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**The Jonsonian Design in Dryden's  
*Mac Flecknoe***

John Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* and Ben Jonson's "To the Memory of My Beloved Master William Shakespeare" are two familiar neoclassical poems seldom paired for critical discussion. Moreover, since each exemplifies so vividly the identifying marks of a particular phase in the history of English neoclassicism, the notion of a comparison between them is apt to bring to mind differences rather than similarities. Clearly *Mac Flecknoe*, the Augustan satire, and "To the Memory", the Renaissance ode, are literary products of vastly different historic eras. Yet, as neoclassicists, both Dryden and Jonson were creatively directed by a theory of art that, paradoxically, commands the poet to use history as the vehicle for transcending history to reach the timeless realm of poesy. In theory at least, every successful neoclassical poem is a historically-inspired expression of one suprahistorical subject, which is nature. In practice, a comparison of *Mac Flecknoe* and "To the Memory" provides an illustration of the generative power of the neoclassical paradox in action.

Certainly it must be granted that there are striking similarities in purely historical subject matter between the satire and the ode. First Jonson, in 1623, and later Dryden, in the late 1670's, treated artfully in poetry the art of drama as practised by a contemporary fellow-playwright. As a result, each produced a heavily judgmental poem of great imaginative brilliance. However, despite our awareness of broad, generic parallels between satire and panegyric,<sup>1</sup> it is at this point that differences in style and manner of execution between an Augustan satire and a Renaissance ode begin to intrude and present formal obstacles to further comparison. For we meet the old problem of comparing apples and oranges—devising an appropriate standard of measurement. What is needed is a common measure that fits equally well both the coarse-

textured mock heroics with which Dryden lambasted Thomas Shadwell in the 1670's, and the polished tribute to Shakespeare and Jonson published in Heminges and Condell's first folio in 1623. But in fact, as this essay aims to show, the common measure is already available to us in Dryden's concept of *design*. A critical comparison by *design* of "To the Memory" and *MacFlecknoe* uncovers the generic affinity that is hidden beneath their diverse surfaces. For the two poems share, in addition to common subject matter, a common *design* whose presence in both relates them as type and anti-type.

In a recent study, *The Art of John Dryden* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1969), Paul Ramsey has illustrated the importance of *design* in Dryden's critical vocabulary by reviewing, in his opening chapter, the chameleonic uses to which Dryden put this word in his critical writings. By *design* Dryden sometimes means no more than what is presently termed the organizational structure of a poem or play. Sometimes, however, the word means much more as well. His concept was elastic enough to cover also the movement (or movements) of a work, or even, at times, its overall informing moral. In other words, for Dryden, the critical notion of *design* implied a plan of purposeful action on the part of a poet. In searching out the *design* of a model for imitation, he looked for the discernible blue-print of a master-strategy underlying and directing all of the creative choices of language and metre to be found in it.

Typically, twentieth-century poetry compels an analytic critic to work "concretely", following specific clues of imagery and diction backwards toward larger organizational patterns. However, to see Jonson's ode from a Dryden-like perspective and find its design, we need to reverse that procedure and ask instead such broad, general questions about "To the Memory" as: What structural parts make up the total organization of the ode? What is its movement from start to finish? What purposeful end dictates this structure and movement? And finally, what underlying "moral" unifies and informs the whole? For all of these matters, taken together, comprise the design of the poem.

"To the Memory" is very accessible to this rhetorical mode of analysis since its eighty lines form a classic structure that is organized in three distinct parts, with clearly marked transitions between them. The ode begins with its focus on not the announced subject, Shakespeare, but rather on a strongly projected narrative voice that is, in modern formalist terminology, "the speaker of the poem". Throughout the first organizational unit, the speaker is at centre stage, identifying himself as Ben Jonson and presenting his credentials to the audience. Not until line

sixteen, when the speaker says, "I therefore will begin", does the focus shift entirely to Shakespeare.

