

**Part II**  
**English Honours**  
**Paper -3**  
**Topic – Mac Flecknoe**

Dryden's Satire in *Mac Flecknoe* -

John Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* (1682) offers an exhaustive study of his engagement with the genre of satire. To demonstrate Dryden's role in influencing satire, the mock epic poem needs to be situated in the larger context of literary and political changes in 17<sup>th</sup> century England. Dryden's own understanding of satire, expressed chiefly in his *Discourse*, also informs the evaluation of his satiric skill and influence on satire.

*MacFlecknoe* is a fine short satirical poem in which Dryden has treated Thomas Shadwell with humorous contempt. It is both a personal and literary satire. Dryden presents Shadwell as a dull poetaster, a plagiarist and an obese idiot. Dryden uses heroic couplet for satirical purposes. Although *MacFlecknoe* is a personal satire, but ultimately, Dryden uses the persona of a bad poet to criticize the decline of literary standards of his time. Thus *MacFlecknoe* does not remain a mere lampoon on a personal rival, but becomes a delightful work of art – a satire on a larger social scale. And satire in the poem is enlivened with wit and humour.

Dryden's immediate purpose in writing "MacFlecknoe" was to expose Shadwell as a mediocre writer—and to get even for Shadwell's offenses against him. Dryden had written a poem called *The Medal*, which was ridiculed by Thomas Shadwell in *The Medal of John Bayes*, a coarse satire on Dryden. Dryden fully revenged himself on Shadwell by the publication of *MacFlecknoe* in 1682.

Dryden lampoons Shadwell mercilessly, although he avoids sarcasm and harangue (a lengthy and aggressive speech). Instead, Dryden uses the genius of his razor sharp wit to expose Shadwell's writing as humdrum and uninspired. Early in the poem, Dryden uses hyperbole to stress the dimness of Shadwell's imagination and creativity. Shadwell, the self-proclaimed heir of Ben Jonson is presented as the son

and successor of Flecknoe from whom he inherits the throne of dullness. He is the dullest son of Flecknoe.

“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.”

Even fog prevails throughout the day in Shadwell. He was born as an enemy of wit and commonsense and at the time of coronation he swore that he will maintain dullness until death.

Dryden exposes the dramatic skill of Shadwell by saying that his comedies make people shed tears and his tragedies create laughter. His fools justify their author’s want of sense; they are the models of dullness. Dryden also accuses Shadwell for copying from others’ work without paying the tribute to them. And further Dryden ridicules Shadwell’s physical built up; Shadwell is a fat and bulky fellow but without brain and common sense. The particular comparison of Shadwell to Jonson, in which Dryden says that the only thing that Shadwell has in common with Jonson is his potbelly, is devastating because Shadwell considered himself the true literary heir of Jonson. He suggests Shadwell not to base his characters upon experience and knowledge of mankind. His men of wit should also be like himself. Shadwell’s borrowings are as distinct as oil in the water. He should not claim likeness with Ben Jonson, because Jonson was a learned man but Shadwell was a perfect stupid. Johnson’s satires are great pieces in literature, his comic pieces were effective; but Shadwell is so poor in using satire that they do not offend the person satirized there in.

We discover another dash of mock-heroic and amusing picture when Mac Flecknoe is contrasted with Arion, a performer whose music pulled in the dolphins, yet Mack Flecknoe pulled in just “little fishes”. The name Shadwell was sounded from a few regions, however the territories named by Dryden were shameful and occupied by uncultured individuals. Mac Flecknoe is then unexpectedly called “sovereign of thy amicable band”. His music energized the envy of the well known performer, John Singleton, who repudiated the triumph he had won. We discover

another case of a similar style and method in the depiction of the place which has been picked as the site of Mac Flecknoe's royal celebration.

The heroic verse implied in the poem magnifies its satiric effect. And the words themselves constantly create the comic ambience. Epithets like "perfect", "genuine", "confirmed" are used with epithets such as "dullard", "stupid" to create ambivalence. This poem is a perfect example in literature for its uniformity, precision, regularity, artistic creativity and literariness.

*Mac Flecknoe* is a mock epic. Such a work uses the elevated style of the classical epic poem such as 'The Iliad' to satirize human follies. A mock epic pretends that a person, a place, a thing, or an idea is extraordinary when—in the author's view—it is actually insignificant and trivial. In writing *Mac Flecknoe*, John Dryden imitated not only the characteristics of Homer's epics but also those of later writers such as Virgil, Dante, and Milton. One of the key questions that *Mac Flecknoe* raises is about its classification as a satire in the first place. While attacking Thomas Shadwell's work is definitely an intent driving the main theme, but the sub-themes that shape Dryden's poem carry his comments on a wide scale of issues. His concerns about authorship, plagiarism, and quality of literature impacting people's tastes also figure in to the poem. These features make this famous poem of the 17<sup>th</sup> century a satire reflecting the anxieties of its time.

Nowhere does Dryden's humour appear spurious or artificial. Anecdotal references to Shadwell's acts of foolishness – such as the incident in which he directed a band of musicians while on a boat-ride on the Thames – provokes further fun and laughter. In spite of the lack of moral and ethical values in *Mac Flecknoe*, Dryden's magnificent satire is redeemed by its innovative and crucially admirable engagement in verbal refinement while delivering the sharpest cutting edge.

The poem ends in an anticlimax which is an apt display of Mac Flecknoe's lack of wit because he plots to dispose his father who was willingly offering him the throne. Flecknoe's long speech in praise of his son is neither responded to nor heard by his son. Shadwell, thus, is bereft of not only sense but basic faculties of speech and hearing.

The poem is replete with general issues of authorship, succession and quality of literature, which were pressing concerns in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The use of a wide variety of genres like the panegyric, satire, mock – epic, and mock – heroic add to its richness. These features give the poem the ‘urgency’ of public matters that Weinbrot credits Dryden’s verse with, Dryden’s influence on satire can be gauged by the way he unites many themes to serve his private concerns and writes one of the most famous satires of his time.

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