
UNIT 3 *MAC FLECKNOE*: SUMMARY AND EXPLANATIONS

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Summary of the Poem
- 3.3 Explanations
- 3.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.5 Answers to Check Your Progress
- 3.6 Unit End Questions
- 3.7 Suggested Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit you will read a detailed summary of the poem, *Mac Flecknoe*. This will be followed by explanations to help you understand the poem better. By the end of this unit, you should be able to relate the characters and theme to real life settings and people of that time, and have a clear idea of what Dryden wanted to convey. You will also understand how the satire is successful in ridiculing while using the elevated form of the epic with characters and situations that clearly do not deserve to be treated in an epic fashion.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

A reading of the poem with all its various references and the treatment of the whole will make us agree with T.S. Eliot in whose view the poem was ‘the piece of Dryden which is most fun, which is the most sustained display of surprise of wit from line to line.’ Satire became poetic in Dryden’s society, because poetry was adequately social, and society was sufficiently literary. The Restoration of 1660 not only changed sensibility but also divided society into Whig and Tory. The class-cleavage was felt as political rather than economic and the divorce between religion and politics was not yet complete. All this is illustrated in *Mac Flecknoe*.

3.2 SUMMARY OF THE POEM

Dryden’s *Mac Flecknoe, or A Satyr upon the True – Blue Protestant Poet, T.S.* (1682) is a satiric poem of 217 lines and is a scathing personal attack on a former friend Thomas Shadwell, who had replied to Dryden’s *The Medal* (1682) in a poem with scurrilous abuse. The poem lampoons Thomas Shadwell, a well-known playwright but an undistinguished poet. Dryden creates for Shadwell, a setting that is completely imaginary and quite incredible. This fictional world is brought to the reader through a mock-heroic form in which all the tools and machinery of the epic mode are brought into play. We are treated to elaborate similes, elevated diction, archaic vocabulary and spelling, heroic and kingly action – but all the while, the situations and characters are debased, low, and farcical.

Richard Flecknoe, who died in 1678, was an Irish priest and a poetaster (someone who writes inferior poetry) who wrote a little good verse and a great deal of bad. This Richard Flecknoe was a stock subject for satire, and even Andrew Marvell wrote against him as early as 1645. Evidently, this suggested Dryden's choice of Flecknoe, as he noticed how natural the connection was between a bad poet and Flecknoe. Dryden and Shadwell of the Tory and the Whig parties respectively came to satirize each other, and Flecknoe's name was found handy because of the contemporary references to him by poets and critics. Flecknoe finds his true heir in his son (Mac) Shadwell, a garrulous Celtic bard, irrepressible and irresponsible.

The poem begins:

All human things are subject to decay,
And, when Fate summons, monarchs must obey.
This Flecknoe found, who, like Augustus, young
Was called to empire, and had governed long.
In prose and verse was owned without dispute
through all the realms of Nonsense absolute.

The elevated tone of the opening couplet crashes once Flecknoe emerges as a foolish Augustus having "governed long in prose and verse" but "through all the realms of Nonsense absolute". Flecknoe, a prince among fake poetasters, realizes that he has ruled too long and decay is only the order of the day and the call of Fate cannot be ignored. And this aged prince does at length debate to settle the succession of his state (of "Nonsense absolute") and ponders which of all his sons was fit to reign and wage immortal war with wit. He decides:

"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".

Thus Shadwell comes out as the right choice for the succession because he is described as "Mature in dullness from his tender years" and "stands confirmed in full stupidity". Dryden's personal satire against Shadwell can be noticed here as coming out very directly.

The poem next goes on to describe the site of the coronation which has been selected to be in the disreputable quarters of London:

"Amidst this monument of vanished minds;
Pure clichés the suburban muse affords.....
Here Flecknoe as a place to fame well known
Ambitiously designed his Shadwell's throne."