The turn is dramatically announced by Jonson's much-quoted salute to Shakespeare as "Soul of the age!" This ringing declaration introduces the middle part of the ode in which the substance of Jonson's critical assessment of Shakespeare's achievement as a dramatist is developed at some length. Then another dramatic transition leads to the ode's brief, six-line conclusion. In the concluding unit, Jonson sums up the meaning of his critical judgments in light of the occasion that has "caused" his poem to be created. But far more than rhetorical summary is conveyed in the allusive image of the star which dominates these final lines. Upon reaching the climax of "To the Memory", Jonson says, "But stay; I see thee in the hemisphere," and, with the dramatic gesture of raising his eyes to heaven, he moves beyond reason or judgment into the realm of pure poetic faith. Seen as three movements, following one another to this soaring finish, the polished couplets flow from the praiser, to the praised, to a joyful celebration of the life-giving power of poesy. In terms of its structure and movement, then, this is the design of "To the Memory".

When we continue to press Dryden's concept of design as a matter of ends and means, the progressive movement of the ode reveals a master-strategy, worked out in parts that correspond to its three organizational units. Jonson's ultimate end in producing a panegyric to Shakespeare is, of course, no mystery. His design in the sense of an informing "moral" was dictated by a specific event—the first publication of Shakespeare's plays in a collected edition. Fit celebration of the existence of Heminges and Condell's volume is both "cause" and final end that governs the master-strategy. But in order to arrive at that end and prepare the way for the star image, the strategy requires that two tactical ends be accomplished along the way. The first is to persuade the audience that Ben Jonson is the proper person to speak to this historic occasion. Jonson's means to this end are partly positive and partly negative. Positively, by projecting a realistic personality, the speaking voice recalls Jonson's real life reputation—the familiar Jonsonian authority, earned in long service to the cause of English poesy. Negatively, Jonson explicitly casts off three kinds of human frailty that might lead to an inferior critical performance. He ritualistically denies that the judgments of Shakespeare that he is about to make are biased by "silliest ignorance" of the works, "blind affection" for their author, or "crafty malice" in himself. As a model for a satire, this three-fold purgation of impurity was rich in potential for development.

With the integrity of the critic thus established, Jonson begins a critical review of Shakespeare's dramatic powers and accomplishments. And again there is persuasive strategy at work. The end in this case is to transfer his arguments for Shakespeare's excellence from one man's opinion to a communally shared, reasoned judgment. The transfer is accomplished by placing the plays within a framework of three accepted criteria for judgment: the English language tradition, the Elizabethan theatre tradition, and the ancient drama tradition. When Jonson has fixed Shakespeare's place in relation to all of these, he has arrived at an "objectivity" that implicitly celebrates the criteria and the society that shares his faith in it, as well as Shakespeare and the plays.

Spreading praises well up to justify the climactic meaning compressed within the image of the star. For the ode closes in witty celebration of the historic fact that Shakespeare's achievements, like the sonneteer's beloved mistress, have on this occasion been rescued from the ravages of time. With the appearance of Heminges and Condell's edition, the plays have been removed, by a community that knows their value, from the chances and changes of theatrical performance. Instead, they have been placed in a timeless location, beyond Fortune's reach, in a book. Jonson celebrates in his conclusion the historic fact that, as a result of publication, the images of nature embodied in the plays have been secured to influence forever the necessarily time-bound English stage, chiding or cheering the progress of dramatic poesy as the historic moment may warrant.

