



John Dryden's “Absalom and Achitophel”

ENGLISH LITERATURE (I) WEEK 15



Dryden's Time, Politics

- Execution of Charles I (1649)
- Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658): “a Commonwealth of Free State”
- Charles II back from France (1660)/
Richard Cromwell



Dryden's Time, Culture

- Beginning of the Era of Reason
- “Scientific,” Rationalistic, Materialistic
- Religious Wars Over
- Literary Style: Clarity and Precision, from Bookishness to Politeness



Dryden's Satires

- Satire: Juvenal/Horace
- “Mac Flecknoe” (1682): Shadwell
- “Absalom and Achitophel” (1681)



Dryden's Drama

○ *All for Love*




Dryden's Religious Verse

- "The Hind and the Panther"



Dryden's Writings

- Religious and Political Weathercock
- Money
- Occasional
- Eloquent and Intellectual



Background to “Absalom and Achitophel”


- The Popish Plot: Titus Oates (1678)
- The Bastard Plot: Earl of Shaftesbury/
Monmouth
- Trial of the Earl of Shaftesbury
- Old Testament: Samuel
- Rime Scheme: Iambic Pentameter,
aa,bb,cc....



Introduction, Lines 1-12

In pious times, ere priestcraft did begin,
Before polygamy was made a sin;
When man on many multiplied his kind,
Ere one to one was cursedly confined;
When nature prompted and no law denied
Promiscuous use of concubine and bride;

>>NEXT



Then Israel's monarch after Heaven's own heart,
His vigorous warmth did variously impart
To wives and slaves; and, wide as his command,
Scattered his Maker's image through the land.
Michal, of loyal blood, the crown did wear,
A soil ungrateful to the tiller's care:



About Absalom, Lines 18-29

So beautiful, so brave, as Absalom:

Whether, inspired by some diviner lust,

His father got him with a greater gust,


Or that his conscious destiny made way,

By manly beauty, to imperial sway.

Early in foreign fields he won renown,

With kings and states allied to Israel's crown:

>>NEXT



In peace the thoughts of war he could remove,
And seemed as he were only born for love.
Whate'er he did, was done with so much ease,
In him alone 'twas natural to please;
His motions all accompanied with grace;



Criticism against David, Lines 31-38


With secret joy indulgent David viewed
His youthful image in his son renewed:
To all his wishes nothing he denied;
And made the charming Annabel his bride.
What faults he had (for who from faults is free?)
His father could not, or he would not see.
Some warm excesses which the law forbore,
Where construed youth the purged by boiling o'er:



The Foolish People, Lines 42-51

While David, undisturbed, in Sion reigned.
But life can never be sincerely blest;
Heaven punished the bad, and proves the best.
The Jews, a headstrong, moody, murmuring race,
As ever tried the extent and stretch of grace;
God's pampered people, whom, debauched with
ease,

>>NEXT




No king could govern, nor no God could please
(God they had tried of every shape and size
That god-smiths could produce, or priests devise);
These Adam-wits, too fortunately free,



The Mob, Lines 57-71

They who, when Saul was dead, without a blow,
Made foolish Ishbosheth the crown forgo;
Who banished David did from Hebron bring,
And with a general shout proclaimed him king:
Those very Jews, who, at their very best,
Their humor more than loyalty expressed,

>>NEXT




Now wondered why so long they had obeyed
An idol monarch, which their hands had made;
Thought they might ruin him they could create,
Or melt him to that golden calf, a state.
But these were random bolts; no formed design
Nor interest made the factious crowd to join:
The sober part of Israel, free from stain,
Well knew the value of a peaceful reign;
And, looking backward with a wise affright,



Political Situation, Lines 85-109

The inhabitants of old Jerusalem
Were Jebusites; the town so called from them;
And theirs the native right.
But when the chosen people grew more strong,
And every loss the men of Jebus bore,
They still were thought God's enemies the more.
Thus worn and weakened, well or ill content,
Submit they must to David's government:


>>NEXT₁₈



Impoverished and deprived of all command,
Their taxes doubled as they lost their land;
And, what was harder yet to flesh and blood,
Their gods disgraced, and burnt like common
wood.