So the place chosen for the coronation is also presented with a sarcastic venom that actually delights the readers. The monument chosen has been described as one of "vanished minds", and the place chosen is praised mockingly and ironically as one well known to fame, and Flecknoe is presented as ambitiously designing his Shadwell's throne. The mock-heroic tone of Dryden can be noticed running

through such descriptions. This monument chosen in the disreputable quarters of London is actually only a wretched Nursery – a training centre for actors, where only stupid dramas are the usual favourites.

The next few lines describe the actual coronation of Shadwell:

“The hoary prince in majesty appeared
High on a throne of his own labours reared,
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 played around his face”.

The “hoary Prince” is Flecknoe, and the throne is made up of his own books. The reference to Ascanius takes us back to the relationship between Ascanius and Aeneas. Shadwell is to Flecknoe what Ascanius was to Aeneas. The gently brilliant “dullness” playing around Mac Flecknoe’s face once again reinforces the satiric thrust on Shadwell.

In the next few lines, come Flecknoe’s unusual prophecy and unique benediction. The father invokes God’s blessings on the son and visualizes a bright future for him in a prophetic mood:

“Then thus continued he: My son advance
Still in new impudence, new ignorance.
Success let others teach, learn thou from me
Pangs without birth and fruitless industry”.

So Shadwell is given an unconventional benediction in which he is blessed to advance still in “new impudence” and “new ignorance”. Flecknoe desires Shadwell to learn from him how to produce “pangs without birth” and “fruitless industry”. The poem ends with Flecknoe suddenly and dramatically disappearing, thus putting an abrupt end to the entire procedure. The last few lines of the poem give almost an anticlimactic bang:

“He said, but his last words were scarcely heard,
For Bruce and Longville had a trap prepared.
And down they sent the declaiming bard,
Sinking, he left his drugget robe behind
Borne upwards by a subterranean wind.
The mantle fell to the young prophet’s part
With double portions of his father’s art”.

Bruce and Longville are actually characters in Shadwell’s *Virtuoso*, and the drugget robe is made of coarse woollen cloth. So as the “declaiming bard” (Flecknoe) says his last words to the young prophet (Shadwell), the father’s mantle falls on Shadwell with double force.

Satire as we know it today, is basically the legacy of Jon Dryden and it all begins with *Mac Flecknoe*. The names that we associate with modern satire are writers

like Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, and Voltaire but their satirical works are drawn directly from the marvelous wit, fantastic hyperbole (exaggeration) and the epic irony of Dryden's masterpiece, *Mac Flecknoe*. We can see the echoes of Dryden's mock-heroic style (excessively elevated tone) that is used to mock and parody their subjects. *Mac Flecknoe* is a long and complicated poem with a number of references and much of the cultural context may be a little difficult to understand. However, like any other satire, it is a commentary on the social and literary scene of that time and is a great satire because it has stood the test of time. Even though many of the references have lost their specific relevance, it remains a clever commentary on a topic that will always be relevant – bad writers and shoddy writing. Through his inventive use of satire, Dryden shows that he's not just a poet, but also a comedian, a critic, and a dissident.

3.3 EXPLANATIONS

The first line of the poem creates the illusion of its being an epic poem about a historical hero. The next lines talk about Mac Flecknoe, a monarch who instead of ruling an empire, rules over the realm of Nonsense.

Couplet 1 is a general reflection. It soon becomes evident (line 6) that the serious tone is really serio-comic. The funny and ironic comparison of Flecknoe with the Roman Emperor, Augustus Caesar and the word 'Non-sense' in line 6 shocks the reader into an awareness of the real satirical meaning intended by the poet. The bathos (anticlimax) is repeated in line 12 in the phrase 'War with wit'. For Dryden's meaning of the word 'Wit', you may read the units on the Augustan Age and also that on his life. This word has undergone a change of meaning since the Augustan Age. 'Dullness' (line 16), 'stupidity' (line 18), 'Thoughtless' (line 26) are vituperative words. But Dryden adorned abuse with the semblance of majesty.