"To the Memory", like the book that historically inspired it, is a star in English poetry. Its riches of wit and imagery are a manifestation of Ben Jonson's neoclassical genius in action. But these are also a reflection of the particular qualities of his age. Jonson, Shakespeare and their contemporaries lived and wrote at a time when an opulent version of neoclassical thought flourished in England, and expansive humanist ideals went, as yet unchallenged by more limited theories of human capacity. Jonson's public was schooled by the same courtly milieu that earlier had produced Philip Sidney's graceful literary manifesto, *An Apology For Poesy*. And an intrinsic part of the critical consensus that nurtured the poetry of the age was a highly idealistic belief in the moral force of poesy in society. Thus, though Jonson found much to satirize in London life and letters during his tenure as laureate, his sharpest satiric strokes were powered by a conviction that he and his audience were speaking the same language figuratively as well as literally. This conviction gives a characteristic tone to all of Jonson's work. Praising the virtuous and scorning the pretenders to virtue, he performed a public role,

confident that lines of communication were open between himself, the chief spokesman for poesy, and the society that they both served. At bottom, the soaring conclusion of "To the Memory" is a celebration of Jonson's Renaissance poetic faith, supported on this occasion by the evidence of Shakespeare's achievement. For the proof of the triumph of English poesy that Sidney had foreseen in the 1580's was safely contained in Heminges and Condell's book in 1623. Small wonder that the tone of Jonson's tribute to this book is expansive and positive, aglow with patriotic satisfaction. When Jonson says, "Triumph my Britain!" he means every word of it.

But Fortune's wheel was on a downward thrust at the historic moment when *Mac Flecknoe* was composed; and for Dryden, looking at the London theatre of the 1670's, the case was altered. At the beginning of his career, as we know from *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), Dryden had had high hopes that the drama of his historic era might equal or even surpass the glories of "the last great age". But he was wrong. The golden age was coming to an end, even as Dryden struggled to reshape his heritage into new comedies and tragedies to please Restoration audiences. By the late 1670's, theatre offerings were both declining in quantity and changing in quality. Dryden himself had shifted the major part of his creative energies into other, non-dramatic genres, and his earlier optimism had vanished.

The rationale of composition behind *Mac Flecknoe* has always been a troublesome mystery for scholars.<sup>2</sup> Why at this time did Dryden choose to mount so gross an attack on a successful and popular fellow-playwright, Thomas Shadwell? Explanations that seek the answer to this question in the politics of the two men or in their theatrical rivalries are never able to settle the matter. At best, they tend to make the negative energies projected by *Mac Flecknoe* seem like Iago's motiveless malignity—out of all proportion to any known cause. Here, I think, the presence of the Jonsonian design in Dryden's satire can enlighten us, for it suggests an alternative interpretation for the satiric hero of *Mac Flecknoe*. What if Shadwell represents in Dryden's poem not the *worst* of playwrights, but the *best*—or at least the *norm*? If Shadwell's drama stands for the high-water mark of accomplishment in Dryden's age, as Shakespeare's does in "To the Memory", then Shadwell personifies the soul of an age that Dryden found riper for satire than for praiseful celebration. And in this case, our questions about *Mac Flecknoe's* rationale should be: Why was Dryden, still laureate and royal historiographer under Charles, so passionately concerned with conditions in the London theatre when drama was moving in directions that

Dryden did not choose to follow? If theatre audiences were content to accept Shadwell's claim to Jonsonian excellence, and failed to notice the trivializing of humours comedy that London playwrights were regularly serving up to them, why did Dryden care so passionately?

Putting the question of *Mac Flecknoe's* rationale in this perspective suggests a possible answer that has little to do with personalities. That London audiences and the playwrights who wrote for their pleasure saw no cause for concern can be interpreted as evidence that the drama tradition of "the last great age" weighed less and less heavily on public taste in what Dryden saw as a not so glorious present. If this was the historic reality to which Dryden addressed himself, might we not understand *Mac Flecknoe* better by placing greater emphasis on Dryden's neoclassical orientation toward poetry and his commitment to conserving and refining the Renaissance past, and less emphasis upon his personal relationships with Thomas Shadwell?