This set the heathen priesthood in a flame;
For priests of all religions are the same:

>>NEXT




Of whatsoe'er descent their godhead be,
Stock, stone, or other homely pedigree,
In his defense his servants are as bold,
As if he had been born of beaten gold.
The Jewish rabbins, though their enemies,
In this conclude them honest men and wise:

>>NEXT



For 'twas their duty, all the learned think,
To espouse his cause, by whom they eat and drink.
From hence began that Plot, the nation's curse,
Bad in itself, but represented worse;



The Popish Plot, Lines 114-130

Some truth there was, but dashed and brewed with
lies,

To please the fools, and puzzle all the wise.


Succeeding times did equal folly call,

Believing nothing, or believing all.

The Egyptian rites the Jebusites embraced,


Where gods were recommended by their taste.

>>NEXT



Such savory deities must needs be good,
As served at once for worship and for food.
By force they could not introduce these gods,
For ten to one in former days was odds;
So fraud was used (the sacrificer's trade):
Fools are more hard to conquer than persuade.

>>NEXT




Their busy teachers mingled with the Jews,
And ranked for converts even the court and stews:
Which Hebrew priests the more unkindly took,
Because the fleece accompanies the flock.
Some thought they God's anointed meant to slay



The Rebels, Lines 135-149


Had yet a deep and dangerous consequence:
For, as when raging fevers boil the blood,
The standing lake soon floats into a flood,
And every hostile humor, which before
Slept quiet in its channels, bubbles o'er;
So several factions from this first ferment
Work up to foam, and threat the government.

>>NEXT



Some by their friends, more by themselves thought
wise,
Opposed the power to which they could not rise.
Some had in courts been great, and thrown from
thence,
Like fiends were hardened in impenitence;

>>NEXT




Some, by their monarch's fatal mercy, grown
From pardoned rebels kinsmen to the throne,
Were raised in power and public office high;
Strong bands, if bands ungrateful men could tie.



Achitophel, Lines 150-162

Of these the false Achitophel was first;
A name to all succeeding ages cursed:
For close designs, and crooked counsels fit;
Sagacious, bold, and turbulent of wit;
Restless, unfixed in principles and place;
In power unpleased, impatient of disgrace:

>>NEXT



A fiery soul, which, working out its way,
Fretted the pygmy body to decay,
And o'er-informed the tenement of clay.
A daring pilot in extremity;
Pleased with the danger, when the waves went
high,
He sought the storms; but, for a calm unfit,
Would steer too nigh the sands, to boast his wit.



Achitophel, Lines 173-179

In friendship false, implacable in hate,
Resolved to ruin or to rule the state.
To compass this the triple bond he broke,
The pillars of the public safety shook,
And fitted Israel for a foreign yoke;
Then seized with fear, yet still affecting fame,
Usurped a patriot's all-atoning name.



Achitophel, Lines 192-198


Oh, had he been content to serve the crown,
With virtues only proper to the gown;
Or had the rankness of the soil been freed
From cockle, that oppressed the noble seed;
David for him his tuneful harp had strung,
And Heaven had wanted one immortal song.
But wild Ambition loves to slide, not stand,



Why Absalom, Lines 220-229

Achitophel still wants a chief, and none
Was found so fit as warlike Absalom:
Not that he wished his greatness to create
(For politicians neither love nor hate),
But, for he knew his title not allowed,
Would keep him still depending on the crowd,

>>NEXT



That kingly power, thus ebbing out, might be
Drawn to the dregs of a democracy.

