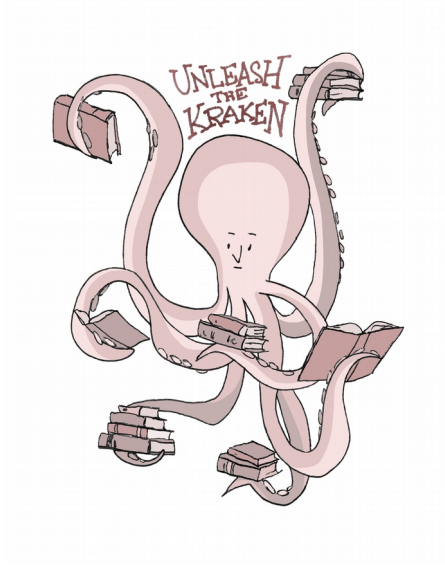
Absalom and Achitophel

John Dryden's 1681 Political Satire

edited and annotated

by

Jacob Rabinowitz



Kraken Editions

This book was originally published in 2020 as part of the Kraken Dryden series. Regrettably, the original files are corrupt, and only the PDF remains. Accordingly, I now re-release the book under the 96th of October aegis, placing it under **Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International**. —Jacob Rabinowitz

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Our thanks to Hoffman/Chapman Publishing Services, and to Peter Lamborn Wilson, for assistance and guidance in preparing the books in this series.

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Poetry

Absalom and Achitophel (1681)

Drama

The Wild Gallant (1663)
The Rival Ladies (1664)
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Introduction

Jacob Rabinowitz

A Difficult Poem

Dryden's poems, even this one, are rarely read nowadays, for a number of reasons, among which their merits do not figure. The principal obstacle to enjoying this particular poem is that it is really a political pamphlet in verse, requiring a fair knowledge of the history and issues it addresses. And even when such context is provided, as here, in the introduction and footnotes, one may not be pleased by the positions taken. Dryden is very much on the wrong side of history. He espouses the cause, and calumniates the enemies, of the last Stuart kings: petty, contemptible despots. When one compares his engagements with those of his predecessor Milton, whose political writings defend the rights of the individual in language unequaled since the days of Demosthenes, Dryden makes a poor showing.

But any comparison with Milton's politics, like a comparison with Shakespeare's poetry, will be invidious and unfair. It must be appreciated that in Dryden's time printing was still in its infancy and no author earned a living by his pen. Authors depended on noble patrons to support their labors, and the well-born considered investment in living artists (not donations to museums) an honor and a responsibility. Dryden can fairly be faulted for his politics, but by that same rule we should look askance at Virgil and Horace, who were Dryden's models both in poetry and in their dependence on a questionable sovereign. But moral and aesthetic merit are independent concerns.

Though Dryden may win no prizes in a moral beauty contest, we can enjoy his poetic pamphlets for their eloquence, which often rises to Shakespearean heights, and for the unparalleled insights Dryden offers into how people thought and what they believed at the time when English liberty, from which American liberty derives, was first tak-

ing on its definite outlines. Cooperative competition of political parties was then just beginning. Whatever Dryden's perspective, he saw deeply into the events of his time, and expressed them memorably.

The Story and the History

Absalom and Achitophel is an allegory. Ostensibly the poet recounts a tale of King David's doings in the tenth century BC, of which The Second Book of Samuel in the Bible is our only account. In brief, Absalom is one of David's sons who, to ensure his succession, organized a nearly successful revolt against his father, and was finally killed in a reckless sortie.

This episode from David's reign presented a number of striking parallels to the political situation of Charles II, which the footnotes describe in detail. I summarize the situation here.

The Tudor line ended with Elizabeth I, and Stuart rule began with her immediate successor, James I. The next king, Charles I, attempted to establish an absolute monarchy. This was the general trend in seventeenth-century Europe. Typically, in the Middle Ages, the commons, nobles and clergy all had some representative role in government. The English Parliament had parallels in the Spanish *Cortes* and the French *États genéraux*. On the continent in the seventeenth century, these latter were crushed and power was consolidated in the hands of the monarch; the English resisted such an imposition in a civil war that cost the king his head. Oliver Cromwell, a general of the parliamentary forces, became dictator, and ruled England for the radical Protestant republican faction, whom we know as the Puritans. The English commonwealth was governed well and effectively by Cromwell, but he was unable to delegate control of the country back to the fractious Parliament, and after his death the only present and plausible candidates for effective rule were

his fellow generals. It was considered preferable to invite the son of Charles I, also named Charles, who had sat out Cromwell's reign in Dutch exile, to resume the kingship, on the condition that he accept certain limits on his powers. This began the period we know as the Restoration, in which, by trial and error, a constitutional monarchy began to evolve. Over the succeeding reigns the sovereign became more and more symbolic, while political parties and prime ministers effectively took his place.

Charles II, known to history as "the merry monarch," had grown up in privations and among low company during his exile. He was only tepidly befriended by his fellow royals, since there was no strong reason to suppose he would ever come to power. Once he was restored, he lived out such dreams of royal wealth and pleasure as a young man might cherish during years of poverty among the social dregs of foreign capitals. Little more than a crowned playboy, he seemed a delicious antidote to the "reign of the saints" under Cromwell, when the theaters were closed, sports were banned, and persistent swearing was a prison offense. Charles' vices were popularly applauded because they expressed the too long and too severely repressed national *id*. It is no coincidence that that priapic monster of optimism, Mr. Punch, first appeared on England's shores at the same time as Charles II.

Charles attended to government reluctantly and haphazardly, reacting to all situations with a short-sighted selfishness which was rendered almost innocuous by his determination to avoid any commitments that interfered with fun.

The principal tension of his reign was the religious opposition between Catholics and Protestants, particularly the dissenting Protestants who found the Anglican Church insufficiently reformed. Both Catholic and Protestant extremists had engaged in acts of terrorism and insurrection

within living memory, and popular feeling against both groups ran high.

The English monarchy had entered the Reformation by forming the Anglican Church, which steered a middle course between Rome and Geneva. Charles, who as king of England was the head of the Anglican Church, had to set (with Parliament's consent) the limits of toleration. The cost of religious non-conformity ranged from exclusion from public office to imprisonment.

Another and parallel conflict came from the competing claims of representative and royal power, which now emerged for the first time, under the names Whig and Tory —which originally designated, respectively, Scottish Protestant and Irish Catholic insurgents. Originally terms of abuse, the titles were adopted by the new-born political parties with defiant pride.

