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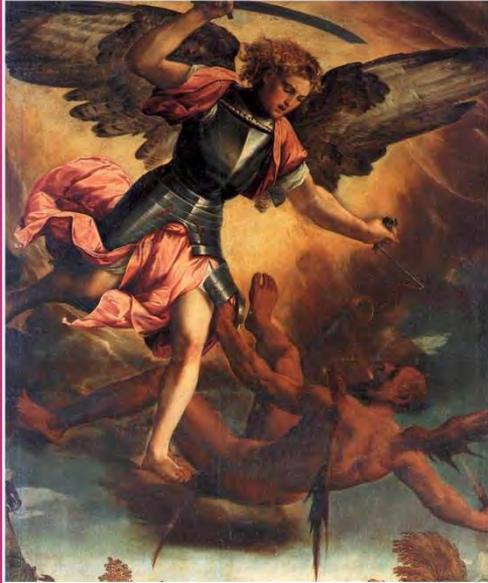
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Political Satire in Neo-Classical Age: John Dryden as an Example

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Abstract

The current research deals with the political satire in the poems of Dryden “Absalom and Achitophel” and “The Medall”. In the poem “Absalom and Achitophel”, the poet selected a famous Biblical tale of Absalom who rebelled against his father David, at Achitophel’s evil initiation to ridicule and satirize the contemporary political state, while he filled the poem “The Medall” or “A Satire against Sedition” with generous criticism against the Whigs. The research consists of three sections. The first section addresses the introduction and the second one discusses the Political Satire in “Absalom and Achitophel”, while the third one covers “The Medall”. The research ends up with a conclusion, endnotes and a list of references.

Keywords: Absalom and Achitophel, political satire, the king, Earl of Shaftesbury, Whigs, The Medall, criticism.

Sátira Política En La Era Neoclásica: John Dryden Como Ejemplo

La investigación actual se ocupa de la sátira política en los poemas de Dryden “Absalom y Achitophel” y “The Medall”. En el poema “Absalón y Achitophel”, el poeta seleccionó un famoso cuento bíblico de Absalom que se rebeló contra su padre David, en la iniciación malvada de Achitophel para ridiculizar y satirizar el estado político contemporáneo, mientras llenaba el poema “The Medall” o “A Sátira contra la sedición “con generosas críticas contra los whigs. La investigación consta de tres secciones. La primera sección aborda la introducción y la segunda discute la sátira política en “Absalom y Achitophel”, mientras que la tercera cubre “The Medall”. La investigación termina con una conclusión, notas finales y una lista de referencias.

Palabras clave: Absalón y Achitophel, sátira política, el rey, conde de Shaftesbury, Whigs, The Medall, críticas.

Section One Introduction

When Dryden was a kid, he lived in the village of Titchmarsh in Northamptonshire / England, in which he had his initial education. He, then in 1644, was sent to Westminster School which had some diverse political and religious nature. It, as a humanist public school, preserved a course teaching the pupils the rhetoric art and arguments for the two sides of a particular issue. This skill remained with Dryden and affected his afterwards writings and thinking. The Westminster course consisted of translation tasks each week, developing his capability for assimilation which was also shown in Dryden’s works afterwards. His time there at Westminster was exciting & busy, and the 1st published poetic work is an elegy that has a strong feeling of royalty in the occasion of Henry’s death, who was a schoolmate, due to smallpox, hinting to King Charles I’s death sentence, which was executed in the vicinity of the school on 30 Jan. 1649 (1).

He attended Trinity College in Cambridge in 1650, where he witnessed a return to his childhood’s religious and political philosophy. Although there is almost little information about his years before college, he definitely pursued the regular course of classics, oratory, and arithmetic. He was awarded his Bachelor of Art at the top of the gradulators’ list from the Trinity College in 1654(2).

