Mac Flecknoe

*Mac Flecknoe* (full title: *Mac Flecknoe; or, A satyr upon the True-Blew-Protestant Poet, T.S.*) is a verse mock-heroic satire written by John Dryden. It is a direct attack on Thomas Shadwell, another prominent poet of the time. It opens with the lines:

> All human things are subject to decay,  
> And when fate summons, monarchs must obey

Written about 1678, but not published until 1682 (see 1682 in poetry), "Mac Flecknoe" is the outcome of a series of disagreements between Thomas Shadwell and Dryden. Their quarrel blossomed from the following disagreements:

1) their different estimates of the genius of Ben Jonson,  
2) The preference of Dryden for comedy of wit and repartee and of Shadwell, the chief disciple of Jonson, for humors comedy,  
3) A sharp disagreement over the true purpose of comedy,  
4) Contention over the value of rhymed plays, and  
5) Plagiarism."

Shadwell fancied himself heir to Ben Jonson and to the variety of comedy which the latter had commonly written. Shadwell’s poetry was certainly not of the same standard as Jonson’s, and it is possible that Dryden wearied of Shadwell’s argument that Dryden undervalued Jonson. Shadwell and Dryden were separated not only by literary grounds but also by political ones as Shadwell was a Whig, while Dryden was an outspoken supporter of the Stuart monarchy.

The poem illustrates Shadwell as the heir to a kingdom of poetic dullness, represented by his association with Richard Flecknoe, an earlier poet already satirized by Andrew Marvell and disliked by Dryden, although the poet does not use belittling techniques to satirize him. Multiple allusions in the satire to 17th-century literary works, and to classic Greek and Roman literature, demonstrate Dryden’s complex approach and his mastery over the mock-heroic style.

The poem begins in the tone of an epic masterpiece, presenting Shadwell's defining characteristic as dullness, just as every epic hero has a defining characteristic: Odysseus's is cunning; Achilles's is wrath; the hero of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is of holiness; whilst Satan in *Paradise Lost* has the defining characteristic of pride. Thus, Dryden subverts the theme of the defining characteristic by giving Shadwell a negative characteristic as his only virtue. Dryden uses the mock-heroic through his use of the heightened language of the epic to treat the trivial subjects such as poorly written and largely dismissible poetry. The juxtaposition of the lofty style with unexpected nouns such as ‘dullness’ provides an ironic contrast and makes the satiric point by the obvious disparity. In this, it works at the verbal level, with the language being carried by compelling rhythm and rhyme.

Context of the Poem

One of the best recipes for great literature is a setting in which writers and poets mock and antagonize one another. One great example of this is the *Restoration* period, which lasted from 1660 to about 1698.

Like many eras of literature and art, the Restoration period is strongly influenced by its political context. Much of its literature takes as its subject the turmoil resulting from the political events that had occurred in previous decades, particularly the conflicts between Catholic supporters of a
traditional royal government and Protestant supporters of more democratic parliamentary government. After the Protestants defeated the Catholics in the English Civil War, which lasted from 1642 to 1651, a Protestant Parliament ruled England from 1651 to 1660. The violence that took place during this time came to an end once Charles II claimed the throne, and this restoring of a traditional king is what gives the period the title 'Restoration.'

Many of the writers of Restoration literature believed the violence of the previous decades was caused by the strict adherence to extreme political and religious ideologies, hence Restoration writers' suspicion of anyone who held dogmatic positions. This context helps explain why the poetry and drama of the Restoration era was marked by witty and often relentless satire that mocks orthodox positions and those who held them. Restoration writers also despised any unrefined aspects of English culture and, in contrast to the Protestant calls for humble living, strongly embraced lavish lifestyles.

John Dryden, who lived from 1631 to 1700, produced some of the most influential works of Restoration satire. Known for his incredibly impersonal poems and his relentless wit, Dryden had a significant impact on the language and rhetorical forms used by future writers.

One great example of his influential work is Mac Flecknoe, which is believed to have been written in late 1678 or 1679, although it wasn't published until 1682. In the poem, Dryden mocks Thomas Shadwell, a fellow poet with whom Dryden had been friends for many years. Although it's not known exactly what events ended the friendship and began the feud, Shadwell and Dryden had quite a few differences, including their theories of literature, their religions, and their politics.