Money was the friction point where all these concerns met. Charles always needed more to pay for his pleasures, and Parliament used its control of the national purse strings to impose new limits on royal power. There were further complications from without. The Dutch were periodically warred upon, despite being fellow Protestants, because they were serious trade rivals with England. And Louis XIV of France, which was the greatest continental power, opened his treasury to corrupt Charles, his supporters and his parliamentary opposition. Louis' object, which Charles never understood, was to foment disunity in England, thus gaining for himself a freer hand to dominate the continent.

There are many fascinating characters involved in the events and legislative battles of this period in England. The modern reader may easily become bewildered by their profusion and the continuous realignments of loyalty—but exactly this is the key to understanding them. They would not be so numerous or so mutable were they individually very

consquential. Here we enter upon modern political history, where there are fewer really important individual actors, while larger trends and factors provide the meaning of the action.

What is the importance of Dryden here? History tends to concern itself with whatever produces the most noise and smoke, whence the prominence of battles in historical writing. Modern history, with its emphasis on economics, is no more enlightened. When we turn our gaze to manufacturing and commerce we have merely exchanged the noise and smoke of the factory for that of the battlefield.

History proper, I believe, is the record of people's evolving understanding of the world they live in, which may be no less effectively expressed in poetry and philosophy than in science, technology or politics. From this perspective we may regard Dryden's political poems as interesting because of their historical subjects, but their subjects as interesting because of Dryden. Modern history is concerned with the meaning of events. The perspective of the poet completes this insight by considering events as meaningful.

Cast of Characters

This poem was published in November 1681, a week before the Earl of Shaftesbury was brought before a grand jury on a charge of high treason.

Dryden had became the bard of the Restoration with his 1666 poem *Annus Mirabilis* ("Year of Miracles") which celebrated the early successes of the reign, so he was ideally situated, and indeed expected, to voice the official position.

Charles II, whose coronation was received with more good will than that of any other English king, dissipated this by squandering the national budget on whores, gambling and luxurious living. Disenchantment also arose from his political flirtation with Louis the Fourteenth's France, and

his marriage to a Catholic princess who did not change her faith. We should note Charles' ill-concealed admiration for absolutism and Catholicism. This was clear enough to make Parliament unwilling to fund an army or a navy for Charles. They didn't trust him not to turn the military against them. His reign was a continuous bickering with Parliament over what prerogatives he would have to relinquish in return for cash. The influence of his mistresses, whom he unstintingly enriched and ennobled, particularly Louise de Kéroualle, who was both French and Catholic, and was in fact the foreign agent she appeared to be, were similarly disquieting.

But the greatest provocation came from Charles' brother, **James, Duke of York.** Though Charles had many children, none of them were legitimate; his wife Catherine was barren, so James was next in line for the throne. But James converted to Catholicism. Charles would not divorce his barren wife to take one by whom he might provide an heir, and he would not allow James to be excluded from the succession. Such loyalty may seem puzzling in a prince as unprincipled as Charles, but it is understandable that a man whom a parliament had deprived of his father, by the executioner's ax, would be unwilling to let another parliament made further edits to his family.

The match was put to the powderkeg of national tension in 1678 when **Titus Oates** came forward with his elaborate fabricated account of a Popish Plot. According to this story, the Jesuits, who had set the Great Fire of London, now planned to murder the king, place his brother on the throne, land French troops in England, stir up a rebellion in Catholic Ireland, eliminate Parliament and murder the Duke of Monmouth, Charles' very popular, and unquestionably Protestant, illegitimate son.

Oates, the son of a weaver, was very gifted as regards extempore speaking, memory for detail, and powers of in-

vention. He had failed as a radical Protestant preacher under Cromwell and the Commonwealth, failed as an Anglican priest under the Restoration, and finally converting to Catholicism, he failed at that as well, getting expelled from two Jesuit seminaries on the continent before beginning his career as a perjurer. Here his efforts at last met with success, and he was for a time one of the most famous and powerful men in England.

Though the furor he produced cost some thirty innocent people their lives, perjury is not a capital offense in England, and he outlived both his crimes and their punishment. After the Glorious Revolution, he was freed from prison and given a small pension by William of Orange—which shows that public opinion regarding the Popish Plot took some time to develop the clarity and unanimity it possesses today.

Anthony Ashley Cooper, the first Earl of Shaftesbury, was a legal thinker, a member of Parliament, and a man of extraordinary intelligence. He chose John Locke as his personal secretary. Under both Cromwell and Charles II, he distinguished himself by his fair-mindedness, respect for law, and fearlessness in opposing power where matters of principle were at stake. A brilliant lawyer, he combined a respect for the law with an utter want of scruple in matters the law did not not consider, strictly speaking, criminal. He took fullest advantage of of the Popish Plot hysteria to attack the king's prerogative, and he bears much blame for the damage done.

Shaftesbury's combination of political realism and moral courage has produced disparate assessments. His opponents called him "Shiftsbury" for his opportunism, while King Charles, teasing him both for his small stature and his principles, called him "little sincerity."

In the uproar over Oates and his Popish plot, Shaftesbury championed the Exclusion Bill, which would have

barred Charles' brother, James, from the succession because of his Catholicism. In 1680 Charles convened Parliament at Oxford, far from the disaffected London mob, and there the Exclusion Bill was presented. When it seemed likely to pass, Charles dissolved Parliament; it never again met during his reign. By this time Charles was steadily on the payroll of Louis XIV, so he did not need Parliament's money.

Shaftesbury was arrested for high treason. There was no real case, it was simply a matter of Charles testing his absolute monarchical strength and taking revenge for the attempt to pass the Exclusion Bill. The nation was divided between the Whigs who stood with Shaftesbury, and the Tories with the king. *Absalom and Achitophel* was published a week before a grand jury acquitted Shaftesbury. Despite his acquittal, Shaftesbury's career was over, and he ended his days as an exile in Holland.

James, Duke of Monmouth, was Charles II's illegitimate son by Lucy Walter, a Welsh aristocrat dispossessed in the civil war, who met her royal fellow refugee at the Hague. A handsome and charming young man, with a distinguished military career, a Protestant, Monmouth seemed to the people the obvious choice for Charles' successor. He encouraged the people's affection.

Literary Evaluation

The poem describes how the brilliant and evil Shaftesbury (Achitophel) tempts Monmouth (Absalom) to take the throne from his father David (Charles II). It contains much poetic oratory in which Dryden's great gifts and long experience as a dramatist have full play. Dryden is unique in the way he combines aristocratic wit and eloquent persuasion: his language would be as dazzlingly apt in the courtroom as in the court.