Section Two

The Political Satire of the poem “Absalom and Achitophel”

This poem is his famous satirical one organized in epic and daring couplets & was published by the poet in 1681. It talks about the Biblical and religious story of Absalom’s uprising in opposition to King David, yet the story represents a metaphor utilized to symbolize a tale at the time of Dryden, King Charles II’s tale of and the Crisis of Exclusion (1679-1681) (3).

Dryden wrote this poem at the request of the king. In the context of this poem, he ridiculed and satirized the Whigs and Earl of Shaftesbury. Yet, he did not utilize cruel criticism for James Scott. The poem covers its political satire under the apparent disguise of a Biblical Story. This poem completely describes the existing crisis and the political issues of the contemporary society(4).

Absalom was convinced by Achitophel to revolt against King David. Absalom represents James Scott and Achitophel represents Earl of Shaftesbury. By using the Biblical Allegory, Dryden satirizes Achitophel and the ones following him. The satire continues from leader to adherents, the Whigs. The poet, all through the poem, wishes to inform King Charles that James Scott was not to be blamed and accused because Earl of Shaftesbury was the one who aroused the rebellion will in James Scott. Also, the poem ridiculed and satirized King Charles but not in cruel words. He criticized the King by mentioning his many wives and slaves(5).

“Absalom and Achitophel” is still and continues to be the greatest and the best political satire in the English writings and literature, in part due to its sensible and moderate satire and its true description of the follies & vices that overcomes in a particular part of the nation(6).

“Absalom and Achitophel” is usually approved to be the best satire in English politics(7). Furthermore, it represents a metaphor related to up to date political incidents, and a false heroic story. On the page of the title, Dryden himself characterizes it a poem only without being a satire, which means in this manner that the poem owned components differ from merely ironic(8). Dryden in the opening of the poem under the title “To the Reader”, affirms that the proper finish of satire lies in amending and correcting the vices. Also, the poet points out that in this poem he tried his best not to make the satire very severe and acute to the less corrupted ones. (9)

The Political Satire Spread in Biblical Cast:

The poet selected the famous Biblical tale of Absalom who rebelled against

his father David, at Achitophel's evil initiation to ridicule and satirize the modern political state. The selection of a Biblical metaphor is not something novel on the poet's part, yet his common dealing with the topic is above comparison. Yet, he is interested in observing that the political satire is not missing in the mystification of very complicated and problematic Biblical parallelism.

The benefit of presenting the tale before Christian ages is evident as it made the poet directly praise the ruler and satirize the ruler's foes and rivals. To disgrace the enemies and foes he should emphasize the illegitimacy of Monmouth; yet simultaneously he must see that Charles the father of Monmouth, was favorably influenced by the poet's criticism. He was not able to explicitly overlook and ignore the loose ethics of Charles, or explicitly criticize it. Dryden sets the poem with a masterly touch(10): One can not miss the ironical hint. It is clear that the poet is ridiculing and laughing at Charles himself who as a clever patron might never miss it, nor fail to get pleasure from it(11).

The philosophers and writers of renaissance were attracted to the notion of bastards' dominance. It was an ordinary notion then that bastards were considered more superior than their rightful peers. Line 19 and line 20 tackle this notion as they state:

"Whether, stimulated by diviner lust,
His father had him with a larger gust"(12)

It was believed that the bigger fervor and longing into delivering illegal babies, i.e. bastards, gave them a more favorable place. Adding this notion to a satirical part may give a lot of inferences. It was proposed, as Greenfield says, that we should take into consideration the poet's indication to the animated behavior where Absalom was visualized -utilized sarcastically as a piece of Absalom's ridicule panegyric(13).

At the back of the satirist's criticism of the crown which is certainly in total more respectful and favorable than his criticism of opponent characters like Shaftesbury, there is a cautious impartial analysis of the role of the king in new history. On one hand, in dealing with his enemies David has made a mistake on the side of compassion as he himself admits(14).