Lines 21 -24 - parody of a passage in Cowley's epic *Davideis*, I:

Here no dear glimpse of the sun's lovely face,
Strikes through the solid darkness of the place;
No dawning morn does her kind red display;
One slight weak beam would here be thought the Day.

Notice how Dryden twists the imagery of the play of light and darkness into metaphorical 'Beams of Wit', 'rising fogs'. 'Lucid interval' means short spells of sanity between fits of lunacy. 'Lucid' literally means 'bright' and 'clear'. Metaphorically, it means clear reasoning or literary style. Shadwell was the best choice, because he never 'deviates into sense'. The exaggeration or distortion is deliberate.

In line 27, 'Thoughtless as Monarch Oakes' is a simile for the 'goodly Fabrick', the bulky figure, of Shadwell. Og in *Absalom and Achitophel* (11) is Shadwell. There we have a detailed, if less poetic and more angry or virulent, description of his physical appearance.

Lines 29-32 - Thomas Heywood (1574-1641) and James Shirley (1596-1666) were inferior dramatists. In line 103, we have 'Much Heywood, Shirley, Ogleby there lay' among the heap of neglected authors. John the Baptist (the prophet) prepared the way for Christ the Messiah. Flecknoe also was sent before but to prepare the way. Notice the disproportion of the analogy which makes it absurdly

comic. But the analogy is not stated, it is only hinted. You can further see that if Dryden is being unfair to Heywood and Shirley, he is being more than fair to Shadwell as of their 'type'.

Line 33 - Norwich, a town in Norfolk, the birth place of Shadwell, produced rough wool from which coarse woolen garment (drugget) was prepared. An obscure, incidental reference reinforcing satire.

Lines 35-36 - Flecknoe's self-congratulatory reference to his musical composition which pleased the King of Portugal.

Lines 37-40 - Shadwell was a musical entertainer at the court of Charles II. The incident mentioned in these lines has not been traced. Moreover, lines (37-50) parody Waller's serious occasional poem of the Danger His Majesty...escaped... at St. Andrews.

Line 42 refers to the fate of Sir Samuel Hearty, a Coxcomb who 'takes himself to be a Wit' in Shadwell's *The Virtuoso* (1676).

Line 43 - Arion, ancient poet and musician, was brought on shore by dolphins charmed by his song. He had been thrown overboard by sailors conspiring to murder him.

Lines 44-46 - The lute 'trembling' is at once literal and metaphorical. 'Treble' and 'bass' are technical terms describing two types - treble is a shrill note and bass is deep and grave. 'The treble squeaks for fear, the basses roar' in Shadwell's music. Dryden loved music, and his Odes and songs show that the music of his composition was superior.

Lines 47-50 - In these two couplets, the comedy or farce continues. The effect of Shadwell's music is described. Pissing Alley is a lane between the Strand and Holywell Street in London.

Aston hall - the supposed palatial house of Lord Aston, a dull-headed scribbler. The music resounds in the lane and the house. Observe that the echoes call Shadwell and pay attention to the elevating rhythm, reminiscent of the majestic rhythm of the *Ode on St. Cecilia's Day*. The little fishes are a comic substitute for the dolphins of the myth about Arion. Dolphins are sensitive to music. Fishes are not. Secondly, the crumbs of toast tempt the fishes to gather round pleasure-barges.

Lines 51 -52 - Shadwell is described as the leader of his musical band, making wild gesticulations with his hand. Notice the words 'Prince' for its heroic association, and 'Threshing' for its agricultural context.

Lines 53-54 - *Psyche*, an opera by Shadwell. It was elaborately produced at Dorset Garden in February 1675 with a company of French dancers led by 'the most famous master, St. Andre'.

Line 57 - One of the king's musicians, Singleton (d.1686) was often employed in the theatre.

Line 59 - Villerius - the name of a character in Davenant's semi-opera, *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656) which Dryden described as the first rhymed play. Singleton turned 'pale with envy' at the success of the music of Shadwell. Villerius appears with a sword in one hand and a lute in the other, thus combining ridiculously musical and military accomplishments. Singleton swore that he would never act

Villierius anymore because Shadwell's *Psyche* had thrown all other operas into the shade.