Beyond this, the poem is a taxonomy of Charles' opponents, personal and collective, expressed in memorable invective. It is a political satire, and its methods correspond to those employed today in political cartoons. One's assessment of whether it has the humor or the moral high tone of true satire depends on whether one agrees with the choice of targets.

Regardless, it is extremely vicious and entertaining—a masterpiece of sarcasm, disparagement, and glittering derision, designed to divert the splendid and heartless court of Charles II. Intended for the pleasure of the merriest of monarchs, it would do credit to the meanest of queens.

Dryden

John Dryden (1631–1700), poet, playwright and translator, was born in Aldwinkle, Northamptonshire, to a large family of landowning gentry. He was sent to Westminster School, where he received a thorough grounding in the classics. He took his BA at Trinity College, Cambridge.

The rule of the Puritans closed the theaters for nearly twenty years. After they were reopened by Charles II in 1660, Dryden began writing plays, and this became his principal source of income. He distinguished himself with sparkling and somewhat libertine comedies, featuring strong female leads, which greatly appealed to the king, as they would later to the king's mistress, the actress Nell Gwyn.

He also inaugurated and perfected English "heroic" plays. These were animated by exalted conceptions of love and honor, and usually entailed extravagant costumes, exotic settings, drums, trumpets and derring-do.

Dryden's drama reached its apogee in the 70s, when he wrote his best-remembered plays, the 1672 comedy *Marriage A-la-Mode* and the 1677 tragedy *All for Love.*

Poetry had always been Dryden's passion. He made a name for himself as a poet in 1667 when he published *Annus Mirabilis,* a brilliant historical poem which described the English defeat of the Dutch naval fleet and the 1666 Great Fire of London. Then, for more than a decade, he devoted his best energies to the theater. In 1681, he again showed himself to be England's most formidable living poet with *Absalom and Achitophel*. A political satire set in Old Testament times, this work offers a febrile and devious defense of absolute monarchy, pitiless caricatures of the king's principal parliamentary opponents, and a scathing account of Titus Oates and his Popish Plot.

In 1682 Dryden published *The Medal*, a further point-blank broadside into the ranks of the king's political opponents. In the same year he gave to the printer *Mac Flecknoe*, a memorably contemptuous lampoon of the playwright Thomas Shadwell. In the annals of English invective, Dryden towers over his rivals with the terrible serenity of an Aztec deity.

With the coronation of James II, a Catholic, Dryden found the Church. His thoroughgoing and uncritical identification with Stuart rule cost him patronage when the 1688 Glorious Revolution ushered in the reign of William and Mary. Public taste followed that of the court, and Dryden's plays now met with indifferent success. In the final decade of the century Dryden turned his hand to translation, of which the most notable product was his 1697 *Works of Virgil.* Dryden's *Aeneid* remains unsurpassed by all its English language successors.

Dryden was the greatest English poet between the time of Milton and that of Pope. Like Pope, he fell out of favor with the rise of Romanticism. His elegant, measured neo-classical creations were regarded as artificial, trivial and

immoral. Nor did the twentieth century, with its drive for authenticity at any price, have much use for him.

In the post-modern age we are better able to appreciate the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for their splendid and precarious achievements. Since the early-music movement has revived the operas of Vivaldi and Handel, and eighteenth-century fashion has been quoted with admiration by the likes of McQueen, Westwood and Lagerfeld, it might not be too optimistic to suppose that Dryden's plays may find a readership once again.

Those exhausted by the rigors of modernity may find much to admire in Dryden. His heroic dramas with their exotic landscapes gratify our taste for fantasy and escape. His zero-gravity wit and ever-present sense of measure may serve as an antidote in a time when people earnestly believe that all their feelings must be shared in detail, regardless of anyone else's. Even Dryden's anger offers a tonic for our times. His sharpest remarks cut, but do not tear. He skewers, but never hacks. His wars are formal and mannerly as a game of chess.

Note on the Text

I have followed the text of the University of California edition of Dryden's works, modernizing the spelling where this added to clarity. The most significant change is in the punctuation. In the early days of printing, periods, commas, colons and semicolons were used idiosyncratically, to show pauses of various duration. They did not have their present-day well-defined meaning, and so offer an unnecessary obstacle for the modern reader. Dryden writes in what we would now call "run-on" sentences. Despite their python length, and the remarkable number of clauses they swallow between their head and their tail, they are structurally sim-

ple enough creatures, and simple commas usually suffice to articulate them.

So then, the spelling and punctuation have been modernized and rationalized in the manner that is standard for annotated Shakespeare texts used in college courses.

Further Reading

There is no shortage of books on Charles II and the Restoration, and new ones continue to be written as further documents are studied and more fine detail is added.

But to really understand the issues and events, the great classics of narrative history remain unsurpassed. Leopold von Ranke's (1859–1868) *A History of England Principally in the Seventeenth Century* (free online) is a masterpiece and a model of method. The relevant volumes in the 1875 English translation are three and four.

The first volume of Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1848 *History of England from the Accession of James II* (free online) includes an excellent concise account of the period.

G. M. Trevelyan's works are those which are most heartily recommended. His 1904 *England under the Stuarts* (free online) may be consulted for the full story, while the relevant chapters in his 1926 *History of England* are a lapidary summary of inestimable value. Trevelyan's work pairs depth of insight with beautiful and sometimes even poetic expression.

The more up-to-date treatments lack synthesis and depth. There is a certain famous biography of Charles with a wealth of romantic detail which will leave the reader innocent of the issues in play; there are political histories wherein the shoving matches of parliamentary factions are recounted in excruciating detail, while the players are never introduced, much less characterized. Beginning with the histories

recommended above, the reader will be in a position to appreciate or criticize more recent treatments.

Sooner or later the student of the period will wonder about David Hume's (1754–61) *History of England*, which treats our period in its final volume. This is unfortunately a Tory apologia, more concerned with persuasion than with a relation of events. Jefferson banned it from the University of Virginia library. Most will agree.

As for Dryden, James Winn's (1987) *John Dryden and His World* is the standard biography, but since Dryden left no autobiographical material, a full biography is not really possible. This work is more a volume of literary criticism. A far more satisfactory picture of the man will be gleaned from Samuel Johnson's (1779–81) *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (free online).