Mac Flecknoe Summary

The poem identifies itself as a satire of which the subject is “the True-blue Protestant Poet T.S.” referring to the poet Thomas Shadwell.

The first line of the poem creates the illusion of its being an epic poem about a historical hero. The next lines talk about MacFlecknoe, a monarch who instead of ruling an empire, rules over the realm of Nonsense. The king is old and thus must choose a successor to his throne. Dryden wonders whether the king will chose a poet who has talent and wit or if he will choose someone like him, a man with no literary talent.

Flecknoe decides upon his son Shadwell, a man with no talent and who is tedious, stupid, and always at war with wit. Shadwell is also described as a very corpulent man. Through Flecknoe’s words, the poet continues to insult Shadwell in a mock-heroic tone, calling him a dunce, the “last great prophet of tautology,” and “for anointed dullness he was made.” Shadwell arrives in London, outfitted like a king and lauded by the people. Flecknoe chooses for his son’s throne a neighborhood of brothels and theaters birthing bad actors. Inside those places, real drama does not exist; only simple plays are welcome. Dryden also alludes to some of the historical Shadwell’s plays, like Epsom Wells and Psyche, and mocks another contemporary writer, Singleton, who is envious that he wasn’t chosen as successor to the throne. It is clear that in this environment, Shadwell will rule over those who have no literary talent. The descriptions Dryden offers only serve the purpose of highlighting the incompetency of Shadwell and create the image of a fool ruling over peasants.

As the coronation begins, Dryden describes the streets as filled with the limbs of other poets, suggesting that Shadwell managed to get a hold on his position at the expense of talented writers. Once more, the poet mentions human waste and links it with Shadwell’s writing and compares
him with a historical figure, Hannibal, to suggest that Shadwell’s purpose is to destroy wit and replace it with dullness. During his coronation, the oil used to anoint a new king is replaced by ale, signifying the poet’s dullness. After the crown is placed on his head, Shadwell sits on the throne and the former king prepares to give the cheering crowd a speech.

The former king begins by presenting the land over which the new king will rule, a territory where no one lives. Flecknoe urges his son to remain true to his writing and to not let anyone make any changes in his work. Flecknoe praises Shadwell’s abilities and then ends his speech by telling Shadwell to continue to remain dull and to avoid trying to be like Jonson.

Flecknoe concludes by exhorting his son not to focus on real plays but rather to work on acrostics or anagrams. His last words are cut off and he sinks below the stage. His mantle falls on Shadwell, which is appropriate because he has twice as much “talent” as his father.

**Mac Flecknoe Character List**

**Richard Flecknoe**

Richard Flecknoe (1600-1678) was an English dramatist and poet. His work was ridiculed by Dryden as well as poet Andrew Marvell (1621-1678). In *Mac Flecknoe*, he is cast in the fictional role of the “King of Nonsense.” He is getting older and decides he must appoint a successor in one of his sons. He chooses Shadwell because he is the most like him; he is dull and devoid of wit and sense. At the end of the poem, he drops below the stage and Shadwell assumes his mantle.

**T.S., Sh--, or Shadwell (i.e., Thomas Shadwell)**

Thomas Shadwell is the target of Dryden's satire and derision in *Mac Flecknoe*. Shadwell was an English dramatist and poet laureate. He was known for his broad comedies of manners and, more significantly, as a frequent target of John Dryden’s satire. In *Mac Flecknoe*, Dryden casts him as the heir of the fictional "Kingdom of Nonsense," which is presided over by Flecknoe. Shadwell is a large, proud man who revels in the bombast of his coronation. He has no sense, is dull, and runs roughshod over the work of other, better poets.

Dryden presents Shadwell as a dull poetaster, a corpulent man and a plagiarist. Dryden’s uses the heroic couplet for satirical purposes. Dryden’s *Absalom and Achitophel* was followed by his another piece *The Medal*, which was answered by Thomas Shadwell in *Medal of John Bayes*, a coarse satire on Dryden. He decided to avenge himself on Shadwell and Dryden fully revenged himself by the publication of Mac Flecknoe in 1682.

Dryden presents Shadwell as a dull poetaster, as an idiot. He is the dullest son of Flecknoe. He “never deviates into sense” Even fog prevails throughout the day in Shadwell has been presented as
a prince of a bond of a musician, he produces shrill unpleasant sound. He was born as an enemy of wit and common sense 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.