We know that from the start of his literary life in London Dryden tried to cast himself in a public role analogous to the one that Jonson had played before him. We also know that neither poet could draw a distinction excluding popular theatre from the other poetic genres because neoclassical assumptions would not let them. Long traditions, ancient and modern, had hallowed comedy and tragedy as major pillars in the unified mansion of poesy. Is it not reasonable to suppose, then, that Dryden, a laureate in the Jonsonian mold, felt an obligation to respond to the decaying of the pillars? Yet, Dryden was in no position to register forthright Jonsonian complaint, for his critical stature in the 1670's, despite the laureateship (that he lost in the next decade to Shadwell) was by no means commensurate to Jonson's. There is documentation aplenty to show that, at the time of the composition of *Mac Flecknoe*, Dryden's voice was only one of many claiming critical authority. Moreover, the good-natured decorum of the earlier critical dialectic that is mirrored in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* had dissolved by this time into an increasingly angry quarrel of critics arguing often at cross-purposes. A new age was aborning, and Dryden could not, in his time do what Jonson often did—simply stand tall, render a verdict on the shortcomings of his contemporaries, and expect to be understood.

He could, however, fulfill his public obligation to poesy and lay the ghost of Ben Jonson by adapting a Jonsonian model to fit these altered circumstances. For, surely, it can be no accident that each part of the three part design of Jonson's "To the Memory" reappears in the design from which Dryden built an ingenious anti-type to a praiseful ode; that beneath *Mac Flecknoe's* weighty mock-epic machinery each piece of



persuasive strategy in the ode has been reimplemented, in the satire to produce a poem whose end is not praise, but blame for a playwright, his theatre, and an age that finds their achievements worthy of the English drama tradition.

Dryden's satiric counterpart to the first part of the Jonsonian design, the establishment of the authority of the critic, is easy to find in *Mac Flecknoe* since the connective clue that points to it is in plain sight in the opening movement of the ode. Asserting his fitness as a judge of Shakespeare's accomplishments, Jonson says:

Or crafty malice might pretend this praise,  
And think to ruin where it seemed to raise.  
These are as some infamous bawd or whore  
Should praise a matron. What could hurt her more?

Jonson's simile of the matron and the bawd is a succinct figurative description of exactly the master-strategy Dryden adopts in *Mac Flecknoe* to ruin the reputation of Thomas Shadwell. This is his design in the sense of a master-strategy, underlying all choices of diction and metre to be found in the poem. To implement the strategy, Dryden organizes a semi-dramatic structure in which his voice, the voice of critical integrity, fades to that of anonymous reporter, while Shadwell, the respected theatrical matron, is handed over to long, effusive praises from a poetic bawd, Richard Flecknoe. Throughout most of the 217 lines of the satire, Dryden's character of Flecknoe is at centre stage, delivering set speeches whose every word in praise of Shadwell is a mockery since the historical Richard Flecknoe, recently deceased, had exemplified to Dryden and his contemporaries the critical vice of "silly ignorance". Aptly enough in a satire, the shared standard and critical consensus on which Dryden relies to communicate his "moral" is not the moral high ground of a universally held ideal, but the low ground of Flecknoe's universal ill-repute as a failed poet-critic. In addition to the historically derived "silly ignorance", Dryden supplies also in his fictional portrait of Flecknoe a "blind affection" for Thomas Shadwell. But the "crafty malice" in the poem all belongs to Dryden.

The larger scope of the satire, and the evidence that far more than mere personal malice toward Shadwell is intended, emerges as Flecknoe progressively sets forth his critical standards of judgement. Here Dryden is implementing a satiric counterpart to the middle part of the Jonsonian design. Jonson measures Shakespeare's stature against that of Chaucer and Spenser; against Lyly, Kyd, and Marlowe; and finally, against the ancient dramatists of Greece and Rome. Implicit in the breadth of these

comparisons is a survey of the breadth of Renaissance poetics, the neoclassical heritage whose weight is almost entirely missing from *Mac Flecknoe*. In its place, by means of Flecknoe's critical framework, Dryden graphically pictures a shrunken little world of London theatre that has allowed the great tradition to decay and turned in upon itself. When Flecknoe measures Shadwell's drama against standards set by Heywood, Shirley, and Dekker, Dryden is arguing implicitly that the legacy of the vulgar crowd-pleasers of "the last great age" has now become the mainstream of English drama, where Etherege and Sedley must serve instead of command.