To highlight this point, readers have noticed that Dryden makes chiefly ironic use of the trope of king-as-father. To Phillip Harth, the poem started with the complaisance of David the English towards Absalom . . . since it characterizes Charles' conduct toward the ones he rules. His extravagance of his overprotected son is a precise indication of the parent king's patience toward his subjects(15).

With regard to this “forbearance,” Dryden perhaps had in mind the concessions Charles had to make, specially on matters related to foreign policy and the Popish Plot, before the Oxford Parliament dissolution in early 1681(16).

On the other hand, David’s own falls of self-restraint as ruler have played to the benefit of his opponents and prepared the public to look with greater indifference on the conspirators’ agitations. In fact, the poem definitely hints that, if we are to condemn the narcissism of Absalom to which Achitophel appeals when he urges the younger man to seize the crown, we ought to admit that Absalom’s displays of futile selfishness take their cue from David’s example. Absalom’s misguidedness of ambition consequently reflects back threateningly (though indirectly) on his father, specially given the poem’s assumption that stimulated by a diviner desire, his father had him with a larger squall(17). In this light, David seems to be the very creator of his own miseries as a ruler(18).

In Achitophel’s first speech, it is mainly the verse form that provides the corrective realism. After the magnificence of the opening, there is a certain inadequacy of movement in the compressed contrast of their gloomy support, and their protector fire and the youthful men’s image, and the elderly men’s vision: the symbols of divine guidance and the evidence of the disaster are very neatly catalogued by the factual couplets and we are reminded that this is the false Achitophel who is speaking. He is himself permitted some excellent mock-heroic ridicule of the king when the Miltonic magnificence of the fall of Satan is converted into the undignified cartwheels runs dropping down with weakening light, and the hereditary right to the throne is depicted as a succeeding title, lengthy, and dim, taken from the moldy spins of Noah’s ark; but as ‘Hell’s dire Agent’ Achitophel is still an extraordinarily epic form as he ‘pours fresh Forces in’.

The weaknesses of the Heroic Plays as drama grow the merits of political allegory. The set speeches of the temptation are intentionally used like a public argument to uncover the motives and policies of the Whigs. It is Dryden’s own full analysis of Shaftesbury’s strategy that strengthens the rhetoric of Achitophel’s second speech. He is now mainly concerned with his characters as public figures and his aim is to assess their conduct, so they are still presented chiefly from the outside and their motives are rhetorically formalized, though with considerably more insight than Dryden had ever shown in the plays. Absalom’s sigh in line 347 is eloquent, but the speech in which it is so carefully included is less an expression of Monmouth’s personal position than a part of Dryden’s formal denial of the

Whig arguments.(19)

The presentation of his private struggle is as objective as the pleasantly planned gesture of his public speech, ‘then take my tears’. The famous study of Achiophel is equally analytical: the contradictions in his character are presented as rhetorical paradoxes and understood in terms of the generalized ethical comment on great wits and insanity. But the intellectual force of the analysis itself and the considered weight of the language prohibit these contradictions from looking just distasteful and shameful. whilst continuing his disconnected evaluation of Shaftesbury, Dryden responds compassionately to the largeness of his subject. His ‘fiery Soul’ may be felt ‘working out its way’ in the firm, sarcastic energy of ‘fretted’ and in the greater extensiveness of the images as they enlarge into the triplet and step over the enjambment that follows. The movement of the verse justifies his political daring before contracting into the mean display of steering very near the sands to show off his intelligence(20).

Section Three

The Medall

In the beginning of 1682, the poet printed and circulated “The Medall”, or the so-called “A Satire against Sedition”, which was a poem filled with generous criticism against the Whigs, started by an energetic and straightforward prose “Epistle to the Whigs.” (21)

“The Medal” has little of the generosity of “Absalom and Achiophel”, but it is a masterpiece of controversial in fighting, opening with an overwhelming series of short, rapid stabs- direct jibes and distorted truths. The assault is brutal, but controlled throughout by the economy of the statement, the continual play of wit and the condensed psychological and political analysis(22).

