolk.

**Whilom** - An outdated word meaning “once” or “in the past.” It was a favorite word of Edmund Spenser.

**King John of Portugal** - Shadwell lived in Portugal and dedicated some of his work to King John.

**In Epsom blankets toss’d** - Shadwell was the author of a play called *Epsom Wells*, but the line “Such a fellow as he deserves to be tossed in a blanket” is actually in Shadwell’s *Virtuoso*.

**Arion** - In Greek myth, Arion is a poet and musician who was carried across the ocean by dolphins.

**Pissing-Ally** - A real alley in seventeenth-century London. It ran from Water Street to Milford Lane, just south of the Strand. Although Water Street and Milford Lane survive (a few streets east of King’s College, London), Pissing Alley has been swallowed up in the redevelopment.

**A——** - Apparently Aston Hall, a place otherwise unknown.

**Toast** - Waste.

**St. André’s feet** - St. André was a French dancing-master — an unreputable profession — and did the choreography for Shadwell’s *Psyche*.

**Number** - “Verses; poetry” (Johnson).

**Singleton** - John Singleton, a court musician.

**Villerius** - Villerius is a character in *The Siege of Rhodes*, an opera by William Davenant.

**Augusta** - Used here for London.

**To fears inclin’d** - London had just gone through “the Popish Plot,” in which a number of Catholics were falsely accused of planning the murder of the king.

**Barbican it high-** the Barbican, a fortified wall, stood in Aldersgate Street in London. *Hight* is an archaic word for “was called.”

**Pile** - “An edifice; a building” (Johnson).

**Punk** - “A whore; a common prostitute; a strumpet” (Johnson).

**Maximins** - Maximin was a character in Dryden’s *Tyrannic Love*. He was a bombastic hero.

**Fletcher never treads in Buskins here,/Nor greater Johnson dares in Socks appear** - John Fletcher and Ben Jonson, early seventeenth-century playwrights. Fletcher was best known for his tragedies, associated with the “buskin” (the kind of shoe worn in stage tragedies); Jonson was famous for his comedies, where “socks” were worn. Johnson’s definition of *sock* explains it: “The shoe of the ancient comick actors, taken in poems for comedy, and opposed to buskin or tragedy.”

**Simkin** - Like *Panton* below, a stock character in plays for a simpleton.

**Clinch** - “A word used in a double meaning; a pun; an ambiguity; a duplicity of meaning, with an identity of expression” (Johnson).

**Decker** - Thomas Dekker, attacked by Ben Jonson in *The Poetaster*.

**Misers** - *The Miser*, *The Humorists*, and *The Hypocrite* were plays by Shadwell. Raymond and Bruce are characters from them.

**Near Bun-Hill, and distant Watling-street** - Bun Hill and Watling Street were in fact very close, suggesting the limited range of Shadwell’s real influence.

**Martyrs of Pies, and Reliques of the Bum** - Paper was expensive. When books ceased to sell, their paper would be used for other purposes — sometimes to line pie tins, sometimes as toilet paper.

**Sh**—— - “Shadwell,” since the verse requires two syllables, but we’re also invited to imagine other words beginning with *sh*.

**Bilk’t Stationers** - Cheated booksellers.

**H**—— - Henry Herringman, Shadwell’s and Dryden’s publisher.

**Hoary** - Literally “white” as if with hoarfrost, metaphorically “old” (with white hair).

**Ascanius** - The son of Aeneas.

**Sworn by his Syre a mortal Foe to Rome** - Hasdrubal made his son Hannibal, ruler of the Carthaginians, swear to hate Rome forever.

**Unction** - The application of sacramental oil at a coronation.

**Priest by Trade** - Flecknoe was a priest.

**Sinister hand** - A king holds a globe in his left (“sinister”) hand during coronation.

**Love’s Kingdom** - The title of a play by Shadwell.

**Poppies** - Poppies are used to produce opium, to which Shadwell was addicted.

**Presage of Sway from twice six Vultures took** - In other words, “It is said [by Plutarch, whom Dryden helped to translate] that Romulus [the founder of Rome] predicted his reign from twelve vultures near the River Tiber.”

**George** - Sir George Etherege, a contemporary playwright. The characters mentioned in the next few lines come from his plays.

**Want** - Lack.

**S—dl—y** - Sir Charles Sedley, who contributed to Shadwell's *Epsom-Wells*.

**Sir Formal** - Sir Formal Trifle, a character in Shadwell's *Virtuoso*.

**Northern Dedications** - Shadwell dedicated some of his plays to the Duke and Duchess of Newcastle, in the north of England.

**Johnson** - Shadwell admired Ben Jonson (in the preferred modern spelling of his name), and tried to imitate his style.

**Rail** - "To use insolent and reproachful language; to speak to, or to mention in opprobrious terms" (Johnson).

**Prince Nicander** - A character in Shadwell's *Psyche*.

**Bargains, Whip-stitch, kiss my Arse** - Phrases from Shadwell's plays.

**Humours** - "The different kind of moisture in man's body, reckoned by the old physicians to be phlegm, blood, choler, and melancholy, which, as they predominated, were supposed to determine the temper of mind" and "General turn or temper of mind" (Johnson). Ben Jonson was famous for his "comedies of humors," in which each character's "temper of mind" was exaggerated; Shadwell tried to imitate his style.

**Likeness** - That is, to Ben Jonson, who was also fat.

**Tympany** - "Tumor" or "swelling."

**Tun** - A large barrel or cask for wine.

**Kilderkin** - A quarter of a *tun*.

**Thy Tragick Muse gives smiles, thy Comick sleep** - In other words, your tragedies make people laugh, and your comedies put people to sleep.

**Keen Iambicks, but mild Anagram** - *Iambicks* are satires, since Greek satirical verse was written in iambic verse. *Anagrams* (rearranged letters), *acrostics* (poems in which the first letter of each verse spells out a word), and *wings* and *altars* (poems written in the form of pictures) were all examples of "false wit."

**Mantle fell to the young Prophet's part** - A reference to Elisha's taking up Elijah's mantle in 2 Kings 2:9-13.

### Check Your Progress

a) Who was Thomas Shadwell?

.....  
.....

b) Which English playwright, poet, and literary critic of the 17th century does Dryden compare Shadwell's physical appearance to?

.....  
.....

- c) What did John Dryden think of Thomas Shadwell?

.....  
.....

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## 2.4 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, we did a close reading of John Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* through explanations of certain references in the text, a number of which go to make up the mock-heroic epical framework of the lampoon on Shadwell. We have seen how *Mac Flecknoe* finally emerges as a striking example of the mock-heroic in English Literature.

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## 2.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- a) Thomas Shadwell was an English poet and playwright in the 17th century who was appointed poet laureate in 1689.
- b) Dryden compares Shadwell's physical appearance to Ben Jonson.
- c) Dryden thought that Shadwell had no talent as a writer.

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## 2.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1. Can you tell which writers referenced in *Mac Flecknoe* Dryden actually admires? What makes you think so?
- 2. What is a "poetaster," and what is Dryden's opinion of them as evidenced in the poem?
- 3. What light does the poem throw on the contemporary literary scene?
- 4. How is personal experience transformed into poetry in *Mac Flecknoe*?
- 5. Would you call *Mac Flecknoe* a comic fantasy?