Him he attempts with studied arts to please,
And sheds his venom in such words as these:



Seduction, Lines 230-234

“Auspicious prince, at whose nativity
Some royal planet ruled the southern sky;
Thy longing country's darling and desire;
Their cloudy pillar and their guardian fire:
Their second Moses, whose extended wand



Christ, Lines 240-245


Thee, savior, thee, the nation's vows confess,
And, never satisfied with seeing, bless:
Swift unbespoken pomps thy steps proclaim,
And stammering babes are taught to lisp thy name.
How long wilt thou the general joy detain,
Starve and defraud the people of thy reign?



Time is Right, Lines 246-261


Content ingloriously to pass thy days
Like one of Virtue's fools that feeds on praise;
Till thy fresh glories, which now shine so bright,
Grow stale and tarnish with our daily sight.
Believe me, royal youth, thy fruit must be
Or gathered ripe, or rot upon the tree.

>>NEXT



Heaven has to all allotted, soon or late,
Some lucky revolution of their fate;
Whose motions if we watch and guide with skill
(For human good depends on human will),
Our Fortune rolls as from a smooth descent,
And from the first impression takes the bent;

>>NEXT




But, if unseized, she glides away like wind,
And leaves repenting Folly far behind.
Now, now she meets you with a glorious prize,
And spreads her locks before her as she flies.



Fortune, Lines 262-280


Had thus old David, from whose loins you spring,
Not dared, when Fortune called him, to be king,
At Gath an exile he might still remain,
And heaven's anointing oil had been in vain.
Let his successful youth your hopes engage;
But shun the example of declining age;

>>NEXT




Behold him setting in his western skies,
The shadows lengthening as the vapors rise.
He is not now, as when on Jordan's sand
The joyful people thronged to see him land,
Covering the beach, and blackening all the strand;

>>NEXT



But, like the Prince of Angels, from his height
Comes tumbling downward with diminished light;
Betrayed by one poor plot to public scorn
(Our only blessing since his cursed return),

>>NEXT




Those heaps of people which one sheaf did bind,
Blown off and scattered by a puff of wind.
What strength can he to your designs oppose,
Naked of friends, and round beset with foes?



Patriotism, Lines 289-302

All sorts of men by my successful arts,
Abhorring kings, estrange their altered hearts
From David's rule: and 'tis the general cry,
'Religion, commonwealth, and liberty.'
If you, as champion of the public good,
Add to their arms a chief of royal blood,
What may not Israel hope, and what applause
Might such a general gain by such a cause?

>>NEXT₄₃




Not barren praise alone, that gaudy flower
Fair only to the sight, but soild power;
And nobler is a limited command,
Given by the love of all your native land,
Than a successive title, long and dark,
Drawn from the moldy rolls of Noah's ark.”



Absalom's Ambition, Lines 303-314

What cannot praise effect in mighty minds,
When flattery soothes, and when ambition blinds!
Desire of power, on earth a vicious weed,
Yet, sprung from high, is of celestial seed:
In God 'tis glory; and when men aspire,
'Tis but a spark too much of heavenly fire.

>>NEXT



The ambitious youth, too covetous of fame,
Too full of angels' metal in his frame,
Unwarily was led from virtue's ways,
Made drunk with honor, and debauched with praise.
Half loath, and half consenting to the ill
(For loyal blood within him struggled still),



Absalom's Half-Hearted Defense, Lines 315-319

He thus replied: "And what pretense have I
To take up arms for public liberty?

My father governs with unquestioned right;
The faith's defender, and mankind's delight,
Good, gracious, just, observant of the laws:



David a Good King, Lines 329-336

What could he gain, his people to betray,
Or change his right for arbitrary sway?
Let haughty Pharaoh curse with such a reign
His fruitful Nile, and yoke a servile train.
If David's rule Jerusalem displease,
The Dog Star [Sirius] heats their brains to this
disease.

Why then should I, encouraging the bad,
Then rebel and run popularly mad?