Dryden also accuses Shadwell for copying from others work without paying the attribute to them. And further Dryden ridicules Shadwell physical built up; Shadwell is a fat and bulky fellow but without a brain and common sense. He suggests Shadwell not to base his characters upon the experience and knowledge of mankind. His men of wit should also be like him. 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.

Mac Flecknoe is a personal satire but nowhere has Dryden stooped too low in exposing Shadwell. And satire in the poem is enlivened with wit and humor. The heroic verse implied in the poem magnifies its 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. But ambivalence disappears once the reader goes through the poem and deciphers the intention of the author.

Some critics like J.C. Collins and George Thorn Drury are of the view that much of the satire in Mac Flecknoe is undoubtedly unjust. Dryden has become in presenting Shadwell in Mac Flecknoe. He was not a confirmed dullard as Dryden says him; though he was not a great poet, he was the comic dramatist of some repute. But for us as a a student of literature, poem is a perfect piece in the pile of English literature for its uniformity, precision, regularity artistic and literariness.

To sum up Dryden’s two hundred lines of abuse, especially with the sketches to Thomas Shadwell in a negative manner is as a result of his political affiliation, but more directly as a result of an increasingly unfriendly rivalry in the theatre. The poem defines by negatives and discrepancies; it undoes epic pretensions by playing with a mock-heroic.

**Augustus**

He is the founder of the Roman empire and the first emperor. Also known as Octavian or Octavius, he was adopted by Julius Caesar.
Thomas Heywood and James Shirley
Heywood (1497-1575) and Shirley (1596-1666) were poets who were not very well esteemed.

Arion
Arion (Ancient Greek: Ἀρίων, gen.: Ἀρίωνος) was a kitharode in ancient Greece, a Dionysiac poet credited with inventing the dithyramb. He is known for his musical inventions and, primarily, for the fantastic myth of his kidnapping by pirates and miraculous rescue by dolphins.

Ascanius
The son of Aeneas, he was the leader of Troy's Dardanian allies during the Trojan War. Ascanius accompanied his father to Italy after the fall of Troy, and fought briefly in the Italian wars. The Julian gens claimed descent from him.

John Singleton
He was a court musician and singer.

Maximins
He was the bombastic hero of Dryden's *Tyrannic Love.*

John Fletcher
The Jacobean playwright John Fletcher (1579–1625), referred to in *Mac Flecknoe* simply as "Fletcher" (l.--), was among the most prolific and influential dramatists of his day. Both during his lifetime and in the early Restoration, his fame rivaled Shakespeare's.

Ben Jonson
Jonson was an English poet, essayist, and playwright. Jonson's enduring reputation rests on his comedies written between 1605 and 1614. Under King James I, Jonson received royal favor and patronage for Jonson's second known play. His most well-known play, *Every Man in His Humour,* was performed in 1598 by the Lord Chamberlain's Men at the Globe with William Shakespeare in the cast. The work catapulted Jonson to celebrity status. From this point onward, he became know for "humors" comedy, a kind of comedy involving eccentric characters designed to represent a temperament, or humor, of humanity. Shadwell admired Ben Jonson and tried to imitate his style.

Charles II
Charles II was king of England, Scotland, and Ireland from 1660 until his death in 1685. His restoration to the throne in 1660 marked the end of republican rule in England. The eldest surviving son of Charles I, he was 12 when the Civil War began. After the victory of Cromwell’s Parliamentary forces, he was in exile in France. His father, King Charles I was executed in 1649, and England subsequently entered the period known to history as the English Interregnum or the English Commonwealth and the country was a de facto republic, led by Oliver Cromwell. In 1651, Charles II invaded England with a Scottish army (as their king), but was defeated by Cromwell at the Battle of Worcester. He subsequently went into exile again and was not invited back to England until 1660, when he reclaimed his throne. As new king, Charles II pursued a policy of political tolerance and power-sharing. With leanings toward Catholicism, he desired
religious toleration and made several attempts to formalize toleration of Catholics and Non-conformists.

**Sir Charles Sedley**
Sir Charles Sedley, 5th Baronet, was an English wit, dramatist, and politician, ending his career as Speaker of the House of Commons. He contributed the prologue to Shadwell's *Epsom-Wells*.