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## UNIT 3 *MAC FLECKNOE*: SUMMARY AND EXPLANATIONS

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### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Summary of the Poem
- 3.3 Explanations
- 3.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.5 Answers to Check Your Progress
- 3.6 Unit End Questions
- 3.7 Suggested Reading

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

---

In this unit you will read a detailed summary of the poem, *Mac Flecknoe*. This will be followed by explanations to help you understand the poem better. By the end of this unit, you should be able to relate the characters and theme to real life settings and people of that time, and have a clear idea of what Dryden wanted to convey. You will also understand how the satire is successful in ridiculing while using the elevated form of the epic with characters and situations that clearly do not deserve to be treated in an epic fashion.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

---

A reading of the poem with all its various references and the treatment of the whole will make us agree with T.S. Eliot in whose view the poem was 'the piece of Dryden which is most fun, which is the most sustained display of surprise of wit from line to line.' Satire became poetic in Dryden's society, because poetry was adequately social, and society was sufficiently literary. The Restoration of 1660 not only changed sensibility but also divided society into Whig and Tory. The class-cleavage was felt as political rather than economic and the divorce between religion and politics was not yet complete. All this is illustrated in *Mac Flecknoe*.

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### 3.2 SUMMARY OF THE POEM

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Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe, or A Satyr upon the True – Blue Protestant Poet, T.S.* (1682) is a satiric poem of 217 lines and is a scathing personal attack on a former friend Thomas Shadwell, who had replied to Dryden's *The Medal* (1682) in a poem with scurrilous abuse. The poem lampoons Thomas Shadwell, a well-known playwright but an undistinguished poet. Dryden creates for Shadwell, a setting that is completely imaginary and quite incredible. This fictional world is brought to the reader through a mock-heroic form in which all the tools and machinery of the epic mode are brought into play. We are treated to elaborate similes, elevated diction, archaic vocabulary and spelling, heroic and kingly action – but all the while, the situations and characters are debased, low, and farcical.



Richard Flecknoe, who died in 1678, was an Irish priest and a poetaster (someone who writes inferior poetry) who wrote a little good verse and a great deal of bad. This Richard Flecknoe was a stock subject for satire, and even Andrew Marvell wrote against him as early as 1645. Evidently, this suggested Dryden's choice of Flecknoe, as he noticed how natural the connection was between a bad poet and Flecknoe. Dryden and Shadwell of the Tory and the Whig parties respectively came to satirize each other, and Flecknoe's name was found handy because of the contemporary references to him by poets and critics. Flecknoe finds his true heir in his son (Mac) Shadwell, a garrulous Celtic bard, irrepressible and irresponsible.

The poem begins:

All human things are subject to decay,  
And, when Fate summons, monarchs must obey.  
This Flecknoe found, who, like Augustus, young  
Was called to empire, and had governed long.  
In prose and verse was owned without dispute  
through all the realms of Nonsense absolute.

The elevated tone of the opening couplet crashes once Flecknoe emerges as a foolish Augustus having "governed long in prose and verse" but "through all the realms of Nonsense absolute". Flecknoe, a prince among fake poetasters, realizes that he has ruled too long and decay is only the order of the day and the call of Fate cannot be ignored. And this aged prince does at length debate to settle the succession of his state (of "Nonsense absolute") and ponders which of all his sons was fit to reign and wage immortal war with wit. He decides:

"Shadwell alone my perfect image bears  
Mature in dullness from his tender years;  
Shadwell alone of all my sons is he  
Who stands confirmed in full stupidity".

Thus Shadwell comes out as the right choice for the succession because he is described as "Mature in dullness from his tender years" and "stands confirmed in full stupidity". Dryden's personal satire against Shadwell can be noticed here as coming out very directly.

The poem next goes on to describe the site of the coronation which has been selected to be in the disreputable quarters of London:

"Amidst this monument of vanished minds;  
Pure clichés the suburban muse affords.....  
Here Flecknoe as a place to fame well known  
Ambitiously designed his Shadwell's throne."

So the place chosen for the coronation is also presented with a sarcastic venom that actually delights the readers. The monument chosen has been described as one of "vanished minds", and the place chosen is praised mockingly and ironically as one well known to fame, and Flecknoe is presented as ambitiously designing his Shadwell's throne. The mock-heroic tone of Dryden can be noticed running



through such descriptions. This monument chosen in the disreputable quarters of London is actually only a wretched Nursery – a training centre for actors, where only stupid dramas are the usual favourites.

The next few lines describe the actual coronation of Shadwell:

“The hoary prince in majesty appeared  
High on a throne of his own labours reared,  
At his right hand our young Ascanius sat  
Rome’s other hope and pillar of the state  
His brows thick fogs instead of glories grace,  
And Lambent dullness played around his face”.

The “hoary Prince” is Flecknoe, and the throne is made up of his own books. The reference to Ascanius takes us back to the relationship between Ascanius and Aeneas. Shadwell is to Flecknoe what Ascanius was to Aeneas. The gently brilliant “dullness” playing around Mac Flecknoe’s face once again reinforces the satiric thrust on Shadwell.

In the next few lines, come Flecknoe’s unusual prophecy and unique benediction. The father invokes God’s blessings on the son and visualizes a bright future for him in a prophetic mood:

“Then thus continued he: My son advance  
Still in new impudence, new ignorance.  
Success let others teach, learn thou from me  
Pangs without birth and fruitless industry”.

So Shadwell is given an unconventional benediction in which he is blessed to advance still in “new impudence” and “new ignorance”. Flecknoe desires Shadwell to learn from him how to produce “pangs without birth” and “fruitless industry”. The poem ends with Flecknoe suddenly and dramatically disappearing, thus putting an abrupt end to the entire procedure. The last few lines of the poem give almost an anticlimactic bang:

“He said, but his last words were scarcely heard,  
For Bruce and Longville had a trap prepared.  
And down they sent the declaiming bard,  
Sinking, he left his drugget robe behind  
Borne upwards by a subterranean wind.  
The mantle fell to the young prophet’s part  
With double portions of his father’s art”.

Bruce and Longville are actually characters in Shadwell’s *Virtuoso*, and the drugget robe is made of coarse woollen cloth. So as the “declaiming bard” (Flecknoe) says his last words to the young prophet (Shadwell), the father’s mantle falls on Shadwell with double force.

Satire as we know it today, is basically the legacy of Jon Dryden and it all begins with *Mac Flecknoe*. The names that we associate with modern satire are writers

like Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, and Voltaire but their satirical works are drawn directly from the marvelous wit, fantastic hyperbole (exaggeration) and the epic irony of Dryden's masterpiece, *Mac Flecknoe*. We can see the echoes of Dryden's mock-heroic style (excessively elevated tone) that is used to mock and parody their subjects. *Mac Flecknoe* is a long and complicated poem with a number of references and much of the cultural context may be a little difficult to understand. However, like any other satire, it is a commentary on the social and literary scene of that time and is a great satire because it has stood the test of time. Even though many of the references have lost their specific relevance, it remains a clever commentary on a topic that will always be relevant – bad writers and shoddy writing. Through his inventive use of satire, Dryden shows that he's not just a poet, but also a comedian, a critic, and a dissident.

### 3.3 EXPLANATIONS

The first line of the poem creates the illusion of its being an epic poem about a historical hero. The next lines talk about Mac Flecknoe, a monarch who instead of ruling an empire, rules over the realm of Nonsense.

Couplet 1 is a general reflection. It soon becomes evident (line 6) that the serious tone is really serio-comic. The funny and ironic comparison of Flecknoe with the Roman Emperor, Augustus Caesar and the word 'Non-sense' in line 6 shocks the reader into an awareness of the real satirical meaning intended by the poet. The bathos (anticlimax) is repeated in line 12 in the phrase 'War with wit'. For Dryden's meaning of the word 'Wit', you may read the units on the Augustan Age and also that on his life. This word has undergone a change of meaning since the Augustan Age. 'Dullness' (line 16), 'stupidity' (line 18), 'Thoughtless' (line 26) are vituperative words. But Dryden adorned abuse with the semblance of majesty.