From the foregoing recommendations I may appear unduly captious or unreasonably thrifty. But historians in the twentieth century lost faith in the possibility of a historical account that drew together all important matters into a compelling and enlightening narrative. Most serious scholars claimed that "History" was no longer possible, and only narrowly focused "histories" (that is, specialist studies) were responsible or credible. Whether this was a sober realization or a matter of limited intellects, frightened by the unexpected breadth of the modern world, taking refuge in a sterilizing skepticism, is not a matter that can be settled here.

My purpose is to suggest such books as will provide the reader with an overall orientation amid the events, ideas and people of the period when this book was written. I may be pardoned if I do not endorse works that don't consider such a synthesis feasible.

Other Editions

The mission of the Kraken Dryden is to provide inexpensive, fully annotated, helpful and welcoming editions of Dryden's plays and poetry. Such do not at present exist. In the following survey I may seem to describe uncharitably the available options. I am not motivated by ill will towards the admirable scholars who have produced the works listed, which I have myself consulted with profit. My first duty, however, is to the student, who must choose carefully how to apportion limited funds, the student who comes to Dryden, not in possession of wide literary culture, but in order to gain it.

The Plays

There are no editions of Dryden's plays that fully explain archaic language, slang, historical references, *and also all the perplexing syntax employed by Dryden, who wrote in English but often thought in Latin.*

The only annotated editions of Dryden's complete dramatic works are the aforementioned University of California Press edition, which sells for an indefensible $100 a volume, and the 1931 Montague Summers' *Dryden, The Dramatic Works*, out of print for nearly a century. These editions, while essential for the specialist, will be for the most part irrelevant to one who reads for pleasure. They also, for all their pains taken, leave much unexplained, so one must hoist to desk-top one's own two ponderous volumes of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and peer through a magnifier. Even then, unless one has a background in Latin, one will sometimes be at a loss to see how the words all go together.

The most famous of the plays, *Marriage à la Mode* and *All for Love,* are frequently found in anthologies of Restoration drama, and can be had in the reasonably priced Norton New Mermaids series, with annotations that are unfortunately far from adequate.

Walter Scott edited a complete works of Dryden, with sparse, perfunctory notes for the plays. This is available on the internet, and has been appropriated by various unscrupulous reprinters.

The Poems

As regards Dryden's poetry, the same difficulty obtains. Though the California *Works* remains the indispensable standard, it is a reference work, not a convenient annotated reading edition. Routledge/Longman's has published Dryden's complete poems in five volumes, at a staggering $256 per volume. A premier academic publisher, Routledge has decided its mission is not to educate or inform but to rob libraries, who can and must purchase these. They also offer a selected Dryden, asking a reasonable $56 for the 588 pages, but the reader may be disappointed by the content. In terms of editing, and apparatus to contextualize the poems, it is beyond compare, but it does not always condescend to provide the basic glosses a student will need, and when it does, these must be winnowed from mounds of scholarship irrelevant to the nonspecialist. The Penguin *Selected Poems* provides little annotation, and that tucked inconveniently into endnotes.

About the Editor

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Dryden's Preface

Absalom and Achitophel
a poem

si propius stes te capiet magis[1]

To the Reader.

'Tis not my intention to make an apology for my poem. Some will think it needs no excuse, and others will receive none.[2] The design, I am sure, is honest,[3] but he who draws his pen for one party must expect to make enemies of the other. (For wit and fool are consequents of Whig and Tory;[4] and every man is a knave or an ass to the contrary side. There's a treasury of merits in the Fanatic church[5] as well as in the Papist, and a pennyworth to be had of saintship, honesty, and poetry, for the lewd, the factious, and the blockheads;[6] but the longest chapter in Deuteronomy has not ten curses enough for an Anti-Bromingham.[7])

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1 **te capiet magis** a phrase from Horace's *Ars Poetica,* which means here "the closer you look, the better you'll like it," that is, the fun of the poem will be in guessing who is represented.

2 **will receive none** would accept no excuse if one were offered.

3 **design . . . honest** I know I meant well.

4 **consequents of Whig and Tory** our estimate of our fellows' intelligence depends on whether they share our political opinions.

5 **treasury of merits . . . Fanatic church** the Catholic Church teaches that the merits of the saints are banked, as it were, with God, in a "treasury of merits" and may be drawn upon to make up the shortcomings of the faithful. This is the theory behind the intercession of saints. *Fanatic* is a less flattering term for extreme Protestant. The whole phrase simply means that the earnest Protestants have their good points as well.

6 **pennyworth . . . blockheads** the ignorant, the partisan and the simply stupid have some virtues too.

7 **Deuteronomy . . . Anti-Bromingham** the 28th chapter of Deuteronomy is a long enumeration of the curses to befall those who disobey God's laws. *Bromingham* is Birmingham, where a few years previously there had been a spate of counterfeit coins. Dryden's phrase "anti-Bromingham" means an opponent of hypocrites. The

My comfort is, their[8] manifest prejudice to my cause will render their judgment of less authority against me. Yet if a poem have a genius, it will force its own reception in the world, for there is a sweetness in good verse, which tickles even while it hurts, and no man can be heartily angry with him who pleases him against his will. The commendation of adversaries is the greatest triumph of a writer, because it never comes unless extorted. But I can be satisfied on more easy terms. If I happen to please the more moderate sort, I shall be sure of an honest party[9] and, in all probability, of the best judges, for the least concerned are commonly the least corrupt. And I confess I have laid in for those, by rebating the satire,[10] where justice would allow it, from carrying too sharp an edge. They who can criticize so weakly[11] as to imagine I have done my worst, may be convinced at their own cost that I can write severely with more ease than I can gently. I have but laughed at some men's follies, when I could have declaimed against their vices, and other men's virtues I have commended as freely as I have taxed their crimes. And now, if you are a malicious reader, I expect you should return upon me[12] that I affect to be thought more impartial than I am, but if men are not to be judged by their professions,[13] God forgive you Commonwealth's-men[14] for profess-

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phrase then means, even though everyone has their good side, those who deliberately deceive deserve all the curses in Deuteronomy and then some.

8 **their** of those who disagree with Dryden's point of view.

9 **honest party** those who are honest will be on my side.

10 **laid in . . . rebating** Dryden has *laid in*, that is, stored or held in reserve (some of the sharp things he could have said) thus *rebating*, that is, deducting from the full payment (of invective) due.

11 **criticize so weakly** judge so poorly.

12 **return upon me** charge me with this.

13 **by their professions** by their explicit declarations (professions) of what they stand for.