Line 61 - See how pathos is manipulated. Look at the word 'boy'. The old Sire's hopes from his joy has a touch of the universal sentiment of fathers. Cowley, in *Davideis* ii) noted that the Hebrew use of the word Boy applied to a boy of ten as well as to a man of thirty six. Shadwell was 36 in 1678, the year of the composition of *Mac Flecknoe*.

Lines 64 - 65 - London in the terror of the Popish Plot. During the period of the Roman occupation of Britain, London was called 'Londinium Augusta'.

Line 67 - Barbican was a small round tower on the outer gate of the fort for the posting of an advance guard.

Line 69 - Fate has so ordained that 'of all the pile an empty name remains', the poet's way of stating that it is in a state of ruin, an empty name.

Lines 70 -74 - The Nursery - an institution which trained actors and actresses for the stage.

Lines 72-77 - parody Cowley's *Davideis* i, particularly the following lines:

Where their vast courts the mother-waters keep,
And undisturbed by moons in silence sleep...
Beneath the Dens where unfledged tempests lie,
And infant winds their tender voices try.

T.S. Eliot spoke of the prejudice which dismissed the material, the feelings, of Dryden's poetry as unpoetic. Poetic emotion is distinguished by him from personal emotion.

Notice the transformations:

'mother-waters' becomes 'mother strumpets'
'Moons' becomes 'watch'
'Dens' is replaced by 'a Nursery'
'Tempests' becomes 'Actors'
'Winds' becomes 'Punks'

All these are distortions, turning the sublime into the bathetic, the serious into the serio-comic. Dryden's Nursery', thus, has a literary source in Cowley's 'Dens'. The mock-heroic effect is so created.

Line 78 - Maximin is the hero of Dryden's heroic play *Tyrannic Love or The Royal Martyr*. The rant and bombast of Maximin's declamations defying the Gods made it fashionable in the heroic tragedy of the time. Remember, Dryden was satirised in *The Rehearsal*. The hero of the heroic tragedy can (in a couplet from *The Rehearsal*):

Make proud Jove, with all his thunders, see
This single arm more dreadful than is he.

Lines 79 -80 - John Fletcher (1579- 1625) who collaborated with Beaumont was an Elizabethan dramatist.

Buskins - high-heeled shoes usually worn by actors in tragedy. Symbol of tragedy.

Socks - Low heeled light shoes worn in comedy.

Ben Jonson - the famous comic poet and neo-classic critic.

Line 81 - Simkin - a cobbler in an interlude, a stupid clown intriguing with an old man's wife.

Line 82 - Dryden borrowed the phrase from Davenant's *Gondibert* (IV, 36):

This to a structure led, long known to fame
And call'd the moment of vanished minds.

Line 83 - Clinches – puns 'the suburban Muse' of poetasters.

Line 84 - Panton - a celebrated punster of the day.

Line 87 - Dekker - Elizabethan comic dramatist. The prophecy referred to here is perhaps Dryden's own invention. Dryden was prejudiced against Dekker possibly because of his confrontation with Ben Jonson. Ben Jonson had satirized him in *The Poetaster* (1602), and Dekker had replied in *Satiromastix*.

Lines 90 -93 - Shadwell's early plays are satirised. *Psyche*, a rhymed opera, *The Miser* (1672), *The Hypocrite* (1671), and *The Humorists* (1671) are 'three as silly Plays as a Man would wish to see'. The remark was made by Settle in the Preface to *Ibrahim* (1677). Dryden's critical controversy with Settle is, by the way, described at length by Dr. Johnson in his *Life of Dryden*.

Raymond is a character in *The Humorists* and Bruce in *The Virtuoso* (1676).

Line 94 - Refers to Virgil, *Aeneid* iv.173 ff.

Line 97 – near - Bun-Hill and distant - Watling Street - from far and near. Bun Hill is in Finsbury district of London suburbs in the north, and Watling Street is old Roman Road in South Britain.