**Thomas Dekker**
Thomas Dekker was an English Elizabethan dramatist and pamphleteer. He was a rival of Ben Jonson, who mocked him in his late Elizabethan stage play, a satire called “The Poetaster.”

**Sir George Etherege (ref. “George”)**
Sir George Etherege was a contemporary English playwright. The characters mentioned throughout lines 152-153 come from his plays.

**Henry Herringman (ref. “H——“)**
Herringman was both Shadwell's and Dryden's publisher.

**Oliver Cromwell**
Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) was an English military and political leader. He was the Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland, and Ireland from 1653-1658.

**St. André**
St. André was a French dancing master — an unrepugnant profession — and did the choreography for Shadwell's *Psyche*.

**Villerius**
Villerius is a character in *The Siege of Rhodes*, an opera by English poet and dramatist William Davenant.

**Virgil**
Virgil was an ancient Roman poet of the Augustan period, known primarily for three major works of Latin literature: the *Eclogues*, the *Georgics*, and the epic *Aeneid*.

**Thomas Panton**
He was a popular punster.

**Raymond and Bruce**
Characters in, respectively, Shadwell's *The Humorists* and *The Virtuoso*.

**John Ogleby**
He was a poet, translator, and printer.

**Prince Nicander**
He was a character in Shadwell's *Psyche*. 
Hannibal
He was the Carthaginian emperor who attacked Rome.

Romulus
With his brother Remus, he was one of the co-founders of Rome.

Sir Formal
Sir Formal Trifle was a character in Shadwell's *The Virtuoso*.

Bruce and Longvil
They are the characters from *The Virtuoso* who arranged for Sir Formal Trifle to fall through a trapdoor.

*Complete text*

*A Satire upon the True-blue Protestant Poet T.S.*

All human things are subject to decay,
And, when Fate summons, monarchs must obey:
This Flecknoe 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:
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.
The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,
But Shadwell never deviates into sense.
Some beams of wit on other souls may fall,
Strike through and make a lucid interval;
But Shadwell's genuine night admits no ray,  
His rising fogs prevail upon the day:  
Besides his goodly fabric fills the eye,  
And seems design'd for thoughtless majesty:  
Thoughtless as monarch oaks, 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 basses roar:  
Echoes from Pissing-Alley, Shadwell call,  
And Shadwell they resound from Aston 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 Villerius more.
Here stopt the good old sire; and wept for joy
In silent raptures of the hopeful 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 fabric, 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 suburban muse affords;
And Panton waging harmless war with words.
Here Flecknoe, as a place to fame well known,
Ambitiously design'd his Shadwell's throne.
For ancient 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 publish't the renown,
Of Shadwell'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 Shadwell almost chok'd the way.
Bilk'd stationers for yeoman stood prepar'd,
And Herringman was Captain of the Guard.
The hoary prince in majesty appear'd,
High on a throne of his ownlaboursrear'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 Shadwell 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 unction 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 loins 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 lie,
On his left hand twelve reverend owls did fly.
So Romulus, 'tis sung, by Tiber's brook,
Presage of sway from twice six vultures took.
Th'admiring throng loud acclamations make,
And omens of his future empire take.
The sire 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 prophetic mood:

Heavens bless my son, from Ireland let him reign
To far Barbadoes on the Western main;
Of his dominion may no end be known,
And greater than his father's be his throne.
Beyond love's 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 other teach, learn thou from me
Pangs without birth, and fruitless industry.
Let Virtuosos in five years be writ;
Yet not one thought accuse thy toil 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 writer's wit.
Yet still thy fools shall stand in thy defence,
And justify 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 Sedley interpose
To lard with wit thy hungry Epsom prose.
And when false flowers of rhetoric 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 Jonson's hostile name.
Let Father Flecknoe fire thy mind with praise,
And Uncle Ogleby thy envy raise.
Thou art my blood, where Jonson 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'ridge dost transfuse to thine?
But so transfus'd as oil 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 bias 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 Tragic Muse gives smiles, thy Comic sleep.
With whate'er gall thou sett'st thy self to write,
Thy inoffensive satires 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 acrostic land.
There thou may'st 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 drugget 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.