14 **commonwealth's-men** you who actually favor the overthrow of the

ing so plausibly for the government. You cannot be so unconscionable as to charge me for not subscribing of my name,[15] for that would reflect too grossly upon your own party, who never dare, though they have the advantage of a jury to secure them. If you like not my poem, the fault may possibly be in my writing, though 'tis hard for an author to judge against himself. But more probably 'tis in your morals, which cannot bear the truth of it. The violent on both sides will condemn the character of Absalom, as either too favorably or too hardly drawn. But they are not the violent, whom I desire to please. The fault on the right hand[16] is to extenuate, palliate, and indulge, and, to confess freely, I have endeavored to commit it. Besides the respect which I owe his[17] birth, I have a greater for his heroic virtues, and David himself could not be more tender of the young man's life, than I would be of his reputation. But since the most excellent natures are always the most easy[18] and, as being such, are the soonest perverted by ill counsels, especially when baited[19] with fame and glory, it is no more a wonder that he withstood not the temptations of Achitophel than it was for Adam not to have resisted the two devils, the serpent and the woman. The conclusion of the story I purposely forbore

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king and the reestablishment of the Commonwealth (the Puritan republic). Dryden's idea here is, if we are to be judged by what we would like rather than what we say, then God forgive the Whigs, who claim loyalty to the king but in their hearts wish the days of Cromwell were come again.

15 **not subscribing my name . . . jury** Dryden published the poem unsigned. If preserving anonymity is a fault, then it is shared by many Whigs (who are not candid about their opposition to the king), despite the fact that they can pack a jury with their supporters, as they have in Shaftesbury's trial for treason.

16 **on the right hand** to err on the side of goodness.

17 **his** Monmouth's.

18 **easy** easy-going.

19 **baited** tempted by the allurements of.

to prosecute, because I could not obtain from myself to show Absalom unfortunate. The frame of it was cut out but for a picture to the waist; and if the draft be so far true, it is as much as I designed.

Were I the inventor, who am only the historian, I should certainly conclude the piece with the reconcilement of Absalom to David. And who knows but this may come to pass? Things were not brought to an extremity where I left the story. There seems yet to be room left for a composure. Hereafter there may only be for pity. I have not so much as an uncharitable wish against Achitophel, but am content to be accused of a good-natured error, and to hope with Origen,[20] that the Devil himself may at last be saved. For which reason, in this poem, he is neither brought to set his house in order,[21] nor to dispose of his person afterwards as he in wisdom shall think fit. God is infinitely merciful, and his vicegerent[22] is only not so, because he is not infinite. The true end of satire is the amendment of vices by correction. And he who writes honestly is no more an enemy to the offender than the physician to the patient, when he prescribes harsh remedies to an inveterate disease, for those are only in order to prevent the surgeon's work of an *ense recidendum*,[23] which I wish not to my very enemies. To conclude all, if the body politic have any analogy to the natural, in my weak judgment, an act of oblivion[24] were as necessary in a hot distempered state as an opiate would be in a raging fever.[25]

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[20] **Origen** an early Church father who suggested that redemption would finally extend to all created spirits, including the fallen angels.

[21] **set his house in order** in the Biblical account, when Achitophel sees that his plans will come to naught, he goes home, sets his affairs ("his house") in order, and hangs himself.

[22] **viceregent** the king.

[23] ***ense recidendum*** the Latin phrase means "recourse to the scalpel."

[24] **act of oblivion** to forgive and forget.

[25] **fever** before the invention of aspirin, opium was a common analgesic.

Absalom and Achitophel

In pious times, ere priest-craft did begin,
Before polygamy was made a sin,
When man, on many, multiplied his kind,
Ere one to one was cursedly confined,[26]
When Nature prompted, and no Law denied
Promiscuous use of concubine and bride,
Then, Israel's monarch,[27] 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. [10]
Michal,[28] of royal blood, the crown did wear,
A soil ungrateful to the tiller's care.
Not so the rest. For several mothers bore
To god-like David, several sons before.
But since like slaves his bed they did ascend,
No true succession could their seed attend.
Of all this numerous progeny was none
So beautiful, so brave, as Absalom.[29]

---

[26] **confined t**he deprecation of marriage, and the exaltation of excess, is a commonplace of Restoration humor, and an endorsement of Charles, who fathered a great many bastards.

[27] **Israel's monarch** Charles is identified with King David, and England with Israel. The reign of the Puritans instilled in the English a habit of reading scripture and listening to sermons, which gave them a ready understanding of even recondite Biblical references.

[28] **Michal** daughter of King Saul, and David's first wife. She is here identified with Catherine of Braganza, the Portuguese princess whom Charles espoused. Though she gave Charles no children, she introduced tea drinking to England. The Portuguese, whose far-eastern trade antedated English ventures, had adopted this habit while the English knew only beer. The connection thus formed with Portugal also led to the prominent place port wine has on the English table to this day.

[29] **Absalom** King David's son by one of his many marriages to seal alliances with neighboring kings. The meaning here is James, Duke of Monmouth, Charles' illegitimate son by Lucy Walter. Monmouth was indeed, like Absalom, a singularly handsome and charismatic young man.

Whether,[30] inspired by some diviner lust,
His father got him with a greater gust, [20]
Or that his conscious destiny made way[31]
By manly beauty to imperial sway.
Early in foreign fields he won renown,[32]
With kings and states allied to Israel's crown.
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,
And Paradise was opened in his face. [30]
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[33] 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,
Were construed youth that purged by boiling o'er,[34]

---

30 **whether** here the word is used to mean "either."

31 **or that his conscious destiny made way** or because fate, intending that he should have a kingly future, saw to it that he was endowed with physical beauty to influence people in his favor.

32 **in foreign fields he won renown** though we are uninformed regarding Absalom's military record, Monmouth served in the fleet, under his uncle James, at age 13, in the second Anglo-Dutch war (1665–67). He greatly distinguished himself in the third Anglo-Dutch war (1672–74), in which England fought, against its own interests, as the pawn of France. When this conflict outlasted England's involvement, he stayed on to fight, but now on the Dutch side against the French, and thus was recast as a Protestant military hero by the time of this poem.

33 **the charming Annabel** there being no Biblical parallel, Dryden Hebraized the name of Monmouth's wife, Anne Scott, a Scottish duchess.

34 **youth that purged by boiling o'er** the authorities showed forbearance in regard to ("forebore") Monmouth's transgressions and excesses ("boiling o'er,") treating them as mere high spirits which he was getting out of his system ("purged").