Line 102 - For Heywood, Shirley see the note on line 29. Ogleby was John Ogleby, dancing master and poetaster. He translated Homer and Virgil. In the *Dunciad*, Pope calls him 'Ogleby the great'. The Scottish poet was also the founder of the Dublin theatre, printer, translator and cartographer.

Line 104 - The King's customary 'Yeomen of the Guard' are burlesqued here. 'Bilk't Stationers for Yeomen'. Cheated booksellers were there. Oldham said that Shadwell was cursed by the broken stationers.

Line 105 - Henry Herrigman, the publisher, was also Dryden's publisher.

Lines 108-111 - Dryden parodies Virgil, *Aeneid*. Ascanins, Son of 'Aeneas, was the second hope of Rome, the first was Aeneas himself. The epic heightening makes the mock-epic admirable poetry. 'Pillar of the State' imitates Milton's'

With grave aspect he rose

And in his rising seemed a pillar of state (*Paradise Lost*)

The fiery halo over the head of locus signifies glory in Virgil's *Aeneid*, lambent radiance is burlesqued in 'lambent dullness'.

Lines 112-113 - refer to Livy's *Histories*, XXXI. As a child, Hannibal was made by his father to swear eternal hostility to Rome.

Line 118 - 'Sacred Unction' signifies the holy oil used to anoint in a religious ceremony like baptism or coronation.

Lines 120-121 - When the king leaves the Abbey after coronation, the Orb ('Ball' in the poem) is in the left hand and the sceptre in the right. The 'mug of ale' refers to Shadwell's love of ale. Refer to the note on line 27 above.

Line 125 - *Love's Kingdom* is a tragi-comedy by Flecknoe.

Line 126 - 'Poppies' is soporific, parching and sterilising - an aphrodisiac but not fertilizing. The sexual implication of Psyche springing from his 'loins' is related to barren poppy. Shadwell was said to be an opium-addict.

Lines 129-131 - Romulus is the legendary founder of Rome. He disagreed with his twin-brother Remus about the site of the city and they decided the question by augury (omen). Twelve owls are supposed to be auspicious augury. The reference to the heroic legend makes fun of Shadwell.

Lines 134-138 - Parody of the classical representation of Jupiter and Virgil's description of the Sibyl in *Aeneid*. Also, Milton's *Paradise Lost*: 'Thrice he assayed to speak and thrice...'

Flecknoe's second speech is inspired. The burlesque of epic convention here is noticeable. The inspiration is of course mock-heroic and comic.

Lines 139-140 - Ireland, homeland for Flecknoe, is fatherland for Shadwell.

Barbadoes is the British West Indies. Western main is the Atlantic Ocean. Ireland and Barbadoes are chosen because they are remote and uncivilized regions. The idea is that in these countries people would take his dullness as brilliance.

Line 143 - *Love's Kingdom* is the title of a tragi-comedy by Flecknoe. The father naturally wishes his son to achieve more than he himself did.

Line 144 - The epic style of benediction is burlesqued.

Lines 147-148 - Virgil, *Aeneid* burlesqued.

Line 149 - In the *Prologue to The Virtuoso* (1670) Shadwell declared that 'Wit, like China, should long buri'd lie', and hit at 'Drudges of the Stage' like Dryden who were 'bound to struggle twice a year'.

Line 151 - Sir George Etherege. The following lines refer to his plays. Dorimant, Mrs. Loveit, and Fopling are characters in *The Man of Mode*; Culley in *The Comical Revenge*; and Cockwood in *She Would if She Cou'd*. The epithet 'gentle' is used by Dryden because Etherege did not choose to reply to Shadwell when the latter lampooned him. Etherege is credited with having written 'the pattern of genteel comedy' and is regarded as the forerunner of Congreve, Goldsmith and Sheridan.

Lines 163-164 - Sedley wrote a poor prologue for Shadwell's *Epsom Wells* (1673), and was said (in spite of Shadwell's denial) to have helped him write the play.