No Tyrant, Lines 337-341

Were he a tyrant, who, by lawless might
Oppressed the Jews, and raised the Jebusite,
Well might I mourn; but nature's holy bands
Would curb my spirits and restrain my hands:
The people might assert their liberty,



Filial, Lines 342-346


But what was right in them were crime in me.
His favor leaves me nothing to require,
Prevents my wishes, and outruns desire.
What more can I expect while David lives?
All but his kingly diadem he gives:



James II, Lines 348-360

“Is justly destined for a worthier head.
For when my father from his toils shall rest
And late augment the number of the blest,
His lawful issue shall the throne ascend,
Or the collateral line, where that shall end.
His brother, though oppressed with vulgar spite,

>>NEXT




Yet dauntless, and secure of native right,
Of every royal virtue stands possessed;
Still dear to all the bravest and the best.
His courage foes, his friends his truth proclaim;
His loyalty the king, the world his fame.
His mercy even the offending crowd will find,
For sure he comes of a forgiving kind.



Fate Unfair, Lines 363-372

Yet O that fate, propitiously inclined,
Had raised my birth, or had debased my mind;
To my large soul not all her treasure lent,
And then betrayed it to a mean descent!
I find, I find my mounting spirits bold,
And David's part disdains my mother's mold.

>>NEXT



Why am I scanted by a niggard birth?
My soul disclaims the kindred of her earth;
And, made for empire, whispers me within,
'Desire if greatness is a godlike sin.'"




Rebuttal, Lines 374-388

While fainting Virtue scarce maintained her
ground,

He pours fresh forces in, and thus replies:

“The eternal god, supremely good and wise,
Imparts not these prodigious gifts in vain:
What wonders are reversed to bless your reign!
Against your will, your arguments have shown,
Such virtue's only given to guide a throne.

>>NEXT₅₅




Not that your father's mildness I contemn,
But manly force becomes the diadem.
'Tis true he grants the people all they crave;
And more, perhaps, than subjects ought to have:
For lavish grants suppose a monarch tame,
And more his goodness than his wit proclaim.
But when should people strive their bonds to break,
If not when kings are negligent or weak?



David not so Loving, Lines 423-436

Nor let his love enchant your generous mind;
'Tis Nature's trick to propagate her kind.
Our fond begetters, who would never die,
Love but themselves in their posterity.
Or let his kindness by the effects be tried,
Or let him lay his vain pretense aside.

>>NEXT




God said he loved your father; could he bring
A better proof than to anoint him king?
It surely showed he loved the shepherd well,
Who gave so fair a flock as Israel.
Would David have you thought his darling son?
What means he then, to alienate the crown?
The name of godly he may blush to bear:
'Tis after God's own heart to cheat his heir.



James a Lion, Lines 441-456


Then the next heir, a prince severe and wise,
Already looks on you with jealous eyes;
Sees through the thin disguises of your arts,
And marks your progress in the people's hearts.
Though now his mighty soul its grief contains,
He meditates revenge who least complains;

>>NEXT



And, like a lion, slumbering in the way,
Or sleep dissembling, while he waits his prey,
His fearless foes within his distance draws,
Constrains his roaring, and contracts his paws;
Till at the last, his time for fury found,
He shoots with sudden vengeance from the ground;

>>NEXT




The prostrate vulgar passes o'er and spares,
But with a lordly rage his hunters tears.
Your case no tame expedients will afford:
Resolve on death, or conquest by the sword,



David Full of Fear, Lines 467-479

And who can sound the depth of David's soul?
Perhaps his fear his kindness may control.
He fears his brother, though he loves his son,
For plighted vows too late to be undone.
If so, by force he wishes to be gained,
Like women's lechery, to seem constrained.

>>NEXT



Doubt not; but when he most affects the frown,
Commit a pleasing rape upon the crown.
Secure his person to secure your cause:
They who possess the prince, possess the laws.”