And Amnon's murder,[35] by a specious name,
Was called a just revenge for injured fame.
Thus praised, and loved, the noble youth remained,
While David, undisturbed, in Zion[36] reigned.
But life can never be sincerely blessed,
Heav'n punishes the bad, and proves[37] the best.
The Jews,[38] a headstrong, moody, murm'ring race,
As ever tried th' extent and stretch of grace,
God's pampered people whom, debauched with ease,
No king could govern, nor no God could please.
(Gods they had tried of every shape and size,
That god-smiths could produce, or priests devise.)
These Adam-wits,[39] too fortunately free,
Began to dream they wanted liberty,
And when no rule, no precedent, was found
Of men, by laws less circumscribed and bound,
They led their wild desires to woods and caves,
And thought that all but savages were slaves.[40]
They who, when Saul was dead, without a blow,

---

35 **Amnon's murder** in the Bible, Absalom kills his half-brother Amnon for raping his sister Tamar. The Biblical parallel applies, with little precision, to the 1670 attack on MP Sir John Coventry. Coventry proposed a tax on the theaters, and when it was objected that the king took pleasure in the actors, Coventry asked whether it was the male or the female actors in which he took such pleasure. Coventry was assaulted at night, and had his nose slit, by a detachment of the Life Guards, which Monmouth commanded. Charles pardoned Monmouth.

36 **Zion** Israel (England).

37 **proves** puts to the test.

38 **The Jews** the English. Dryden makes this identification only in unflattering contexts, in a deliberate and somewhat anti-Semitic belittling of the common people.

39 **Adam-wits** people who, like Adam, were not satisfied even with a paradisal condition.

40 **all but savages were slaves** when they could find no historical record of any people who lived under more generous and liberal laws than they presently enjoyed, but which seemed to them inadequate, they supposed that true freedom was to be found only in a state of nature, with no government at all.

Made foolish Ishbosheth[41] the crown forego,
Who banished David did from Hebron[42] bring,
And, with a general shout, proclaimed him king. [60]
Those very Jews, who, at their very best,
Their humor more than loyalty expressed,
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.[43]
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, [70]
And, looking backward with a wise affright,
Saw seams of wounds, dishonest[44] to the sight,
In contemplation of whose ugly scars,
They cursed the memory of civil wars.
The moderate sort of men, thus qualified,[45]

---

41 **Saul . . . Ishbosheth** After Saul's death, he was briefly succeeded by his son Ishbosheth before David became king. Saul is here Cromwell, whose son Richard proved inadequate to assume his father's office of Lord Protector, whereupon Charles was invited back.

42 **Hebron** in Hebron David was made king of Judah, the Southern portion of the Hebrew kingdom; after the death of Ishbosheth he was annointed king of the Northern portion, Israel, as well. Hebron is here the Hague, whence exiled Charles sailed home to England for his coronation.

43 **golden calf** the Jews (the English), whose politics were dictated by whim (humor), came to suppose that they had *made* Charles king rather than acknowledged his rule. Since they had themselves chosen to accept a royal government (idol-monarch), they might equally well replace him with a republic ("that golden calf, a state"). The golden calf is an idol mentioned in the book of Exodus, which the Israelites made and venerated while Moses was absent on Sinai receiving the commandments. It became a proverbial emblem of misdirected veneration.

44 **dishonest** dishonorable, disgraceful; Dryden is here thinking of the Latin root *honestus*, meaning decent or noble. His readers would all have had enough Latin to interpret such classicized English.

45 **qualified** in the sense of limited or restricted, here, by scruples and

Inclined the balance to the better side,
And David's mildness managed it so well,
The bad found no occasion to rebel.
But, when to sin our biased nature leans,
The careful[46] Devil is still at hand with means,
And providently pimps for ill desires.
The good old cause,[47] revived, a plot[48] requires.
Plots, true or false, are necessary things,
To raise up commonwealths,[49] and ruin kings.

Th' inhabitants of old Jerusalem
Were Jebusites, the town so called from them,[50]
And theirs the native right—
But when the chosen people grew more strong,
The rightful cause at length became the wrong,
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.
Impoverished and deprived of all command,
Their taxes doubled as they lost their land,[51]
And, what was harder yet to flesh and blood,

---

prudence.

46 **careful** attentive to his opportunities.

47 **good old cause** a popular phrase for the Puritan rebellion.

48 **plot** the Popish Plot, a slanderous allegation that Catholics intended to murder the king and his leading Protestant subjects and restore England's allegiance to Rome. This delusion was cynically exploited by the opponents of James II, Charles' Catholic heir.

49 **commonwealths** "commonwealth" here alludes specifically to the regicide republic of the Puritans, which favored this term to describe itself.

50 **Jebusites . . . from them** the Jebusites were the pagan Canaanite people whose capital, Jerusalem, became that of Israel. Here Jebusite means Catholic, and the capital in question is London. The word "from" is used to mean "by"; Dryden's grammar here is Latin, where the same word (*ab*) means both "by" and "from."

51 **taxes . . . land** from the time of Henry VIII on, land confiscation and punitive taxes were often used against the Church and Catholics in England.

Their gods disgraced, and burnt like common wood.[52]
This set the heathen priesthood in a flame;
For priests of all religions are the same,
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,
For 'twas their duty, all the learned think,
T' espouse his cause by whom they eat and drink.[53]
From hence[54] began that plot, the nation's curse,
Bad in itself, but represented worse.
Raised in extremes, and in extremes decried,
With oaths affirmed, with dying vows denied. [55]
Not weighed, or winnowed by the multitude,
But swallowed in the mass, unchewed and crude.
Some truth there was, but dashed and brewed with lies;
To please the fools, and puzzle all the wise.
Succeeding times did equal folly[56] call,
Believing nothing, or believing all.
Th' Egyptian[57] rites the Jebusites embraced,
Where gods were recommended by their taste.
Such sav'ry deities must needs be good,
As served at once for worship and for food.

---

[52] **like common wood** the English Reformation carried out a tremendous and thoroughgoing campaign of vandalism against Catholic churches, inspired by the Old Testament proscription of idolatry.

[53] ***rabbins* . . . drink** even the officials of the Church of England believe that the loyalty the Catholic clergy feel towards their "idols," is only natural, though Dryden assigns a venal motive.

[54] **from hence** from the Protestant spirit of intolerance.

[55] **affirmed . . . denied** the oaths are the perjuries of Oates and his minions, the vows are the final protestations of their victims.

[56] **equal folly** either the madness was on the part of the wicked Catholics, or of the blood-crazed Protestants. There is no perspective from which the controversy appears sane.

[57] **Egyptian** here, French. The lines poke fun at belief in transubstantiation.