Lines 21 -24 - parody of a passage in Cowley's epic  *Davideis*, I:

Here no dear glimpse of the sun's lovely face,  
Strikes through the solid darkness of the place;  
No dawning morn does her kind red display;  
One slight weak beam would here be thought the Day.

Notice how Dryden twists the imagery of the play of light and darkness into metaphorical 'Beams of Wit', 'rising fogs'. 'Lucid interval' means short spells of sanity between fits of lunacy. 'Lucid' literally means 'bright' and 'clear'. Metaphorically, it means clear reasoning or literary style. Shadwell was the best choice, because he never 'deviates into sense'. The exaggeration or distortion is deliberate.

In line 27, 'Thoughtless as Monarch Oakes' is a simile for the 'goodly Fabrick', the bulky figure, of Shadwell. Og in *Absalom and Achitophel* (11) is Shadwell. There we have a detailed, if less poetic and more angry or virulent, description of his physical appearance.

Lines 29-32 - Thomas Heywood (1574-1641) and James Shirley (1596-1666) were inferior dramatists. In line 103, we have 'Much Heywood, Shirley, Ogleby there lay' among the heap of neglected authors. John the Baptist (the prophet) prepared the way for Christ the Messiah. Flecknoe also was sent before but to prepare the way. Notice the disproportion of the analogy which makes it absurdly

comic. But the analogy is not stated, it is only hinted. You can further see that if Dryden is being unfair to Heywood and Shirley, he is being more than fair to Shadwell as of their 'type'.

Line 33 - Norwich, a town in Norfolk, the birth place of Shadwell, produced rough wool from which coarse woolen garment (drugget) was prepared. An obscure, incidental reference reinforcing satire.

Lines 35-36 - Flecknoe's self-congratulatory reference to his musical composition which pleased the King of Portugal.

Lines 37-40 - Shadwell was a musical entertainer at the court of Charles II. The incident mentioned in these lines has not been traced. Moreover, lines (37-50) parody Waller's serious occasional poem of the Danger His Majesty...escaped... at St. Andrews.

Line 42 refers to the fate of Sir Samuel Hearty, a Coxcomb who 'takes himself to be a Wit' in Shadwell's *The Virtuoso* (1676).

Line 43 - Arion, ancient poet and musician, was brought on shore by dolphins charmed by his song. He had been thrown overboard by sailors conspiring to murder him.

Lines 44-46 - The lute 'trembling' is at once literal and metaphorical. 'Treble' and 'bass' are technical terms describing two types - treble is a shrill note and bass is deep and grave. 'The treble squeaks for fear, the basses roar' in Shadwell's music. Dryden loved music, and his Odes and songs show that the music of his composition was superior.

Lines 47-50 - In these two couplets, the comedy or farce continues. The effect of Shadwell's music is described. Pissing Alley is a lane between the Strand and Holywell Street in London.

Aston hall - the supposed palatial house of Lord Aston, a dull-headed scribbler. The music resounds in the lane and the house. Observe that the echoes call Shadwell and pay attention to the elevating rhythm, reminiscent of the majestic rhythm of the *Ode on St. Cecilia's Day*. The little fishes are a comic substitute for the dolphins of the myth about Arion. Dolphins are sensitive to music. Fishes are not. Secondly, the crumbs of toast tempt the fishes to gather round pleasure-barges.

Lines 51 -52 - Shadwell is described as the leader of his musical band, making wild gesticulations with his hand. Notice the words 'Prince' for its heroic association, and 'Threshing' for its agricultural context.

Lines 53-54 - *Psyche*, an opera by Shadwell. It was elaborately produced at Dorset Garden in February 1675 with a company of French dancers led by 'the most famous master, St. Andre'.

Line 57 - One of the king's musicians, Singleton (d.1686) was often employed in the theatre.

Line 59 - Villerius - the name of a character in Davenant's semi-opera, *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656) which Dryden described as the first rhymed play. Singleton turned 'pale with envy' at the success of the music of Shadwell. Villerius appears with a sword in one hand and a lute in the other, thus combining ridiculously musical and military accomplishments. Singleton swore that he would never act

Villierius anymore because Shadwell's *Psyche* had thrown all other operas into the shade.

Line 61 - See how pathos is manipulated. Look at the word 'boy'. The old Sire's hopes from his joy has a touch of the universal sentiment of fathers. Cowley, in *Davideis* ii) noted that the Hebrew use of the word Boy applied to a boy of ten as well as to a man of thirty six. Shadwell was 36 in 1678, the year of the composition of *Mac Flecknoe*.

Lines 64 - 65 - London in the terror of the Popish Plot. During the period of the Roman occupation of Britain, London was called 'Londinium Augusta'.

Line 67 - Barbican was a small round tower on the outer gate of the fort for the posting of an advance guard.

Line 69 - Fate has so ordained that 'of all the pile an empty name remains', the poet's way of stating that it is in a state of ruin, an empty name.

Lines 70 -74 - The Nursery - an institution which trained actors and actresses for the stage.

Lines 72-77 - parody Cowley's *Davideis* i, particularly the following lines:

Where their vast courts the mother-waters keep,  
And undisturbed by moons in silence sleep...  
Beneath the Dens where unfledged tempests lie,  
And infant winds their tender voices try.

T.S. Eliot spoke of the prejudice which dismissed the material, the feelings, of Dryden's poetry as unpoetic. Poetic emotion is distinguished by him from personal emotion.

Notice the transformations:

'mother-waters' becomes 'mother strumpets'  
'Moons' becomes 'watch'  
'Dens' is replaced by 'a Nursery'  
'Tempests' becomes 'Actors'  
'Winds' becomes 'Punks'

All these are distortions, turning the sublime into the bathetic, the serious into the serio-comic. Dryden's Nursery', thus, has a literary source in Cowley's 'Dens'. The mock-heroic effect is so created.

Line 78 - Maximin is the hero of Dryden's heroic play *Tyrannic Love or The Royal Martyr*. The rant and bombast of Maximin's declamations defying the Gods made it fashionable in the heroic tragedy of the time. Remember, Dryden was satirised in *The Rehearsal*. The hero of the heroic tragedy can (in a couplet from *The Rehearsal*):

Make proud Jove, with all his thunders, see  
This single arm more dreadful than is he.

Lines 79 -80 - John Fletcher (1579- 1625) who collaborated with Beaumont was an Elizabethan dramatist.

Buskins - high-heeled shoes usually worn by actors in tragedy. Symbol of tragedy.

Socks - Low heeled light shoes worn in comedy.

Ben Jonson - the famous comic poet and neo-classic critic.

Line 81 - Simkin - a cobbler in an interlude, a stupid clown intriguing with an old man's wife.

Line 82 - Dryden borrowed the phrase from Davenant's *Gondibert* (IV, 36):

This to a structure led, long known to fame  
And call'd the moment of vanished minds.

Line 83 - Clinches – puns 'the suburban Muse' of poetasters.

Line 84 - Panton - a celebrated punster of the day.

Line 87 - Dekker - Elizabethan comic dramatist. The prophecy referred to here is perhaps Dryden's own invention. Dryden was prejudiced against Dekker possibly because of his confrontation with Ben Jonson. Ben Jonson had satirized him in *The Poetaster* (1602), and Dekker had replied in *Satiromastix*.

Lines 90 -93 - Shadwell's early plays are satirised. *Psyche*, a rhymed opera, *The Miser* (1672), *The Hypocrite* (1671), and *The Humorists* (1671) are 'three as silly Plays as a Man would wish to see'. The remark was made by Settle in the Preface to *Ibrahim* (1677). Dryden's critical controversy with Settle is, by the way, described at length by Dr. Johnson in his *Life of Dryden*.