He said, and this advice above the rest
With Absalom's mild nature suited best:
Unblamed of life (ambition set aside),



Descriptions of the Rebels, Line 491-517


To further this, Achitophel unites
The malcontents of all the Israelites;
Whose differing parties he could wisely join,
For several ends, to serve the same design:
The best (and of the princes some were such),
Who thought the power of monarchy too much;

>>NEXT




Mistaken men, and patriots in their hearts;
Not wicked, but seduced by impious arts.
By these the springs of property were bent,
And wound so high, they cracked the government.
The next for interest sought to embroil the state,
To sell their duty at a dearer rate;
And make their Jewish markets of the throne,
Pretending public good, to serve their own.

>>NEXT



Others though kings an useless heavy lord,
Who cost too much, and did too little good.
These were for laying honest David by,
On principles of pure good husbandry.
With them joined all the haranguers of the throng,
That thought to get preferment by the tongue.

>>NEXT




Who follow next, a double danger bring,
Not only hating David, but the king:
The Solymaeian rout, well-versed of old
In godly faction, and in treason bold;
Cowering and quaking at a conqueror's sword,
But lofty to a lawful prince restored;
Saw with disdain an ethnic plot begun,



Personal Satire, Lines 544-568


In the first rank of these did Zimri stand;
A man so various, that he seemed to be
Not one, but all mankind's epitome:
Stiff in opinions, always in the wrong;
Was everything but starts, and nothing long;

>>NEXT




But, in the course of one revolving moon,
Was chymist, fiddler, statesman, and buffoon:
Then all for women, painting, rhyming, drinking,
Besides then thousand freaks that died in thinking.
Blest madman, who could every hour employ,
With something new to wish, or to enjoy,
Railing and praising were his usual themes;

>>NEXT



And both (to show his judgement) in extremes:
So over-violent, or over-civil,
That every man, with him, was God or Devil.
In squandering wealth was his peculiar art:
Nothing went unrewarded but desert.

>>NEXT




Beggared by fools, whom still he found too late,
He had his jest, and they had his estate.
He laughed himself from court; then sought relief
By forming parties, but could ne'er be chief;
For, spite of him, the weight of business fell
On Absalom and wise Achitophel:
Thus, wicked but in will, of means bereft,
He left not faction, but of that was left.



Personal Satire, Lines 632-642

Yet, Corah, thou shalt from oblivion pass:
Erect thyself, thou monumental brass,
High as the serpent of thy metal made,
While nations stand secure beneath thy shade.
What though his birth were base, yet comets rise
From earthy vapors, ere they shine in skies.

>>NEXT




Prodigious actions may as well be done
By weaver's issue, as by prince's son.
This arch-attestor for the public good
By that one deed ennobles all his blood.
Who ever asked the witnesses' high race



Absalom Hypocritical, Lines 682-695

Surrounded thus with friends of every sort,
Deluded Absalom forsakes the court:
Impatient of high hopes, urged with renown,
And fired with near possession of a crown.
The admiring crowd are dazzled with
surprise,
And on his goodly person feed their eyes:

>>NEXT₇₄



His joy concealed, he sets himself to show,
On each side bowing popularly low;
His looks, his gestures, and his words he frames,
And with familiar ease repeats their names.
Thus formed by nature, furnished out with arts,
He glides unfelt into their secret hearts.
Then, with a kind compassionating look,
And sighs, bespeaking pity ere he spoke,




Absalom's Travel, Lines 768-722

“I mourn, my countrymen, your lost
estate;


Though far unable to prevent your fate:
Behold a banished man, for your dear cause
Exposed a prey to arbitrary laws!
Yet oh! that I alone could be undone,
Cut off from empire, and no more son!

>>NEXT₇₆




Now all your liberties a spoil are made;
Egypt and Tyrus intercept your trade,
And Jebusites your sacred rites invade.
My father, whom with reverence yet I name,
Charmed into ease, is careless of his fame;
And, bribed with petty sums of foreign gold,
Is grown in Bathsheba's embraces old;

>>NEXT



Exalts his enemies, his friends destroys;
And all his power against himself employs.
He gives, and let him give, my right away;
But why should he his own, and yours betray?
He only, he can make the nation bleed,
And he alone from my revenge is freed.