'hungry' may mean devoid of wit.

Line 168 - 'The greatest master of Tropes and figures', 'the most Ciceronian coxcomb' in Shadwell's *The Virtuoso*. A pompous fool who 'never speaks without Flowers of Rhetorick'.

Shadwell is as great a fool as his Sir Formal Trifling, the character in his play.

Line 170 - Till 1678, Shadwell had dedicated five of his nine plays to the Duke or Duchess of Newcastle. Newcastle is to the north of England. Hence 'northern dedications'.

Line 171 - 'false friends'. Dryden and Shadwell differed on Jonson. Dryden had tried to correct Shadwell's opinion of Jonson in vain. So 'false' as friend. Notice the irony. Jonson is 'hostile' (Line 172).

Lines 173-174 - Parody of Virgil, *Aeneid*. For 'Ogleby', see note to Line 102 above.

Lines 179-180 - The reference is to a ridiculous love-scene in Shadwell's opera *Psyche*, where the heroine (Psyche) sweeps the dust to show her humility.

Line 181 - Dryden echoes Sir Samuel Hearty in *The Virtuoso*: 'hold thy peace, with a whip-stitch, your nose in my breech'. The phrases of this line are all from Shadwell's plays.

'to sell bargains' meant to make a fool of, to make obscene exchanges in conversation.

Line 182 - In the dedication to *The Virtuoso*, Shadwell wrote: 'I have endeavour'd in the Play, at Humour, Wit and Satire, I say nothing of impossible, unnatural Farce Fools, which some intend for comical, who think it the easiest thing in the world to write a Comedy'. His own promise 'dwindled to a farce'.

Lines 183-184 - Plagiarism from Fletcher and Etherege is the criticism here. But the pilferage was unassimilated like oil on waters (Line 185). Dryden referred to the similarities of situation between *Epsom-Wells* and Etherege's *She Wou'd if She Cou'd*.

Lines 189-92 - Parodying Shadwell's Jonsonian definition in the *Epilogue to the Humorists*:

A Humor is the Byas of the Mind,
By which with violence its one way inclin'd:
It makes our Actions lean on one side still,
And in all changes that way bends 'the Will.

Line 194 - 'likeness' to Jonson. Tympany: 'A kind of obstructed flatulence that swells the body like a drum' (Johnson).

Lines 195-196 - A Tun of Man: like Falstaff (*Henry IV*). Kilderkin: fourth part of a tun.

Lines 284-208 - Varieties of 'false wit'. Poems in shapes were common in the seventeenth century. George Herbert's 'Easter Wings' and 'The Altar' are famous examples.

An anagram is a change in a word from a transposition of letters. An acrostic is a short poem in which the initial letters of the lines spell a word.

Lines 212-213 - In *The Virtuoso*, Bruce and Longvil, ‘Gentlemen of wit and sense’ dispose of the rhetorical amorist Sir Formal through a trap-door in the very midst of flight of eloquence.

Lines 215 -217 - Parody of 2 Kings (*The Bible*). But whereas Elijah’s mantle fell from him as he went up to heaven in the whirlwind, Flecknoe’s is returned from below.

Check Your Progress

a) Comment critically on the dramatic significance of the following lines:

“All human things are subject to decay
And when Fate summons, monarchs must obey”

.....

b) Explain briefly what Dryden suggests in the following lines:

“Shadwell alone my perfect image bears
Mature in dullness from his tender years”

.....

c) Comment briefly on the following lines:

“The hoary prince in majesty appeared
High on a throne of his own labours reared”

.....

d) Discuss briefly the satiric effect created by the following lines:

“Success let others teach, learn thou from me
Pangs without birth and fruitless industry”

.....

e) Discuss the dramatic importance of the following lines:

“The mantle fell to the young poet’s part
With double portion of his father’s art”

.....