Raymond is a character in *The Humorists* and Bruce in *The Virtuoso* (1676).

Line 94 - Refers to Virgil, *Aeneid* iv.173 ff.

Line 97 – near - Bun-Hill and distant - Watling Street - from far and near. Bun Hill is in Finsbury district of London suburbs in the north, and Watling Street is old Roman Road in South Britain.

Line 102 - For Heywood, Shirley see the note on line 29. Ogleby was John Ogleby, dancing master and poetaster. He translated Homer and Virgil. In the *Dunciad*, Pope calls him 'Ogleby the great'. The Scottish poet was also the founder of the Dublin theatre, printer, translator and cartographer.

Line 104 - The King's customary 'Yeomen of the Guard' are burlesqued here. 'Bilk't Stationers for Yeomen'. Cheated booksellers were there. Oldham said that Shadwell was cursed by the broken stationers.

Line 105 - Henry Herrigman, the publisher, was also Dryden's publisher.

Lines 108-111 - Dryden parodies Virgil, *Aeneid*. Ascanins, Son of 'Aeneas, was the second hope of Rome, the first was Aeneas himself. The epic heightening makes the mock-epic admirable poetry. 'Pillar of the State' imitates Milton's

With grave aspect he rose

And in his rising seemed a pillar of state (*Paradise Lost*)

The fiery halo over the head of locus signifies glory in Virgil's *Aeneid*, lambent radiance is burlesqued in 'lambent dullness'.



Lines 112-113 - refer to Livy's *Histories*, XXXI. As a child, Hannibal was made by his father to swear eternal hostility to Rome.

Line 118 - 'Sacred Unction' signifies the holy oil used to anoint in a religious ceremony like baptism or coronation.

Lines 120-121 - When the king leaves the Abbey after coronation, the Orb ('Ball' in the poem) is in the left hand and the sceptre in the right. The 'mug of ale' refers to Shadwell's love of ale. Refer to the note on line 27 above.

Line 125 - *Love's Kingdom* is a tragi-comedy by Flecknoe.

Line 126 - 'Poppies' is soporific, parching and sterilising - an aphrodisiac but not fertilizing. The sexual implication of Psyche springing from his 'loins' is related to barren poppy. Shadwell was said to be an opium-addict.

Lines 129-131 - Romulus is the legendary founder of Rome. He disagreed with his twin-brother Remus about the site of the city and they decided the question by augury (omen). Twelve owls are supposed to be auspicious augury. The reference to the heroic legend makes fun of Shadwell.

Lines 134-138 - Parody of the classical representation of Jupiter and Virgil's description of the Sibyl in *Aeneid*. Also, Milton's *Paradise Lost*: 'Thrice he assayed to speak and thrice...'

Flecknoe's second speech is inspired. The burlesque of epic convention here is noticeable. The inspiration is of course mock-heroic and comic.

Lines 139-140 - Ireland, homeland for Flecknoe, is fatherland for Shadwell.

Barbadoes is the British West Indies. Western main is the Atlantic Ocean. Ireland and Barbadoes are chosen because they are remote and uncivilized regions. The idea is that in these countries people would take his dullness as brilliance.

Line 143 - *Love's Kingdom* is the title of a tragi-comedy by Flecknoe. The father naturally wishes his son to achieve more than he himself did.

Line 144 - The epic style of benediction is burlesqued.

Lines 147-148 - Virgil, *Aeneid* burlesqued.

Line 149 - In the *Prologue to The Virtuoso* (1670) Shadwell declared that 'Wit, like China, should long buri'd lie', and hit at 'Drudges of the Stage' like Dryden who were 'bound to struggle twice a year'.

Line 151 - Sir George Etherege. The following lines refer to his plays. Dorimant, Mrs. Loveit, and Fopling are characters in *The Man of Mode*; Culley in *The Comical Revenge*; and Cockwood in *She Would if She Cou'd*. The epithet 'gentle' is used by Dryden because Etherege did not choose to reply to Shadwell when the latter lampooned him. Etherege is credited with having written 'the pattern of genteel comedy' and is regarded as the forerunner of Congreve, Goldsmith and Sheridan.

Lines 163-164 - Sedley wrote a poor prologue for Shadwell's *Epsom Wells* (1673), and was said (in spite of Shadwell's denial) to have helped him write the play.

'hungry' may mean devoid of wit.

Line 168 - 'The greatest master of Tropes and figures', 'the most Ciceronian coxcomb' in Shadwell's *The Virtuoso*. A pompous fool who 'never speaks without Flowers of Rhetorick'.

Shadwell is as great a fool as his Sir Formal Trifling, the character in his play.

Line 170 - Till 1678, Shadwell had dedicated five of his nine plays to the Duke or Duchess of Newcastle. Newcastle is to the north of England. Hence 'northern dedications'.

Line 171 - 'false friends'. Dryden and Shadwell differed on Jonson. Dryden had tried to correct Shadwell's opinion of Jonson in vain. So 'false' as friend. Notice the irony. Jonson is 'hostile' (Line 172).

Lines 173-174 - Parody of Virgil, *Aeneid*. For 'Ogleby', see note to Line 102 above.

Lines 179-180 - The reference is to a ridiculous love-scene in Shadwell's opera *Psyche*, where the heroine (Psyche) sweeps the dust to show her humility.

Line 181 - Dryden echoes Sir Samuel Hearty in *The Virtuoso*: 'hold thy peace, with a whip-stitch, your nose in my breech'. The phrases of this line are all from Shadwell's plays.

'to sell bargains' meant to make a fool of, to make obscene exchanges in conversation.

Line 182 - In the dedication to *The Virtuoso*, Shadwell wrote: 'I have endeavour'd in the Play, at Humour, Wit and Satire, I say nothing of impossible, unnatural Farce Fools, which some intend for comical, who think it the easiest thing in the world to write a Comedy'. His own promise 'dwindled to a farce'.

Lines 183-184 - Plagiarism from Fletcher and Etherege is the criticism here. But the pilferage was unassimilated like oil on waters (Line 185). Dryden referred to the similarities of situation between *Epsom-Wells* and Etherege's *She Wou'd if She Cou'd*.

Lines 189-92 - Parodying Shadwell's Jonsonian definition in the *Epilogue to the Humorists*:

A Humor is the Byas of the Mind,  
By which with violence its one way inclin'd:  
It makes our Actions lean on one side still,  
And in all changes that way bends 'the Will.

Line 194 - 'likeness' to Jonson. Tympany: 'A kind of obstructed flatulence that swells the body like a drum' (Johnson).

Lines 195-196 - A Tun of Man: like Falstaff (*Henry IV*). Kilderkin: fourth part of a tun.

Lines 284-208 - Varieties of 'false wit'. Poems in shapes were common in the seventeenth century. George Herbert's 'Easter Wings' and 'The Altar' are famous examples.

An anagram is a change in a word from a transposition of letters. An acrostic is a short poem in which the initial letters of the lines spell a word.



Lines 212-213 - In *The Virtuoso*, Bruce and Longvil, ‘Gentlemen of wit and sense’ dispose of the rhetorical amorist Sir Formal through a trap-door in the very midst of flight of eloquence.

Lines 215 -217 - Parody of 2 Kings (*The Bible*). But whereas Elijah’s mantle fell from him as he went up to heaven in the whirlwind, Flecknoe’s is returned from below.

### Check Your Progress

- a) Comment critically on the dramatic significance of the following lines:

“All human things are subject to decay  
And when Fate summons, monarchs must obey”

.....