>>NEXT



Take then my tears (with that he wiped his eyes),
'Tis all the aid my present power supplies:
No court-informer can these arms accuse;
These arms may sons against their fathers use:
And 'tis my wish, the next successor's reign
May take no other Israelite complain”



Authorial Intrusion, Lines 747-755


Religion, and redress of grievances,
Two names that always cheat and always please,
Are often urged; and good King David's life
Endangered by a brother and a wife.
Thus, in a pageant show, a plot is made,
And peace itself is war in masquerade.
O foolish Israel! never warned by ill,
Still the same bait, and circumvented still!
Did ever men forsake their parent ease,



Defends King, Lines 779-798


For who can be secure of private right,
If sovereign sway may be dissolved by might?
Nor is the people's judgment always true:
The most may err as grossly as the few;
And faultless kings run down, by common cry,
For vice, oppression, and for tyranny.

>>NEXT



What standard is there in a fickle rout,
Which, flowing to the mark, runs faster out?
Nor only crowds, but Sanhedrins may be
Infected with this public lunacy,
And share the madness of rebellious times,
To murder monarchs for imagined crimes,
If they may give and take whene'er they please,

>>NEXT



Not kings alone (the Godhead's images),
But government itself at length must fall
To nature's state, where all have right to all.
Yet, grant our lords the people kings can make,
What prudent men a settled throne would shake?
For whatsoe'er their sufferings were before,
That change they covet makes them suffer more.



Loyalists, Lines 811-816


Now what relief can righteous David bring?
How fatal 'tis to be too good a king!
Friends he has few, so high the madness grows:
Who dare be such, must be the people's foes:
Yet some there were, even in the worst of days;
Some let me name, and naming is to praise.



David's Speech, Lines 939-975


“Thus long have I, by native mercy swayed,
My wrongs dissembled, my revenge delayed:
So willing to forgive the offending age,
So much the father did the king assuage.
But now so far my clemency they slight,
The offenders question my forgiving right.
That one was made for many, they contend;

>>NEXT




But 'tis to rule; for that's a monarch's end.
They call my tenderness of blood, my fear;
Though manly tempers can the longest bear.
Yet, since they will divert my native course,
Tis time to show I am not good by force.
Those heaped affronts that haughty subjects bring,
Are burdens for a camel, not a king:

>>NEXT




Kings are the public pillars of the State,
Born to sustain and prop the nation's weight:
If my young Samson will pretend a call
To shake the column, let him share the fall:
But, oh, that yet he would repent and live!
How easy 'tis for parents to forgive!

>>NEXT




With how few tears a pardon might be won
From nature, pleading for a darling son!
Poor pitied youth, by my paternal care
Raised up to all the height his frame could bear:
Had God ordained his fate for empire born,
He would have given his soul another turn:

>>NEXT



Gulled with a patriot's name, whose modern sense
Is one that would by lea supplant his prince:
The people's brave, the politician's tool;
Never was patriot yet, but was a fool.
Whence comes it that religion and the laws
Should more be Absalom's than David's cause?

>>NEXT



His old instructor, ere he lost his place,
Was never thought indued with so much grace.
Good heavens, how faction can a patriot paint!
My rebel ever proves my people's saint:
Would *they* impose an heir upon the throne?



Lines 991-992

The law shall still direct my peaceful sway,
And the same law teach rebels to obey:



Lines 1006-1007

Law they require, let Law then show her face;
They could not be content to look on Grace,



Lines 1025-1031

He said. The Almighty, nodding, gave consent;
And peals of thunder shook the firmament.
Henceforth a series of new time began,
The mighty years in long procession ran:
Once more the godlike David was restored,
And willing nations knew their lawful lord.



Questions

1. In which way is *Absalom and Achitophel* a political satire? Give examples.
2. What is Dryden's attitudes toward Charles II and Duke of Monmouth?
3. In writing *Absalom and Achitophel*, Dryden avails himself of the Old Testament. Explain his use of this source.