

Notion of Neoclassicism as contextualized by *Absalom and Achitophel*: An analysis of John Dryden's adroitness as a neoclassical poet

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Abstract

As opposed to individualism that was the overarching attitude in the period preceding neoclassicism, the neoclassical era was marked by reason and order and a strong propensity to privilege reason over instinct and emotion. A flurry of works was published at the time to inform this burgeoning chasm between the two periods. John Dryden, Thomas Gray, Alexander Pope are some of the most prolific neoclassicists who wrote to pique the cerebral while repudiating the visceral. They are all known for their collective love of lofty diction, heroic couplet and satirizing of prevailing norms. This paper will discuss the neoclassical elements predominantly populating Dryden's world of *Absalom and Achitophel*. Neoclassicism characterizes the slow advent of didacticism, laced in oblique rebuke. The satirical poem *Absalom and Achitophel* draws from a biblical story of Absalom's rebellion against King David to indicate the tense political situation in contemporary England where the king Charles II's throne is prone to usurpation by the Duke of Monmouth, Charles' illegitimate Protestant son, as egged on by Earl of Shaftesbury. The two contenders of Charles II's succession – his Roman Catholic brother, James, whom the Tories supported; and Protestant Duke of Monmouth, who was backed by the Whigs – were at loggerheads with each other. Dryden being a royalist was thus called upon by the king to write a satire that will be akin to a tacit denunciation of Duke of Monmouth in particular and the Whigs in general. This paper will highlight neoclassical elements permeating the poem.

Keywords: Neoclassicism, *Absalom and Achitophel*, John Dryden, Whigs, Tories, heroic couplet, satire, political satire, allegory.

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I. Introduction

The advent of a particular age is conducive to drastic changes in the literary oeuvre of that period. In what can be seen as revulsion to romantic grandiloquence of its precursors, Restoration Literature, indispensable and inceptive to Neoclassicism, brings to the forefront the moral debasement and court corruption perpetuating in England as a result of society's backlash to puritan restraints. Taking recourse to the classical writers of antiquity, neoclassicism dwells upon refashioning of classicism whilst seeking to "*paint realistic pictures of a corrupt society and emphasize vices rather than virtues, and give us coarse, low plays without moral significance.*" (Long, 40) *Absalom and Achitophel* serves to accentuate the political milieu of religiously torn England. This paper reflects on the key features of neoclassicism as encapsulated in *Absalom and Achitophel*.

II. Resistance to the Renaissance

In lieu of harping on sentimentality that was emblematic of the Renaissance style of poetry, John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* is a work fraught with Augustan influence, infused with values antithetical to that propagated by and belonging to the Renaissance. To view man as flawed and susceptible to errors is the idea that neoclassicism fostered. A reaction against renaissance style of poetry, neoclassical age is marked by realism. This verisimilitude coupled with an uninhibited emphasis on reason was bound to lay bare the socio-political scenario of 17th century England in entirety. How an implicit insinuation is able to create a furore is proof enough of the multiple perspectives the poem can be read from and leads us to the major aspect of neoclassical age- satire. Satire reigns supreme in this period for it enables people to take a stock of the prevailing circumstances and probably lampoon them. Dryden writes this targeted satire to hurl an attack on the Earl of Shaftesbury, The Duke of Buckingham, Titus Oates and the Sheriff of London. Clearly, neoclassical poets called for an insightful dissection of the contemporary status-quo.

But in order to bolster the credibility of the poem, John Dryden assumes the garb of a 'historian' and employs Biblical allusions. We have been reminded of how political writers compared Charles II to David (King

of Israel) and showed no trepidations in appropriating the Biblical tale to the English situation. For example, Achitophel's temptation of Absalom exacts a kind of satanic enticement of Christ in that it is an allurements from filial devotion. Instead of repudiating David's authority head-on, Achitophel makes Absalom accept the role of Messiah. (Maresca, 343) This biblical story when superimposed on the contemporary English milieu unmasks a horde of villains on the pursuit of seizing the throne from Charles II and the probable heir, James. Moreover, the profligacy of court is hinted at in the opening lines but Dryden uses the couplet as a ploy to extol the times when polygamy was not a sin and enlists the king's confidence:

*"When nature prompted and no law denied
Promiscuous use of concubine and bride."* (Dryden, l. 5-6)

Is the beginning of the poem eulogistic? Or is it subverting what it overtly projects? Perhaps, it is an amalgam of both, thereby diminishing the heroic aspect and making it satirical. (Maresca, 338) Not only does the satirical form subtly castigates Shaftesbury's attempts to topple the king, but it goes to engender a mock-heroic effect by comparing God who created man in his image with the potential of David/ Charles:

*"Then Israel's monarch after Heaven's own heart
His vigorous warmth did variously impart
To wives and slaves, and, wide as his command,
Scattered his Maker's image through the land."* (Dryden, l. 7-10)

Satire Shrouded as the Mock-heroic and Heroic Couplet

It is safe to assume that political squabbles (between Whigs and Tories) led to the rapid popularity of satire. While taking jibes at the contemporary scenario, satire seeks to reform as well, and this was the purpose of the neoclassicists like Pope and Dryden. Neoclassicism basically allowed the writers to reveal everything that transpired on the social and political front, albeit clothing their libel in burlesque, mock-heroic, parody or allegory.

