

# Mac flecknoe, corrosion of an heir



**ASSIGN  
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In Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe*, dullness is the defining trait of the mock epic's "hero", and decay is employed as a theme and a weapon within the poem, underlined mostly as the decay of wit as the speaker dangles his victim and his reputation from his rhetorical noose. As a mock epic, the poem demonstrates the themes and motifs of an epic ballad – with an entwining of satire and persecution for the subject – in this case, Thomas Shadwell. The function of the poem itself is an attack on the dullness that is synonymous with the decay of intelligent humor and lack of appreciation for wit by Shadwell, an argument made possible by Dryden's persuasive satirical aphorism that, in truth, is little more than humorous, belittling, literary propaganda. Before *Mac Flecknoe: A Satyr upon the Trew-Blue-Protestant Poet T. S.* was written or published, John Dryden and Thomas Shadwell were guilty of what is likely a prolonged series of disagreements ending in a quarrel which blossomed into a heated mock epic that wasn't published until several years after it was written. The two have been known to disagree over an array of subjects including (but hardly limited to) their opinions on the genius of Ben Jonson, their interpretations of humor, comedy, and wit, their separate views on the value of rhyme, and of course, the value Shadwell's work. Not least of all, however, is that Shadwell is known to have thought himself the heir of poet Ben Jonson, to which Dryden staunchly disagreed, as Shadwell's quality of poetry is hardly comparable to his "predecessor" – and both men sported different opinions on their earlier colleague in the first place. These minor details make up the premise of Dryden's poem, and open the doors to humor in the face of insult while taking into consideration the maneuvers of *Mac Flecknoe*. Taking his contemporary's claims into mind, Dryden utilizes them to write him a ballad of praise as the next to take

throne in a line of decaying intellect, creative or otherwise. Written in heroic couplets, the poem carries a lyrical quality - an underscore to a quarrel he held with Shadwell on the subject of rhyme and an expression of decay regarding his victory or ability to protest Dryden's argument; a decomposition of influence. Shadwell is being cured for entombment under the weight of Dryden's obstinately dense, princely caricature of an heir for Flecknoe - who Dryden is also known to have held an express dislike for as a poet. Which son, he ponders is more fit to "wage immortal War with Wit (Dryden, 12)," than Shadwell, who alone bears his perfect image as, "Mature in dullness from his tender years . . . [he] Who stands confirm'd in full stupidity (16-18)." The opening of the epic introduces the topic of decay blatantly as "All human things are subject to decay," and sets the intention of literary propaganda by continuing with "And when fate summons, monarchs must obey (1-2)," which also brings to point the decay of a generation. By the passing of one monarch, the line decays further into tedium. Decay in the form of one generation waning into the next is painted best in the image of a coronation where, "instead of Ball," the heir is gifted with "a mighty Mug of potent Ale (120-121)." Rather than being presented with the royal, empowering ball and scepter, Shadwell is given the common drink, his influence suggestively diluted by the stagnation necessitated by fermentation of weak, familiar ale. Perhaps Dryden is even insinuating that one might need to be drunk to endure the new Prince of Dullness' reign. Further reference to a weak, corrosive reign are the "Poppies . . . o'er spread,/That nodding seem'd to consecrate his head (126-127)." Poppies are an opiate, and speak of a decay of the mind, and to imply that Shadwell took opium is further discredit to his mind, his works, and his title. In Pissing-Alley

and Augusta, referring to London, Dryden refers to “ lewd loves . . . polluted joys . . . Queens . . . Hero’s . . . unfledg’d Actors (71-76),” flooding the area, populating and contaminating it. Although “ From its old Ruins,” indicates renewal and rebirth it is a “ brothel-house” that “ rises (70),” resulting in the connotation that no advancement can or will be drawn from what could have been a momentous renewal. A parallelism is drawn here with the passing of Flecknoe’s title to Shadwell, who is even duller than the previous owner of the title he heirs to. Given that Queens and Punks are nothing more than common prostitutes or whores, none of the futures in the scene are respectable, and there is no hope for progression. The picture painted is one of stagnation in decomposition. News of Shadwell’s coronation, however, still must spread, and come out to meet are “ Bun-Hill, and distant Wailing-street (97),” who are in fact relatively near each other and suggest mightily that Shadwell’s influence never spread very far. And although no Persian carpets are laid for his royal highness, the new claimant to the throne of dullness, an image of “ scatter’d limbs of mangled poets” and “ dusty shops and neglected authors (99-100)” is presented just before “ Martyrs of Pies, and Reliques of the Bum (101).” The entire arrangement suggests a rotten stench of death and decay, the slow infection of a thoroughly defiled district where papers – perhaps writings of Shadwell’s – are being used as pie-tin liners and toilet paper. Comparing Shadwell to more respected poets, Dryden mentions Eth’ridg, a play on the poet’s name Etheridge, a comic dramatist, who Dryden likely believes superior to Shadwell. The images here denote decay as well, oil flowing over water, Etheridge as the oil that floats over the dense, dull capacity of Shadwell’s humor. The images are heavy, but suited to denote the idea in accordance to the others. The mock epic is emphasized

by repetitive elaboration on the original idea, utilizing allusions to classical and recognizable literature – mainly of Shadwell’s device as further opportunity to drag him down. Finally, impatient for Flecknoe’s speech to end, the coronation to be done with, and for Shadwell to claim his throne, two of Shadwell’s friends do away with him finally. Bruce and Longville “ had a Trap prepar’d (212),” anticipating a prolonged oration from the Prince of dullness – a lengthy process of decay before the title is handed over to Shadwell, who is said to have twice the dullness of his predecessor, which is an indication of a stagnation of rotting reputation. Flecknoe is cast down, beneath the stage – into symbolic hell of the under-stage as his mantel was “ born upwards by a subterranean wind (215)” to settle on his successor’s shoulders, a final symbol of Shadwell taking up the title of the Prince of dullness. At this point, it may be more appropriate to call him the King of dullness, for the mantle fell on him with “ double portion (217)” – a heftier responsibility than Flecknoe was faced with. Irony lies in the fact that even the poet himself is appealing to the crude humor of propaganda with, although illustrious and amusing, repetitive blows to Shadwell’s work and the dullness thereof, giving the poem itself a sense of decay in its own echo. Debasing Shadwell’s reputation, “ non-sense, absolute (6),” refers to second-rate work; mediocrity of which the victim of his epic is accused of attempting to flaunt as novel and interesting. What’s more is that the poem isn’t an attack on just Shadwell alone, but the many “ Shadwells” of the time, false legatees with deluded senses of their own skill. Dryden is picking apart Shadwell particularly, but the notion of the poem is apparent.