By force they could not introduce these gods,
For ten to one, in former days was odds,[58]
So fraud was used, (the sacrificers' trade)[59]
Fools are more hard to conquer than persuade.
Their busy teachers mingled with the Jews
And raked, for converts, even the court and stews,[60]
Which Hebrew priests the more unkindly took,
Because the fleece accompanies the flock.[61]
Some thought they God's anointed meant to slay [130]
By guns, invented since full many a day.
Our author swears it not, but who can know
How far the Devil and Jebusites may go?
This plot, which failed for want of common sense,
Had yet a deep and dangerous consequence
For as when raging fevers boil the blood,
The standing lake soon floats into a flood,
And ev'ry hostile humor, which before
Slept quiet in its channels, bubbles o'er,
So, several factions from this first ferment, [140]
Work up to foam, and threat the government.
Some by their friends, more by themselves thought wise,
Opposed the pow'r, to which they could not rise.
Some had in courts been great, and thrown from thence,
Like fiends, were hardened in impenitence.
Some by their monarch's fatal mercy grown,
From pardoned rebels, kinsmen to the throne,
Were raised in pow'r and public office high,
Strong bands, if bands ungrateful men could tie.
Of these the false Achitophel[62] was first. [150]

---

[58] **ten to one . . . odds** the chances of imposing their beliefs was small for at that time the proportion of Protestants to Catholics in England was ten to one. (The estimate is not statistically precise.)

[59] **sacrificer's** an anti-Catholic dig. The Mass is called a "sacrifice." A suggestion that all religious leaders skim from the offerings is likewise present.

[60] **stews** brothels.

[61] **Hebrew . . . flock** the Protestant ("Hebrew") divines realized that conversions to Catholicism would cut into their revenue.

[62] **Achitophel** the Earl of Shaftesbury. Long before this poem Achitophel had become a term for a treacherous politician.

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 pow'r unpleased, impatient of disgrace.
A fiery soul, which working out its way,
Fretted the pigmy-body to decay,
And o'er informed the tenement of clay.[63]
A daring pilot in extremity,
Pleased with the danger, when the waves went high [160]
He sought the storms, but for a calm unfit,
Would steer too nigh the sands, to boast his wit.
Great wits are sure to madness near allied,
And thin partitions do their bounds divide,
Else, why should he, with wealth and honor blessed,
Refuse his age the needful hours of rest,
Punish a body which he could not please,
Bankrupt of life, yet prodigal of ease? [64]
And all to leave, what with his toil he won
To that unfeathered, two-legged thing, a son, [170]
Got, while his soul did huddled notions try,
And born a shapeless lump, like anarchy.[65]
In friendship false, implacable in hate:
Resolved to ruin or to rule the state.
To compass this, the triple bond[66] he broke,

---

[63] **fiery soul . . . tenement of clay** Shaftesbury's brilliant but infernal (fiery) soul nearly wore out (fretted) his not very tall (pygmy) physical body ("tenement of clay").

[64] **bankrupt of life** Shaftesbury was 60 in 1681 when this poem was published. He squandered ("prodigal of ease") on politics his autumn years, more fit for retirement.

[65] **son . . . anarchy** Shaftesbury's son was undistinguished, but the suggestion that he was born malformed, in expression of his father's chaotic soul, is fantasy.

[66] **triple bond** the Triple Alliance between England, Holland and Sweden, aimed at containing the ambitions of France. Charles subverted this by the 1670 Treaty of Dover, which Shaftesbury, one of Charles' closest councilors, ratified. The treaty was made on Charles' initiative, and had secret provisions of which Shaftesbury was not informed, but in this poem Shaftesbury bears the blame

The pillars of the public safety shook,
And fitted Israel for a foreign yoke.[67]
Then, seized with fear, yet still affecting fame,
Usurped a patriot's all-atoning name.[68]
So easy still it proves in factious times, [180]
With public zeal to cancel private crimes.
How safe is treason, and how sacred ill,
Where none can sin against the people's will,
Where crowds can wink, and no offense be known,
Since in another's guilt they find their own.[69]
Yet, fame deserved no enemy can grudge,
The statesman we abhor, but praise the judge.
In Jewish courts ne'er sat an *abbethdin*[70]
With more discerning eyes, or hands more clean,
Unbribed, unsought, the wretched to redress, [190]
Swift of dispatch, and easy of access.
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,[71] that oppressed the noble seed,
David, for him his tuneful harp had strung,
And heav'n had wanted one immortal song.[72]
But wild ambition loves to slide, not stand,
And fortune's ice prefers to virtue's land.
Achitophel, grown weary to possess [200]

---

alone.

67 **foreign yoke** subordination to France.

68 **patriot's . . . name** here Dryden implies Shaftesbury's opposition to the court in favor of the country ("patriotism") was merely to distract attention from his role in destroying the Triple Alliance.

69 **how safe is treason . . . they find their own** all manner of crime is permissible so long as it accords with public sentiment, and even when public sentiment shifts, none are held to account for sins which everyone had a share in.

70 ***abbethdin*** jurist. Shaftesbury's record as a jurist in the English ("Jewish") courts actually was exemplary.

71 **rankness . . . cockle** "rank" used of earth means fertile; "cockle" means weed.

72 **immortal song** David would not have written Psalm 109, in which he calls down God's curse upon his enemies.

A lawful fame, and lazy happiness,
Disdained the golden fruit to gather free,
And lent the crowd his arm to shake the tree.
Now, manifest[73] of crimes contrived long since,
He stood at bold defiance with his prince,
Held up the buckler of the people's cause,
Against the crown, and skulked behind the laws.
The wished occasion of the plot[74] he takes,
Some circumstances finds, but more he makes.
By buzzing emissaries, fills the ears [210]
Of list'ning crowds with jealousies and fears,
Of arbitrary counsels brought to light,
And proves the king himself a Jebusite.
Weak arguments! Which yet he knew full well,
Were strong with people easy to rebel.
For, governed by the moon, the giddy Jews
Tread the same track when she the prime[75] renews,
And once in twenty years, their scribes record,
By natural instinct they change their lord.
Achitophel still wants a chief, and none [220]
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,
That kingly pow'r, thus ebbing out, might be
Drawn to the dregs of a democracy.[76]

---

[73] **manifest** (Latinism) *manifestus* means "exposed, caught in the act."

[74] **plot** Oates' "Popish Plot." Shaftesbury had no hand in concocting it, but he exploited its political potential to the full.

