

# Sh— and Shakespeare in Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe*

ROBERT F. WILLSON JR.

THE SH— ABBREVIATION IN Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* serves a number of satiric ends. It allows Dryden to lampoon the work and character of Thomas Shadwell, with whom Dryden carried on something of a literary war, and at the same time avoid charges of libel.<sup>1</sup> In the satire itself, the sound effect of Sh— complements the theme of Shadwell's dulness, pointing out that his dramatic inspirations bear a striking resemblance to windy aspirations. (Parents urging children to be quiet make the same sound.) In lines such as "But loads of Sh— almost chok'd the way," Dryden leads the reader to the inescapable impression that Shadwell's plays are not only dull but stink too. Allusions to the similarity between them and flatulence and excrement establish for *Mac Flecknoe* what might be called a "fecal vision."<sup>2</sup>

Yet to achieve his burlesque, mock-heroic style, Dryden may have employed Sh— to underscore the great aesthetic distance between Shadwell and Shakespeare. At least one other critic has concluded that Dryden had Shakespeare in mind when he depicted Mac Flecknoe and his father as types of the Falstaffian debaucher.<sup>3</sup> Even if Dryden had no particular Shakespearean character or play in mind, he certainly would not have failed to seize upon the humorous possibilities of an ironic comparison between the natural dramatic genius of Avon and Shadwell the upstart pretender.<sup>4</sup>

There are some compelling reasons to support this interpretation of Dryden's witty strategy. Shadwell had claimed he was the legitimate heir of Ben Jonson's mantle as the monarch of humor comedy. Dryden of course found the claim outrageous and worthy of attack, especially

---

<sup>1</sup> For an outline of the quarrel see George R. Noyes, ed., *The Political Works of Dryden*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1950), pp. xxxvi-xxxviii.

<sup>2</sup> See my article, "The Fecal Vision in *Mac Flecknoe*," *SNL*, 8 (Fall, 1970), 1-4.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher R. Reaske, "A Shakespearean Backdrop for Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe*?", *SQ*, 25 (Summer, 1974), 358.

<sup>4</sup> Note in addition that both two-syllable names suit the meter.

after Shadwell had so lavishly praised Buckingham's *Rehearsal*, in which Dryden is lampooned in the role of Bayes. In *Mac Flecknoe*, Flecknoe suggests that instead of following any models (such as Ben Jonson, Dryden seems to be saying), Sh\_\_\_ should "Trust nature" and "Set thy own songs, and sing them to thy lute." Put another way, Sh\_\_\_ might well "profit" by taking the path of England's famous genius of the stage, one whom Ben Jonson admired but censured for failing to blot a line. The insult directed at Shadwell is clear: not only is he a failure at copying Jonson's plays, he has only natural dulness to qualify as a descendant of Shakespeare.

Dryden's remarks in his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668) reinforce the claim that he believed Shakespeare was the only dramatist worthy of the hyperbolic *tone* that marks *Mac Flecknoe*.<sup>5</sup> That is, if the poem were a serious encomium to natural genius, not dulness, Shakespeare could be considered an archetype. Neander assigns to Shakespeare "the largest and most comprehensive soul"; he drew "all the images of Nature" not laboriously but luckily.<sup>6</sup> Though he wanted learning he did not require books in order to read Nature: "he looked inward and found her there." When applied to Sh\_\_\_ and his work, these praises are turned to their opposites: the "comprehensive soul" becomes "a tun of man," full of "thoughtless majesty"; the "images of Nature" luckily drawn are changed to "loads of Sh\_\_\_" choking the way. And when Sh\_\_\_ looks within he finds "rising fogs" instead of Nature.

Dryden's assessment of Shakespeare is not entirely unqualified in the *Essay*: "I cannot say he is everywhere alike. . . . He is many times flat, insipid; his comic wit degenerating into clenches, his serious *swelling into bombast* [italics mine]." It is intriguing and revealing of the workings of Dryden's critical mind that the phrase "swelling into bombast" suits the argument against poetasters like Shadwell. Is the distance between poetic genius and poetic dulness so great after all, he seems to be asking. Occasionally, we may conclude, the criticism leveled at Sh\_\_\_ could apply to Shakespeare's style as well. But Dryden is quick to add that he "is always great, when some great occasion is presented to him"; given "a fit subject for his wit" he raises himself high above the rest of the poets. Sh\_\_\_, on the other hand, descends

<sup>5</sup> That exaggerated tone is revealed in such lines as Flecknoe's: "'T is resolved; for nature pleads, that he Should only rule, who most resembles me. Sh\_\_\_ alone my perfect image bears, . . ." Of course the anticlimax follows in the rhyming line, "Mature in dulness from his tender years: . . ." In some cases words may be changed and transposed to achieve a compliment instead of an insult: "But Sh\_\_\_'s genuine *day* admits no *night*."

<sup>6</sup> All quotes are from the Noyes edition.

into the underworld where he is tossed by a subterranean wind.

I believe this reading adds a significant dimension of irony to the travesty already present in Dryden's satire. Since Shakespeare was deemed by Dryden as beyond imitation, Flecknoe's advice to his son and heir to "Trust nature, do not labor to be dull" and "Set thy own songs and sing them to thy lute" becomes especially trenchant. Now that Shadwell has failed as an imitator of Ben Jonson, he might try looking within himself for inspiration. He then will not fail to expose his true dulness as he produces anagrams and acrostics. Without on occasion reading Shakespeare into the Sh\_\_\_ abbreviation we lose some of the mock-heroic wit that makes *Mac Flecknoe* more than a farcical, and often sarcastic attack on a literary opponent.

University of Missouri at Kansas City

#### NECROLOGY

The Secretary-Treasurer has recently received word of the death of Donald C. Swanson on April 12, 1976. Professor Swanson was known to onomatologists especially for his works in Latin literature: *The Names in Roman Verse* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), a lexicon and reverse index of all proper names of history, mythology and geography found in the classical Roman poets, and *A Characterization of the Roman Poetic Onomasticon* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1970), also dealing with Latin names.