- b) Explain briefly what Dryden suggests in the following lines:

“Shadwell alone my perfect image bears  
Mature in dullness from his tender years”

.....

- c) Comment briefly on the following lines:

“The hoary prince in majesty appeared  
High on a throne of his own labours reared”

.....

- d) Discuss briefly the satiric effect created by the following lines:

“Success let others teach, learn thou from me  
Pangs without birth and fruitless industry”

.....

- e) Discuss the dramatic importance of the following lines:

“The mantle fell to the young poet’s part  
With double portion of his father’s art”

.....

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## 3.4 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, we read a detailed summary of *Mac Flecknoe* with relevant quotations. We followed this up by explaining lines from the poem, bringing in all the references made by the poet to convey his thoughts and feelings. We saw that *Mac Flecknoe* is the finest short satirical poem in which Dryden has treated Thomas Shadwell with humorous contempt. The poem opens with Richard Flecknoe (whose name has already become a synonym for a fool), the poet-king of the kingdom of Nonsense deciding to abdicate the throne and to find a worthy successor. His choice falls upon Shadwell as, among all his (literary) sons,

Shadwell is the fittest as he is the unparalleled poet of dullness. Mac Flecknoe then goes on to deliver a speech on the merits of his son, Shadwell (or should we say, the lack of merits) during the coronation. The poem develops into a barely concealed, condemnation of both Shadwell's literary credentials as well as his character. The descriptions Dryden offers only serve the purpose of highlighting the incompetency of Shadwell and create the image of a fool ruling over peasants. The poem ends with the prophecy that Shadwell would write weak verse, bad plays and ineffective satires. He is advised to set his own songs to music and sing them. As Flecknoe speaks, he is sent crashing through a trap door and his mantle falls on Shadwell, symbolizing the passing on of the legacy of Nonsense.

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### 3.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- a) These opening lines of Dryden's Mac Flecknoe are dramatically significant because they set the mock-heroic tone of the entire poem. These lines set up a very serious tone in which all the human beings are described as mortal, and the ponderous truth that when the call of Death comes, even Kings have to respond. But the elevated tone of the couplet crashes once Flecknoe emerges with his "realms of absolute Nonsense". This couplet, therefore, raises the expectations of the readers which are later on only denied ironically.
- b) Dryden exposes the confirmed stupidity of Shadwell in these lines when Flecknoe is described here as positively admitting that of all his sons it is only Shadwell who resembles him perfectly as being dull and stupid right from his tender years.
- c) These lines describe ironically the actual place where Shadwell is to be crowned as the successor of Flecknoe. The "hoary prince" is Flecknoe himself, and throne prepared for Shadwell is one made up of the books of Flecknoe. So the mock-heroic satire of Dryden continues even here. The "prince", "majesty" and "throne" conjure images of grandeur which do not match the satiric story being narrated.
- d) The satiric effect created here by these lines is indeed pungent. Here Shadwell is given a unique, unconventional blessing in which Flecknoe desires him to learn from him how to produce "pangs without birth" and "fruitless industry". In a way, Flecknoe is actually asking Shadwell to be fruitless in his literary creations.
- e) The dramatic importance of these concluding lines is immense. Contrary to the opening couplet which started on a highly serious note, this concluding couplet ends with an anticlimactic bang. The last words of Flecknoe are scarcely heard as he suddenly falls in the trap-door which opens below his feet. But as Flecknoe falls, his woollen garment is carried upwards by a sudden gust of wind. This is the 'mantle' that falls on Shadwell, and he inherits from his father a stupidity which is two times more than that of Flecknoe. The stupidity of Flecknoe has only been doubled in the absurdity of Mac Flecknoe, and the lampoon *Mac Flecknoe* has reached its culminating point.

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### 3.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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1. Why is Shadwell compared to an oak tree and why is he called the prophet of tautology?

2. Do you think that the many literary references detract from or strengthen the poem? Elucidate.
3. In lines 64-93, Dryden describes the scene of Sh\_\_\_\_\_'s coronation. How is the location of the throne and the environment significant and how do they characterise the main characters of the poem?
4. In the section (lines 94-138) which describes the coronation, how does Dryden describe the occasion with all its details to heighten the sense of irony?

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### 3.7 SUGGESTED READING

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1. Abrams, MH, Stephen Greenblatt, Julia Reidhead (eds). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 2 (WW Norton & Co Inc. first published 1962)
2. Collins, JC (ed.) *The Satires of Dryden* (Macmillan, 1905)
3. Combe, Kirk. "But Loads of Sh— Almost Choked the Way": Shadwell, Dryden, Rochester, and the Summer of 1676," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 37 (Summer 1995): 127-164
4. Doren, Mark Van. *The Poetry of John Dryden* (Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1931)
5. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-dryden>
6. Jack, Ian. *Augustan Satire* (1952)

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## UNIT 4 *MAC FLECKNOE*: THEME AND POETIC DICTION

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### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Theme
- 4.3 The Title
- 4.4 Form
- 4.5 Poetic Diction
- 4.6 Satire as Poetry
- 4.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.8 Answers to Check Your Progress
- 4.9 Unit End Questions
- 4.10 Suggested Reading

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit will examine various aspects of John Dryden's poem *Mac Flecknoe*. By the end of this unit you will be able to understand the theme and analyse the diction, imagery, figures of speech, narrative etc. in this poem, and evaluate it as a classic of English poetry. You will be able to appreciate the mock-heroic design and the verse-form of the heroic couplet.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Our intention in this unit is to show how far whatever Dryden wrote was almost automatically suggested by events in his contemporary life. We will study *Mac Flecknoe*, a poem which goes beyond critical sniping to a rage at human stupidity; from the aspects of the autobiographical, social, historical, literary and poetic elements which inspired the poem. We will explore the mock-heroic form and poetic techniques that have been used by the poet to convey his thoughts.

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### 4.2 THEME

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*Mac Flecknoe* was published anonymously in October, 1682. The date of its composition and its authorship remained uncertain for ten years after publication.

Thomas Shadwell, the target of satire in *Mac Flecknoe*, was born in 1642, and younger by more than ten years to John Dryden. He was a dramatist and professed imitator of Ben Jonson. His witty talk and amusing writing made him popular.

But the real or historical Shadwell is less important, at least in this context, than Dryden's Shadwell. It is more relevant to know Dryden's relations with him. Dryden had been friendly with Shadwell during the first decade of their acquaintance as dramatists from 1668 to 1679. He had praised Shadwell's genius

in an *Epilogue to The Volunteers*, a play by Shadwell, written a Prologue to another play by him, *A True Widow*. They had worked together in preparing the critical comments on Settle's *Empress of Morocco*. But, during this same period, Dryden had also been engaged in a literary debate with Shadwell on rhyme, wit, humour and other issues. In Dryden's view, Shadwell had no understanding of true wit or the merit of Ben Jonson whom he professed to imitate.

Professional rivalry between Dryden and the younger Shadwell is also easy to imagine. Dryden's appointment as Poet Laureate in 1668 may have made Shadwell envious. Ironically, Shadwell succeeded Dryden as the Poet Laureate in 1685.

The Exclusion Bill of 1679 brought about a change in social life. The revelry and entertainment of the Restoration court and society which had lasted for about two decades ceased. The political turmoil that ensued with the Bill divided society and separated friends and turned them into enemies as in the case of Dryden and Shadwell. *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) was published a week before Shaftesbury (Achitophel) was released. The Whigs felt triumphant, and struck a medal in his honour. Dryden made a second attack in *The Medal* which he subtitled 'A Satire against Sedition'. One of the immediate replies was *The Medal of John Bayes*. This was attributed to Shadwell. *Mac Flecknoe*, Dryden's reply, is far greater poetry. John Bayes is associated with Dryden as it is the name of the satirical character in the *Rehearsal* (1671). Shadwell is believed to have contributed to this as well. Shadwell had also criticised rhyme in Dryden's plays and the Tories including Dryden (their champion) and often sneered at Dryden, a senior and superior poet. But the Shadwell of *Mac Flecknoe* is fictional or mythical. Its derivation from real experience is like all other derivations of fiction from fact.