3.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we read a detailed summary of *Mac Flecknoe* with relevant quotations. We followed this up by explaining lines from the poem, bringing in all the references made by the poet to convey his thoughts and feelings. We saw that *Mac Flecknoe* is the finest short satirical poem in which Dryden has treated Thomas Shadwell with humorous contempt. The poem opens with Richard Flecknoe (whose name has already become a synonym for a fool), the poet-king of the kingdom of Nonsense deciding to abdicate the throne and to find a worthy successor. His choice falls upon Shadwell as, among all his (literary) sons,

Shadwell is the fittest as he is the unparalleled poet of dullness. Mac Flecknoe then goes on to deliver a speech on the merits of his son, Shadwell (or should we say, the lack of merits) during the coronation. The poem develops into a barely concealed, condemnation of both Shadwell's literary credentials as well as his character. The descriptions Dryden offers only serve the purpose of highlighting the incompetency of Shadwell and create the image of a fool ruling over peasants. The poem ends with the prophecy that Shadwell would write weak verse, bad plays and ineffective satires. He is advised to set his own songs to music and sing them. As Flecknoe speaks, he is sent crashing through a trap door and his mantle falls on Shadwell, symbolizing the passing on of the legacy of Nonsense.

3.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- a) These opening lines of Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* are dramatically significant because they set the mock-heroic tone of the entire poem. These lines set up a very serious tone in which all the human beings are described as mortal, and the ponderous truth that when the call of Death comes, even Kings have to respond. But the elevated tone of the couplet crashes once Flecknoe emerges with his "realms of absolute Nonsense". This couplet, therefore, raises the expectations of the readers which are later on only denied ironically.
- b) Dryden exposes the confirmed stupidity of Shadwell in these lines when Flecknoe is described here as positively admitting that of all his sons it is only Shadwell who resembles him perfectly as being dull and stupid right from his tender years.
- c) These lines describe ironically the actual place where Shadwell is to be crowned as the successor of Flecknoe. The "hoary prince" is Flecknoe himself, and throne prepared for Shadwell is one made up of the books of Flecknoe. So the mock-heroic satire of Dryden continues even here. The "prince", "majesty" and "throne" conjure images of grandeur which do not match the satiric story being narrated.
- d) The satiric effect created here by these lines is indeed pungent. Here Shadwell is given a unique, unconventional blessing in which Flecknoe desires him to learn from him how to produce "pangs without birth" and "fruitless industry". In a way, Flecknoe is actually asking Shadwell to be fruitless in his literary creations.
- e) The dramatic importance of these concluding lines is immense. Contrary to the opening couplet which started on a highly serious note, this concluding couplet ends with an anticlimactic bang. The last words of Flecknoe are scarcely heard as he suddenly falls in the trap-door which opens below his feet. But as Flecknoe falls, his woollen garment is carried upwards by a sudden gust of wind. This is the 'mantle' that falls on Shadwell, and he inherits from his father a stupidity which is two times more than that of Flecknoe. The stupidity of Flecknoe has only been doubled in the absurdity of Mac Flecknoe, and the lampoon *Mac Flecknoe* has reached its culminating point.

3.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1. Why is Shadwell compared to an oak tree and why is he called the prophet of tautology?

2. Do you think that the many literary references detract from or strengthen the poem? Elucidate.
3. In lines 64-93, Dryden describes the scene of Sh_____’s coronation. How is the location of the throne and the environment significant and how do they characterise the main characters of the poem?
4. In the section (lines 94-138) which describes the coronation, how does Dryden describe the occasion with all its details to heighten the sense of irony?

3.7 SUGGESTED READING

1. Abrams, MH, Stephen Greenblatt, Julia Reidhead (eds). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 2 (WW Norton & Co Inc. first published 1962)
2. Collins, JC (ed.) *The Satires of Dryden* (Macmillan, 1905)
3. Combe, Kirk. “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
4. Doren, Mark Van. *The Poetry of John Dryden* (Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1931)
5. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-dryden>
6. Jack, Ian. *Augustan Satire* (1952)

ignou
THE PEOPLE’S
UNIVERSITY