This brings us to a feature tailor-made for Neoclassicism, namely, heroic couplet. This couplet is formed when the two lines having the metrical called feet iambic pentameter, rhyme. It was first popularised by Chaucer in epic poetry. In addressing Dryden's verse form, Humbert Wolfe writes:

His heroic couplets, in the first place, are as great an advance on anything that preceded them as Shakespeare's blank verse over its predecessors. He took a ragged, dog-mouthed blunderbuss and changed it into a nickel-plated rifle. He not only redoubled the accuracy of the weapon, but immensely increased its range. (Wolfe, 79)

Even though neoclassical poets are characterized by adherence to classical rules, an increased attention to form rather than content leads to the rise of what Dryden and Pope are purveyors of- heroic couplet. The couplets are "Closed", that is to say, each pair of lines contains a complete thought. This succinct form becomes predominant and excludes other forms of versification. For instance:

*"Great wits are sure to madness near allied
And thin partitions do their bounds divide."* (Dryden, l. 163-164)

The aforementioned couplet speaks volumes of Achitophel's fiery demeanor as he dabbles in unpleasant situations voluntarily. This indicates Dryden's brevity in driving home an idea, a feature unique to neoclassical period. The age's predilection for terseness cannot be more prominent. Moving towards formalism, it was indeed the age of few words. To that end, the readers come to grips with a new style as opposed to the blank verse of Shakespeare and Milton, which hitherto was the order of the day.

Allegorical and Self-referential

A significant characteristic of neoclassicism is that self-referential art had taken a back seat which is why the poets desisted from venting their emotions. *Absalom and Achitophel* was written with the purpose of influencing the trial and securing the conviction of the Earl of Shaftesbury. Since Dryden was conferred upon the title of Poet Laureate, he was duty-bound to write in defense of King Charles. The following couplet apprises us of Absalom's deportment after Achitophel piques his interest to seize the crown:

*"His joy concealed, he sets himself to show,
On each side bowing popularly low"* (Dryden, lines 703-704)

Dryden contends that it is unreasonable to believe that political succession has to be in alignment with the popular will since it is the king's prerogative to choose the heir, rendering Achitophel's and consequently, Shaftesbury's arguments fallacious. This corresponds to the concept of Divine Right of Kings, averring that it is God who gives authority to the kings and rebellion is a transgression meriting indictment.

The political situation in England around the 1680s was so similar to the Biblical story in the Old Testament that it became incumbent upon Dryden to write inconspicuously. The Licensing Act of 1662 forbade the intellectual intelligentsia of the time to be explicit in their expression. Dryden sought the king's permission and encouragement to use the biblical story in a way that would allegorize the contemporary milieu. The fact that the

biblical story lends the poem an exalted status without lapsing into bathos is by no means contentious. Moreover, the poem also underscores Dryden's wit in attaching to it an air of objectivity in a manner more unprecedented than the direct exclamations and proclamations unique to political satires. The characters including the King, the instigator, the mob, are so easily recognizable that it catapults the poem from the realm of political wrangling to the realm of a philosophical veracity. (Mathur, 761)

Unembellished Language

The neoclassicists used words deemed hackneyed in critical parlance owing to their emphasis on the conciseness and simplicity over embellishment. He frequently used Latinism, that is, Latin phraseology to substitute some of the words. To quote an example, "pomps" has been used in place of "procession":

*"Swift unbespoken pomps thy steps proclaim,
And stammering babes are taught to lisp thy name."*(Dryden, l. 242-243)

Language forms an integral part in the structure of the poem. Just like in Dryden's other portraits, unity, humour, impact of language, and a measured observation of detail produce a satire of remarkable import. Dryden's deftness rests in his ability to carefully select those details which most efficaciously stoke the human imagination. This is achieved by simplistic yet symbolic use of language. Dryden is seldom scathing or virulent in his tone, nor is he willfully exhaustive.

III. Conclusion

Suffice it to say, Dryden represents the spirit of the Neoclassical Age. According to Saintsbury, "*if there is one thing more characteristic and more honorably characteristic of Dryden, it is that he was emphatically of his times.*"(Saintsbury, 43) Nothing escapes his notice, be it dissipation and corruption of the court, the age's moral degeneration or the religious and political brawls pervading the period. Breaking away from the shackles of excesses of both the Elizabethans and Metaphysicals, Dryden, the leading exponent of Neoclassical Age, writes *Absalom and Achitophel* to hold in derision the vices and follies of the time.

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