The analogy in *Mac Flecknoe* has Biblical undertones that deal with divine selection which add an unexpected dimension to the incongruous setting and characters. The two rulers, father and son, are at various times compared to Augustus, to Arion, to Romulus, to Ascanius, to Hannibal, to Elijah, to John the Baptist, and by implication to Christ Himself. This ridiculous magnification is offset by a contrasting system of analogies in which the king and his son are compared to little, insignificant people - to earlier minor poets and playwrights such as Thomas Heywood, James Shirley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ogilby; to Simkin, a foolish character, and to an oxymoronic Maximin.

*Mac Flecknoe* can be regarded as a highly entertaining though abusive attack on Shadwell, light in weight, concentrated in its venom, devastating in its capacity to hit by means of its satirical thrusts charged with a vision after the epic manner. Dryden, in *Mac Flecknoe*, emerges in a relaxed, uninhibited mood attacking Shadwell in a burlesque lampoon which is purely, even at times surrealistically, comic. *Mac Flecknoe* can be rightly considered as a striking example of the mock-heroic in English Literature. A burlesque is a literary, dramatic or musical work intended to cause laughter by caricaturing the manner or spirit of serious works, or by ludicrous treatment of their subjects while lampoon is the term used for a short satirical work or to a passage in a longer work, describing the appearance and character of a particular person in a ridiculous way.

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### 4.3 THE TITLE

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The full title of *Mac Flecknoe* is *Mac Flecknoe or a satire upon the True-Blue Protestant Poet T.S.*: 'Mac' is a Gaelic word meaning 'son': '*Mac Flecknoe*'



means 'Son of Flecknoe'. Flecknoe is the historical Richard Flecknoe, believed to have died in the same year (1678) as *Mac Flecknoe* was composed. Flecknoe was an Irish Roman Catholic Priest who had been satirised by Andrew Marvell in a poem entitled 'Flecknoe, an English Priest at Rome', Dryden found the connection between a bad poet and Flecknoe natural. The name had become a literary or fictional synonym for a poetaster and dullard. And so Dryden chose it. The analogy of Augustus, the Roman emperor, for Flecknoe is a stroke of the mock-heroic genius. The elevation of a bad poet to the status of a monarch 'called to Empire' young, and governing long, seems more serious than comic in the opening pair of couplets. The implicit analogy of the kingdom of letters to the kingdom of Augustus is the standard against which this monarch 'Through all the realms of Nonsense, absolute' is to be judged. The anti-climax in the second line of the third couplet is the first of the surprises which make the poem 'exquisitely satirical'.

To return to the rest of the title, 'True-Blue' means an extreme Whig, and its collocation with 'Protestant' is remarkable. Religion was mixed with politics in Dryden's England. The Reformation had divided Christianity and loosened the grip of the churchmen over politics and statecraft. Dryden stood peculiarly for the State, 'betwixt the Prince and Parliament'.

T.S. is Thomas Shadwell, the primary target, the 'hero' of the poem. 'He never was a poet of God's making'. At his nativity, the midwife had prophetically blessed him, 'Be thou dull'. She saw that "Treason botched in rhyme will be thy bane", and "Rhyme is the rock on which thou art to wreck,/'Tis fatal to thy fame and to thy neck."

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#### 4.4 FORM

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*Mac Flecknoe* is constructed in a mock-heroic epical framework with all the solemnity and grandeur in the Homeric style. Its scheme is highly ingenious. It can be interpreted as perhaps the best expression of the various forces which served to diffuse the satiric spirit in the age of Dryden. In his ready-made frame, Dryden displays all the classical power of form which has all the features of a mock-heroic fantasy. The development is masterly from the very opening in which the aged monarch of Dullness, Flecknoe, is represented in the epic manner down to the closing speech in which he bids his heir – the supreme dullard (Shadwell) to trust nature and not labour to be dull (meaning that he is naturally dull and does not need to make any effort to be so).

The mock-heroic epic framework of the poem means, among other things that, unlike Pope, Dryden could give his satire a narrative form. If he could not write an epic, it was partly because the mock-epic expressed the spirit of his age better. Moreover, Augustan satire prepared the ground for the rise of modern realism and the novel.

The poem is written in rhymed couplets of iambic pentameter, also known as heroic couplets. They rhyme in pairs: aa bb and so on. This description was used in the latter seventeenth century, because of the frequent use of such couplets in heroic poems and plays. Clarity, precision, balance and antithesis are characteristic of the diction and rhythm of the verse. This verse form was introduced into English poetry by Geoffrey Chaucer and since then it has been used widely. From the age



of Dryden through that of Dr. Johnson, the heroic couplet became the predominant English measure for all the poetic varieties. Each line is comprised of five iambs - one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Penta means five. Let us understand how it works by taking just two lines from the poem:

*And pond'ring which of all his sons was fit  
To reign, and wage immortal war with wit*

The sections in bold are said with greater emphasis or stress as it is called. You can see that each line has five such stressed sections and you can also see that the last word of the first line sounds similar to the last word of the second line. This is called rhyme. The entire poem is made up of rhymed couplets (a pair of lines that rhyme), which combined with iambic pentameter, gives us the classic heroic couplet. This is typical of epic poetry. But we know that *Mac Flecknoe* is not an epic but a satire which employs the meter, rhyme, and elevated language of the epic to make an ironic point - it is a mock-epic, or mock-heroic.

The story of the succession of the state by the retiring king has political overtones. Where *Absalom and Achitophel* dealt with the real topic of political succession, *Mac Flecknoe* presents the imaginary coronation in the pseudo-literary sphere. The selection of the successor, the 'happy' auguries, the prophecy of the future of the prince, the farcical and fleeting coronation, are all ingredients of a heroic plot. Satirical fantasy transforms a non-event into a seemingly real event.

Shadwell is found the fittest of the sons 'to reign, and wage immortal war with wit'. Notice how 'reign' and 'wage immortal war' are playfully misapplied to create a mock-heroic effect. A hero reigns, wages and wins immortal wars. A mock-hero wages 'war with wit', and the poem of his creator makes him 'immortal' as actually a villain.

Dryden's scorn is dramatically masked as Flecknoe's praise for Shadwell. The first speech of Flecknoe is a storm of twenty two couplets culminating crushingly in a triplet. Then the satirist-narrator takes over. The art is at once narrative, dramatic and descriptive. The poetry of statement is amply suggestive or densely poetic.

The Barbican and the Nursery, obscure spots in a corner of London are the setting for the mock ceremony. The nations meet here. But 'the scattered limbs of mangled poets', instead of Persian couplets, lie in the 'imperial' way. Here the elderly prince 'in Majesty appeared High on a throne of his own labours rear'd.' The King, the Prince, the throne, the nations, are all there, the 'sacred' unction is travestied in 'a mighty Mug of potent ale'. The augury of the owls, the acclamations of the 'admiring throng', the prophetic speech of the sire, the sacrosanct mock-heroic manner of the abrupt end and the farce of the mantle' falling 'to the young Prophet's part' are all stage-managed with great skill. A farce assumes the air of a ceremony through the art of the poet.

Allusion means a brief reference, explicit or indirect to a person, place or event or to another literary work or passage. Allusions play a vital role in *Mac Flecknoe*. For the modern day reader, *Mac Flecknoe* is a very obscure poem as Dryden here uses contemporary allusions and even brings in phrases about John the Baptist.