There is, however, one link remaining to connect the living theatre of Shadwell with its former glory in *Mac Flecknoe*, and that is the memory of Ben Jonson. Indeed, given the design of the satire, it might have been sub-titled "To the Memory of My Beloved Master Ben Jonson." Since all of the would-be literary authorities of Dryden's day, including, of course, both Dryden and Shadwell, claimed critical descent from Jonson, the still-revered Renaissance master enjoys analogous position to the ancients of Jonson's ode as the ultimate value-giver in Dryden's counterpart to Jonson's framework of comparisons. It is a witty transformation. No longer historically present to speak his mind in person, Ben Jonson rises up in Dryden's satire as a haunting memory, plaguing the minds of his successors. Thus when Flecknoe asserts in praise of Shadwell:

Thou art my blood where Jonson has no part,  
What share have we in nature or in art?

Dryden does more than simply denounce a rival playwright. He pronounces a gloomy verdict on the future of an English theatre that has denied its lifeblood and cast off the critical wisdom that formerly sustained it.

The satiric counterpart to the concluding part of the Jonsonian design of "To the Memory" appears in *Mac Flecknoe* where we would expect to find it, in the brief, narrative conclusion. Here Dryden parallels Jonson's form exactly, ending the satire with a dramatic movement that introduces a symbol that in turn relates *Mac Flecknoe* to its occasion. But while the dramatic movement in "To the Memory" is *up*, as the speaker's eyes turn to gaze upon a symbolic star; the dramatic movement of *Mac Flecknoe* is *down*, as the anonymous narrator describes Flecknoe's fall into a stage hell, leaving behind, alone on stage, a new king of dullness. On the shoulders of this king falls the coarse drugget



mantle that symbolizes his succession. Thus the multi-level mantle image in *Mac Flecknoe* becomes Dryden's gathering image, analogous to Jonson's star. This image fuses the Biblical, Miltonic, and classical allusions that permeate the satire, and also functions, as did Jonson's star, to make a comment on the occasion as a historic moment in the progress of English poesy.

For if, as I have argued, Dryden self-consciously transformed the design of a Renaissance ode of 1623 into a witty defence of the mansion of English poesy in the 1670's, then the matter of occasions is the key point that marks the formal departure from a type to its anti-type. In 1623, Jonson had a historic occasion, worthy of celebration in a forthright, neoclassical form. In contrast, the informing moral of *Mac Flecknoe* is the lack of any cause for celebration. To give artful expression to this historic turn of events, Dryden invented a fictional occasion that allowed him to treat literally the critical judgment that dullness ruled, and would continue for a time to rule, the London stage. The "cause" of Dryden's mock celebration is a coronation, and from this pseudo-historical event spring all of the mock-heroic inventions that transform the Jonsonian design beyond easy recognition.

An awareness of its presence, however, adds another dimension of richness to the satire. For despite its negative energy, *Mac Flecknoe* is not a poem of despair. On the contrary, its opening line, "All human things are subject to decay", is a positive neoclassical affirmation no different in essence, but only in emphasis from the concluding statement of Jonson's ode. In a time for chiding, not cheering, Dryden used his historic moment as the vehicle with which to transcend history. In the creation of a new kind of poetic masterpiece derived from a traditional model, Dryden demonstrates the integrity of neoclassical principles, and proves once more the creative power of the neoclassical paradox in action. In *Mac Flecknoe*, the legacy of the Renaissance past is transformed into a model satire, Dryden's contribution to a new phase in the continuing history of English poesy.

#### NOTES

1. James D. Garrison, *Dryden and the Tradition of Panegyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 220-228.
2. James Black, "Dryden on Shadwell's Theatre of Violence" *DR*, 54 (Summer 1974), 298-311.