

Mac Flecknoe

To readers coming to it for the first time, John Dryden's "Mac Flecknoe" can be a baffling work, filled with names and events that are not familiar at all. And it is written in a form, the heroic couplet, that is rarely if ever used by poets today. But it's also the case that a lot of people in Dryden's time would not have been able to identify some of the people involved. He is fighting a war within a fairly small circle of (entirely male) literary figures in England, and the conflict is about who has the authority to weigh in on what *counts* as good literature, and why.

At its essence, the poem is an elaborate satirical fantasy where Dryden imagines the "coronation" of a new "monarch" to rule over the realm of poetic "nonsense." Here Dryden pictures Richard Flecknoe, an older, mediocre poet and playwright, deciding that his "crown" should go to Thomas Shadwell (1642-92), a younger dramatist who had already by this point enjoyed a great deal of success in the London theater. Dryden's most consistent running joke throughout the poem is the print the name "Shadwell" as "Sh—." This was probably done in part to provide a (very thin) cover against being accused of libel, but Dryden is also coaxing the reader to imagine Shadwell's literary production as so much waste product, figuratively human excrement that is crowding the streets of London: "loads of Sh— almost choakt the way." This is brutally unfair; Shadwell was a successful playwright for a reason, and he continued to have success in the London literary world for decades. In fact, he succeeded Dryden as Poet Laureate in 1689, when Dryden was removed from the post because he was a Roman Catholic. But in the eyes of modern literary history, Dryden's stature and this poem's influence over readers for generations has pretty much ruined Shadwell's reputation.



Thomas Shadwell, about 1690. (National Portrait Gallery, London)

Like much of Dryden's poetry this is an *occasional* work, prompted by a particular situation or moment. That moment is quite distant from us, and reconstructing exactly what prompted Dryden to unleash this hilarious verbal attack at this point is not completely possible. But all the evidence we have suggests that "Mac Flecknoe" is inspired by a

complicated and to some extent overlapping set of issues, literary and personal: issues having to do with the nature of comedy in the theater, issues having to do with poetic authority, but also issues having to do with class, status, and generational change.

Shadwell, who was almost a decade younger than Dryden, seems to have seen himself as an up-and-coming rival, challenging the already-established Poet Laureate Dryden. Shadwell consistently mocked Dryden's rhymed heroic tragedies, which were very popular in the 1660s and early 1670s, as increasingly old-fashioned rants. Shadwell also imported current French theories about comedy and satire, arguing that a chief goal of comedy was to instruct by offering models of behavior to follow and also to avoid; Dryden had long argued that comedy's main goal was simply entertainment. By the mid-1670s, it was clear that audiences, who might not have cared much about the such theoretical arguments, were supporting Shadwell at the box office. Heroic drama was falling out of fashion (Dryden himself stopped writing such plays after 1675), and it was Shadwell, not Dryden, who had a string of successful comedies (including one, *The Virtuoso*, a satire on the new Royal Society, that is still sometimes performed). Meanwhile, Dryden was also being mocked by his social betters; the Duke of Buckingham's 1671 play *The Rehearsal* featured a stupid playwright called "Bayes" who was pretty clearly a figure for Dryden. In about 1675, the Earl of Rochester's poem "[An Allusion to Horace](#)" started making its way in manuscript around literary circles. Here, Rochester praises Shadwell and other new playwrights like William Wycherley (author of [The Country Wife](#)) and George Etherege, but mocks Dryden as a bad rhymer who lacks the wit of the younger men. Dryden was in no position to take on Rochester, a very powerful and potentially dangerous man. But, as Kirk Combe suggests, Shadwell became a safe target by which Dryden could defend himself and outflank the attacks that were by now coming from those he considered to be his lessors (the younger upstarts) and those he knew to be his social betters (Buckingham and Rochester). "Mac Flecknoe" is the result. It is an occasional poem, but it helped set a lot of terms for how high and low culture got talked about for generations; in imagining a sequence of great-or-terrible-writers as a kind of succession akin to the succession of a monarchy, it also sets

up a model of literary generations as dominated by a series of great men.

“Mac Flecknoe” was thus probably written in 1676, and it circulated in manuscript in literary circles in London for several years. The poem was first printed in 1682 in an edition that Dryden almost certainly did not authorize (the publisher, “D. Green” is otherwise untraceable, suggesting that whoever was being the publication of the poem did not want their identity known; the text is also filled with typographical errors, suggesting quick and sloppy printing). In 1684, the poem was published as part of a more respectable collection of poems by several authors, and this time, the text is much cleaner; it seems likely that Dryden had the chance to proofread. The version published in that 1684 collection is the text reproduced here. We have consulted *The Works of John Dryden, Poems 1681-84*, ed. H. T. Swedenberg et al. (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1972), the standard scholarly edition of Dryden’s works.

For further reading: Kirk Combe, “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.

<http://virginia-anthology.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Mac-Flecknoe-librvox.mp3>

Mac Flecknoe

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
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:
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 only rule, who most resembles me:
Sh— alone my perfect image bears,
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.
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,
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:
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
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;
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 sharpen'd thumb from shore to shore
The Treble squeaks for fear, the Bases roar:
Echoes from [Pissing-Alley](#), *Sh*— call,
And *Sh*— they resound from [A-- Hall](#).
About thy boat the little Fishes throng,
As at the [Morning Toast](#), that floats along.
Sometimes as Prince of thy Harmonious band
Thou wield'st thy Papers in thy threshing hand.

St. Andre'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 excel;
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 *Villierius* more.
Here stopt the good old Syre; and wept for joy
In silent raptures of the hopefull boy.
All arguments, but most his Plays, persuade,
That for anointed dullness he was made.

Close to the walls which fair *Augusta* bind,
(The fair *Augusta* much to fears inclin'd)
An ancient fabrick, rais'd t'inform the sight,
There stood of yore, and *Barbican* it 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,
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 heroes bred;
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 *Jonson* dares in socks appear;
But gentle *Simkin* just reception finds
Amidst this Monument of vanish'd minds:
Pure *Clinches*, the *suburbian* Muse affords;
And *Panton* waging harmless war with words.
Here *Flecknoe*, as a place to fame well known,
Ambitiously design'd his *Sh—'s* throne.
For ancient This triggers the tooltip *Decker* prophesi'd 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,
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.
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,
Martyrs of pies, and Reliques of the bum.
Much *Heywood, Shirley, Ogleby* there lay,
But loads of *Sh—* almost chok'd the way.
Bilk'd Stationers for Yeomen stood prepar'd,
And *H—* was Captain of the Guard.
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,
And lambent dullness play'd around his face.
As *Hannibal* did to the altars come,
Sworn by his sire a mortal foe to *Rome*;
So *Sh—* swore, nor should his vow be vain,
That he till Death true dullness would maintain;
And in his father's Right, and Realm's 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*,
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,
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,
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
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;
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
Still in new Impudence, new Ignorance.
Success let others 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.
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,
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.
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,
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.
Nor let false friends seduce thy mind to fame,

By arrogating *Johnson's Hostile name* .
Let Father *Flecknoe* fire thy mind with praise,
And Uncle *Ogleby* thy envy raise.
Thou art my blood, where *Johnson* has no part;
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?
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,
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,
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,
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.
In thy felonious heart, though Venom lies,
It does but touch thy *Irish* pen, and dies.
Thy Genius calls thee not to purchase fame
In keen Iambics, but mild Anagram:
Leave writing plays, and choose for thy command
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.
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 Brugget robe behind,
Born upwards by a subterranean wind.
The [Mantle fell](#) to the young Prophet's part,
With double portion of his Father's Art.