Literary allusions, cartoon, caricature, parody, burlesque, lampoon are the poetic devices used.

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## 4.5 POETIC DICTION

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The term diction signifies the selection of words in a work of literature. The poetry of almost all ages has been written in a special language, a poetic diction, which includes words, phrases, a stylized syntax, and types of figures, not used in the ordinary conversation of the time. The poem is a performance. Its narrative design has a purpose - to create comedy and satire, to laugh at a fellow-dramatist in a mock-heroic manner in sweet verse. Let us attempt an interpretation of the diction, and then rhythm, to see how the purpose is attained. Dryden, the classicist, protested against pretension and unimaginativeness, and appealed for the use of polite idiom and educated speech.

Dryden was always careful in his choice of words. In this poem, since the primary aim was to create a mock-heroic effect, the choice of words was made with this in mind.

The most important words are taken from the register (style of language, grammar, and words used for particular situations) of royalty, to turn the unheroic or contemptible into mock-heroic. The poem is full of them. Some are mentioned here:

**Nouns and noun-phrases denoting royalty:** Monarchs; Augustus; empire; subject; realms; prince; State; majesty; King John of Portugal; Commander; Prince of thy harmonious band; Throne; Empress; coronation; the Nations; Sceptre; Captain of the Guard; Ascanius; Hannibal; Romulus; Dominion; Kingdom; mantle; triumph; rule of sway; province

**Verbs:** summons; governed; to reign; to wage war; rule; reign

**Adjectives:** absolute; royal; imperial

The poem is literary satire and the vocabulary of poetry and rhetoric is most prominent. The literary field is made parallel and comparable to the heroic in a comic vein. The Kingdom of England and the Kingdom of Letters are comic parallels.

**Nouns and noun phrases:** prose; verse; non-sense; wit; dullness; stupidity; meaning; sense; thoughtless majesty; tautology; paper; rhyme; actor (acting); plays; buskins; socks; vanished minds; clichés; muse; war with wit; war with words; peace with wit; truce with sense; oblivion; pen; ignorance; write; author; writer; false flowers of rhetoric; oratory; quill; learning; farce; scenes; humours; tragic; comic; satire; inoffensive satire; iambics anagram; acrostic; word

**The Superhuman and the Religious:** Fate; immortal; bless; perfect; soil; solemn; prophet; celestial; muse; prophecy; prophetic; martyr; relique; altar; the sacred action; priest (by trade); consecrate; omen; Heaven; the raging God; Amen

**Nature:** Nature; beams; fogs; oaks; fishes; Thames; shore to shore; poppies; mountain

**Light and darkness:** beams; day; night; shade

**Farming:** threshing; flail

**Roman myth:** Ascanius; Romulus; Hannibal

**Roman History:** Augustus.

**Arts:** music - the lute; song; harmonious; band; treble; bass; dance (feet keeping equal time)

**Mac Flecknoe:**  
**Theme and Poetic Diction**

**Image:** Dryden described 'imaging' as 'the very height and life of poetry'. An image, he said, "which is strongly and beautifully set before the eyes of the reader, will still be poetry, when the merry fit (of comedy or satire) is over, and last when the other is forgotten". The comic imagination of Dryden created the poetic image in *Mac Flecknoe* in this sense. The narrative is dramatic. The scene and the action are set before the mind's eye.

Father-son and king-prince: The story of coronation is all figurative.

Other figures of speech:

**Archaisms** (a thing that is very old or old-fashioned, especially a word or style of language or art):

Whilom; hight; thou; methinks; thy; sire; of yore

**Clichés** (a phrase or opinion that is overused and betrays a lack of original thought): warbling lute; silver Thames

**Similes** (the comparison of one thing with another thing of a different kind, used to make a description more emphatic or vivid using words such as 'like' and 'as'):

'like Augustus'; 'as oil on water'; thoughtless as monarch oaks

**Alliteration** (the occurrence of the same letter or sound at the beginning of adjacent or closely connected words)

Worn out with business, **d**id at length **d**ebate

To settle the **s**uccession of the **S**tate

To reign, and **w**age immortal **w**ar with **w**it

And coarsely clad in Norwich drugget came

**Assonance** (resemblance of sound between syllables of nearby words, arising particularly from the rhyming of two or more stressed vowels, but not consonants (e.g. sonnet, porridge), but also from the use of identical consonants with different vowels (e.g. killed, cold, culled). Remember, it is not the spelling but the pronunciation which matters here:

Like mine **th**y gentle numbers **feebly** creep

Thy **T**ragic Muse **g**ives smiles, **th**y **C**omic **s**leep" (lines 197-198)

**Anaphora** (the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses)

i) **Shadwell** alone my perfect image bears,

Mature in dullness from his tender years.

**Shadwell** alone, of all my sons, is he

Who stands confirm'd in full stupidity.

ii) **Where** queens are form'd, and future heroes bred;

**Where** unfledg'd actors learn to laugh and cry,

**Where** infant Punks their tender voices try

**Hyperbole** (exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally):

And torture one poor word ten thousand ways (line 208)

**Irony** (the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect):

From time to time in the poem, Shadwell receives the acclamation of crowds for his matchless stupidity; the realm of Nonsense is compared to the great Roman empire; Flecknoe is so proud of someone who is dull and has no sense; the dull and corpulent Shadwell is compared to Greek heroes like Arion; the setting for the coronation is in a disreputable area filled with brothels and bad theaters

**Metaphor** (a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable):

Beams of wit; rising fogs; play of light and shade; mountain belly

Comparison of: Shadwell's intelligence to night and to fog; creativity to a ray of light; Shadwell's writing to a pen; love's kingdom; false flowers of rhetoric

**Personification** (the attribution of a personal nature or human characteristics to something non-human, or the representation of an abstract quality in human form):

Empress Fame; Fate summons; the treble squeaks for fear, the basses roar; numbers feebly creep

Dryden's poetry is the 'poetry of statement'. The language of Dryden does not have the illumination, the magic, of Shakespeare's language, because the vision is less spiritual and more social in focus. Dryden's attempt to combine the heroic with courtly wit was the product of a specific perspective - life in society and the state interested the poet. The heroic for Dryden was the imperial dream of England and he inspired the dream. But the attainment of this dream appeared to be far distant in the future and so his immediate focus was on culture, poetry, social institutions, and particularly the political state. Wordsworth was prejudiced against the 'unpleasant' poetic material of Dryden, but his love for England was similar.

Moreover, the line of wit turned to the concrete reality of life and experience. Since reality is both pleasant and unpleasant, the material of poetry includes the beauty as well as the horror and the ugliness of experience. For Dryden, what was imbued with beauty and eternal joy was a poem rather than a person. The transitions from Shakespeare to Keats via Milton and Dryden and Wordsworth is significant. Dryden alone was dramatic, Milton and Wordsworth were not. His serio-comic vision was sound and whole. It was not the egotistical sublime of Wordsworth. Milton did not separate religion from literature, but Dryden did, though not completely. God, to him, was that UNIVERSAL HE who is 'Unmade, unmov'd; yet making, moving All'. But he was aware that finite reason could not reach 'Infinity'. The Divine was replaced by the Imperial.

Interpretation is the translation of a text for an audience. Our interpretation of *Mac Flecknoe* leads us to aesthetic (concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty) evaluation of the text. The form of Dryden's experience was social, and the form of his poetry reflects that. His own ethical (relating to moral principles) or didactic (intended to teach) purpose is doubtful but how is it possible to separate the ethical from the aesthetic in a single piece of work? Any attempt to do so would result in a flawed conclusion since Dryden's ethical humanism was inseparable from moral, cultural and religious reflection.