The Medal Background:

A majestic panel of adjudicators was summoned in Middlesex in 1681 to think about a list of accusations directed against Shaftesbury Earl on the grounds of committing high treachery. He, the Earl, were previously immortalized by his disgraceful depiction in Dryden’s historical poem “Absalom and Achiophel” side by side with clues and proposals that he additionally creates a quite secret and less evident manifestation as the title character of Dryden’s comedy in 1679 “Mr. Limberham”. The majestic jury in the end denied every accusation of treachery leveled at Shaftesbury Earl and by celebrating their political triumph, the Whigs honored the occasion by striking a medal on which the legend “Lætamur” was inscribed and taking to the roads in happy festival believed to be quite overripe by

the political resistance of that Party of which Dryden regarded himself a member(23).

The poet makes clear the legend is a Polish term translated into rejoice, although it can be actually Latin for “joy”. Whatever the right translation, the real end was the joy celebrated by his political enemies for their triumph. Dryden was very annoyed by the majestic jury’s actions and by the reaction of the ones who supported Shaftsbury Earl in that he was stimulated once more to assault not only the Earl and his adherents, but also the jurors believed to be really responsible. Therefore, “The Medal” turns out to be a poem that directs a gloomy eye on the jurors distinguished with a quite cruel delight as totally and incompetent ignorant. In comparison, the celebrants descend quite effortlessly with their portrayal by him as basically ignorant drunken celebrants. Unnecessary to state the ones, on the hot end of red hot poem-poker of Dryden were almost displeased with the reaction(24).

What puts “The Medal”, frequently registered as “The Medall” with an extra “l”, separately from the poems of Shadwell and Pordage is less in its legendary importance and worth than in its political importance and worth. The poem was directed against the Whigs. The poet utilizes “The Medal” accurately to predict the subsequent lack of stability concerning its constitution which would view England overwhelmed by worrying separations for the subsequent 3 decades(25).

“The Medall” tries to shame the Whigs and lessen their significance so as to prevent the revival of popular scares. The poet hopes to propose the crushing and dispersing of the Whigs as an effectual political power through the king’s precedent year acts and the exposures of their followed scandal(26).

Moreover, although Dryden’s methods have changed, Dryden is still the advocate of moderation. In lines 91-110 he expands on what he had said in *Absalom and Achitophel* (ll. 781-94) of the dangers of mob rule and again bases his defense of hereditary succession and the ‘inherent right’ of monarchs on their necessity for preserving civil peace(27).

The chaotic ‘State of Nature’, described in general terms in *Absalom and Achitophel* (ll. 791-810), is interpreted in contemporary detail (ll. 287-317), with a masterly fusion of political dissection and satirical venom. The magnificence of the invective from line 256 even reflects some dignity on its victim, and there seems to be at least some intellectual sympathy with Shaftsbury in Dryden’s final state-ment of his dilemma(28).

Conclusion

Dryden the poet is the most energetic, strong, elegant and sophisticated of English satirists mixing elegance with enthusiasm. He is unique and matchless at disputing in rhyme. "Absalom and Achitophel" and "Medall" shows his supremacy of disputing in verse. "Absalom and Achitophel" may not have a competitor in the political satire domain.

Regardless of the poem's modern significance and its worth and value historically, it attracts the present reader in its remarks on English personality and on human points of weakness generally.

His popularizations on man's nature have a lasting interest. He defeated the strange difficulties of his selected theme. He ought to criticize a son whose father is still appreciated and liked; he ought to push Shaftesbury into condemning the King, yet he must realize that the sensitivities of the king were infected. He ought to praise with no stilted subjugation and he ought to criticize in an artistic way. He achieves all that smartly and competently.

Achitophel's condemnation of the king supposes the shades of praise in the eyes of Charles. Absalom is an erroneous tool in the hands of Achitophel. The poem is surely a political satire, yet it is a mix of self-respect with incisive and effectual satire.

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