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## 4.6 SATIRE AS POETRY

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Satire is the art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation, or scorn. It differs from the comic as comedy evokes laughter as an end in itself, while satire derides, i.e. it uses laughter as a weapon. It attempts to juxtapose the actual with that of the ideal. The use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues is the hallmark of satire. It was frequently used to hold up the mirror to follies and weaknesses in an attempt to reform. According to Dryden, the function of satire is moral; the true end of Satire, is the amendment of vices by correction.

The poetry of Dryden at its best is satirical, and it is generally held that satire cannot be great poetry. Moral criticism is mixed with the literary and aesthetics, and the high expectation that a poet should be a seer or saint is used as a critical value. This is a romantic and unrealistic approach.

Literary Satire, of which *Mac Flecknoe* is the first example in English, is judicial and demonstrative. The satirist protests in public, addressing an audience and trying to persuade it to accept his point of view. Dryden had acquired the art of oratory from his school teacher Richard Busby at Westminster and he regarded rhetoric (the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the exploitation of figures of speech and other compositional techniques as an art). Dryden claimed for the poet the liberty of poetic license, the license to use tropes and figures. 'Imaging', according to him, is 'the very height and life of poetry'. In *Mac Flecknoe*, John Dryden's contempt for his literary contemporaries is evident in every line. Why does this arouse laughter in the reader rather than anger or sympathy? The answer is that the descriptions are evoked in a satiric mode which employs wit and humor as a device of ridicule by transforming the meanings of words. To be more specific, a sudden imbalance in diction generates a sense of confusion as the reader tries to place familiar words within a different context. What was respectable becomes disreputable; what was once praised becomes condemned. As the new meanings of the words become clear, the realization of the mockery produces laughter.

The tradition of the serio-comic, serious and cheerful by turns, is predominant in English poetry. Chamber, Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, Byron are the most prominent poets of this line. Besides, Comedy and Satire have a moral purpose. Pope said: Satire 'heals with Morals what it hurts with Wit'. But Comedy is different. The writer of Comedy accepts the imperfections, follies and vices of life and is alive to the eccentric, the abnormal, the imperfect, as well as to the



regular, the normal, the perfect. The comic poet tolerates, even accepts, while the satirist judges and punishes, wishing to restore balance and correct errors. The intention is to expose or deride. The satirist deliberately distorts, looking at only one aspect of the truth, not the whole truth.

The comic imagination of Dryden created, in *Mac Flecknoe*, a mock-heroic fantasy. Shadwell is almost an excuse for the poem. Maynard Mack (1951) described the Muse of Satire and regretted that the fictionality of Satire is overlooked in criticism. According to him, whereas tragedy exhibits the inadequacy of norms, satire asserts their validity and necessity. And the satirist assumes the authority of a hero who transforms the historical into the rhetorical. Above all, satirical poetry is poetry which is attempting to understand what society is doing. *Mac Flecknoe* is one of the best verse-satires in English, 'and the first literary satire. His political satire has 'public' themes, but *Mac Flecknoe* is personal satire which the poet wrote to please himself.

Dr. Johnson compared Dryden and Pope as poets: 'If the flights of Dryden are higher, Pope continues longer on the wing. If of Dryden's fire the blaze is brighter, of Pope's the heat is more regular and constant. Dryden often surpasses expectation, and Pope never falls below it. Dryden is read with frequent astonishment and Pope with perpetual delight'.

If satire cannot be as great as tragedy or the epic, nor can the lyric. In fact, realism rather than romance makes poetry modern, Dryden is the first modern English poet in a sense in which neither Milton nor Pope is. Remember that Pope wrote criticism in verse and called it 'Essay'. His literary mode and manner were more traditional than Dryden's. The modern tradition has no doubt gone far beyond Dryden, but the change that the English language underwent in his leadership was to last.

The mock-heroic technique of *Mac Flecknoe* has its source in the analogical vision of the poet. The amplification of the exploits of Shadwell, and Flecknoe, draws indifferently upon the example of past and present rulers. The individual was related to the State organically in Dryden's vision and the coronation of Shadwell should be appreciated in this light. The kingdom of letters was analogical to the kingdom of England in Dryden's witty imagination.

### Check Your Progress

- a) Briefly explain the context of Dryden's poem.  
.....
- b) Why did Dryden single out Richard Flecknoe, a relatively obscure writer at the time?  
.....
- c) In the last section, what is the prophesy about the successor to the throne?  
.....
- d) Say briefly what you understand by the term 'mock heroic'.  
.....



e) Do you think that Dryden attacks Shadwell directly?

.....

f) Can this poem be considered a personal satire?

.....

g) What are the allusions that Dryden makes in the poem?

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## 4.7 LET US SUM UP

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We have closely examined John Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* through relevant extracts from the text and seen how the mock-heroic epical framework has been artistically used by Dryden to write the lampoon on Shadwell. *Mac Flecknoe* finally emerges as a striking example of the mock-heroic in English Literature. Competition, reputation, respect, literature, writing, cleverness – are all themes that have been spun into this poem. We know he was extremely critical of many of his contemporaries, and skeptical of the cheap, unimaginative nature of many of the day's popular poems and plays. *Mac Flecknoe*, it seems, is at least in part Dryden's clever way of critiquing not just Shadwell, but the entire English literary scene.

Narrating in the style of the third-person omniscient narrators of classical epics like *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*, we soon realize that our speaker actually refers to himself in the first person, briefly inserting himself in the story.

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## 4.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- a) This is a satire on the poet, Thomas Shadwell, a former friend with whom Dryden had been engaged in a literary dispute.
- b) Shadwell is portrayed as a complete dunce, a worthy successor to Richard Flecknoe a poet and dramatist of whose work Dryden had a very poor opinion.
- c) The prophecy was that Shadwell would write weak verse, bad plays and ineffective satires and poetry will sink to even further depths as he would torture one word in ten thousand ways.
- d) A mock-heroic poem uses formal elements which form part of an epic - heightened poetic diction, elaborate similes and metaphors, archaic words and spellings - to depict an insignificant situation or person. It creates a contrast between the form and the content which results in a satire with an absurd effect as it ridicules the characters and their actions.
- e) Dryden never directly attacks Shadwell, rather he obtains his result of mocking him by exaggerated and exalted descriptions of his ignorance and bad writing.
- f) This poem can be considered a personal satire because it highlights and attacks the shortcomings of a specific individual, namely, Thomas Shadwell.
- g) The poem is filled with topical allusions to the literary world of Restoration England.

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## 4.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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1. Why do you think that *Mac Flecknoe* has survived, when Shadwell's own poetic critiques of Dryden have been largely forgotten?
2. Explain with examples, the mock-heroic elements in *Mac Flecknoe*.
3. How does the mock-epic style contribute to the poem's humour and success?
4. What do you understand by satire, and in what specific ways is Dryden satirizing his rival Shadwell here?
5. Write a few lines on the following:
  - a. Heroic couplet
  - b. Poetic Diction
  - c. Satire
  - d. Illusion
6. Discuss the fun and humour in the story of *Mac Flecknoe*.
7. Write a note on the poetic devices used in *Mac Flecknoe*.
8. What is Dryden's intention in writing *Mac Flecknoe*?
9. What are the ways in which Dryden utilizes irony in the poem? What is the effect of its use?
10. Show how the following are used to reinforce irony in the following passages: the comparison of Flecknoe with Augustus (3-6), the likening of Shadwell to Arion (43-50), the comparison of Shadwell to Hannibal (112-17).

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## 4.10 SUGGESTED READING

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