[75] **prime** the beginning of a period or cycle. Here, the 19-year period after which the cycles of the moon appear on the same days. The Commonwealth, Restoration, and Popish Plot were in fact separated by intervals of approximately twenty years.

[76] **title . . . democracy** since the illegitimate Monmouth had no valid title to the crown ("title not allowed"), he would have to depend on popular favor (and Shaftesbury) to keep the kingship once he got it. Normally the sovereign should be above the people, as the liquid surface of a full vessel is above its bottom. But as the liquid is "drawn" off ("ebbing out"), the diminished liquid's surface meets

Him[77] he attempts, with studied arts to please
And sheds his venom, in such words as these,

"Auspicious prince! at whose nativity [230]
Some royal planet ruled the southern sky,[78]
Thy longing country's darling and desire,
Their cloudy pillar, and their guardian fire, [79]
Their second Moses, whose extended wand
Divides the seas, and shows the promised land,
Whose dawning day, in very distant age,
Has exercised the sacred prophet's rage.[80]
The people's pray'r, the glad diviner's theme,
The young men's vision, and the old men's dream!
Thee, savior, thee, the nation's vows confess, [240]
And, never satisfied with seeing, bless.
Swift, unbespoken pomps,[81] 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?
Content ingloriously to pass thy days
Like one of virtue's fools that feeds on praise,[82]
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, [250]
Or gathered ripe, or rot upon the tree.
Heav'n has to all allotted, soon or late,

---

the sediment ("dregs").

77 **Him** Absalom. Dryden often favors a Latin word order, so the object of the verb occurs at the start of the sentence and the verb at the end.

78 **southern sky** a planet in the southern sky dominates a horoscope.

79 **pillar . . . cloud** Exodus 13: 21-22. "By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light . . ."

80 **distant age . . . rage** long ago the coming birth of Absalom (Monmouth) inspired transports in the prophets. Achitophel wickedly gives Monmouth the attributes of the coming Christ.

81 **pomps** spontaneous parades. Latinism, from *pompa*, "procession."

82 **virtue's fools . . . praise** one who is content with thanks for his good deeds, and doesn't require any recompense. Achitophel here shows his venality.

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,[83]
But, if unseized, she glides away like wind,
And leaves repenting folly far behind.
Now, now she meets you, with a glorious prize, [260]
And spreads her locks before her as she flies.[84]
Had thus Old David, from whose loins you spring,
Not dared, when fortune called him, to be king,
At Gath[85] an exile he might still remain,
And heaven's anointing oil[86] had been in vain.
Let his successful youth your hopes engage,
But shun th' example of declining age.
Behold him setting in his western skies,
The shadows lengthening as the vapors[87] rise.
He is not now, as when on Jordan's sand[88] [270]
The joyful people thronged to see him land,
Cov'ring the beach, and black'ning all the strand,
But, like the prince of angels from his height,
Comes tumbling downward with diminished light,
Betrayed by one poor plot to public scorn,[89]
(Our only blessing since his cursed return).
Those heaps of people which one sheaf did bind,

---

83 **bent** tendency, disposition or inclination.

84 **her locks before her** the image is of Fortune leading the way for Absalom/Monmouth, facing him as she advances, stepping rapidly backwards, so that her hair streams towards him.

85 **Gath** during Saul's kingship, David fell out of favor with him, and took refuge in the Philistine city of Gath. The current reference is to Charles' exile in Holland.

86 **annointing oil** which consecrated him as king.

87 **vapors** evening mists.

88 **Jordan's sand** recalling the joyful reception of returning Charles when he landed at Dover.

89 **public scorn** the Popish Plot delusion has made Charles unpopular. Dryden passes over the *grounds* of the unpopularity, that Charles' brother, the heir apparent, converted to Catholicism, and England's foreign policy now serves the interests of Catholic France.

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? [280]
If Pharaoh's[90] doubtful succor he should use,
A foreign aid would more incense the Jews.
Proud Egypt would dissembled friendship bring,
Foment the war, but not support the king,
Nor would the royal party e'er unite
With Pharaoh's arms, t'assist the Jebusite,
Or if they should, their interest soon would break,[91]
And with such odious aid, make David weak.
All sorts of men, by my successful arts,
Abhorring kings, estrange their altered hearts [290]
From David's rule, and 'tis the general cry,
Religion, Commonwealth, and Liberty![92]
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?
Not barren praise alone, that gaudy flow'r,
Fair only to the sight, but solid pow'r.
And nobler is a limited command,
Giv'n by the love of all your native land, [300]
Than a successive title, long, and dark,
Drawn from the moldy rolls of Noah's Ark."[93]

What cannot praise effect in mighty minds,
When flattery soothes, and when ambition blinds!

---

90 **Pharoah's** Louis XIV's.

91 **Proud Egypt . . . break** France promises to support the king, but if civil war were to occur again, their help would never materialize. The English aristocracy ("royal party") would never ally itself with an invading French force ("Pharoah's arms") in a struggle which would benefit Catholics ("the Jebusite"). And even if they did, they as group ("interest") would soon lose their unity ("break").

92 **and Liberty** the return to to a kingless republic, as it was under Cromwell.

93 **moldy rolls** rule given by popular acclaim is loftier than a legitimate title, even one attested by records ("rolls") going as far back as the time of the Flood.

Desire of pow'r, 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.
Th' ambitious youth, too covetous of fame,
Too full of angel's mettle in his frame,[94] [310]
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)
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,
And Heav'n by wonders has espoused his cause. [320]
Whom has he wronged in all his peaceful reign?
Who sues for justice to his throne in vain?
What millions has he pardoned of his foes
Whom just revenge did to his wrath expose?
Mild, easy, humble, studious of our good,
Inclined to mercy, and averse from blood.
If mildness ill with stubborn Israel suit,
His crime is God's beloved attribute.
What could he gain, his people to betray,
Or change his right, for arbitrary sway? [330]
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 heats their brains to this disease.
Why then should I, encouraging the bad,
Turn rebel, and run popularly mad?[95]
Were he a tyrant who, by lawless might,
Oppressed the Jews, and raised the Jebusite,

---

[94] **angel's mettle** angelic temperament (mettle), but also (via the pun) greed, for an "angel" or "angel-noble" is a gold coin.

[95] **popularly mad** share the general political insanity for the sake of cultivating popularity.

Well might I mourn, but nature's holy bands[96]
Would curb my spirits, and restrain my hands. [340]
The people might assert their liberty,
But what was right in them were crime in me.
His favor leaves me nothing to require;
Prevents[97] my wishes, and out-runs desire.
What more can I expect while David lives?
All but his kingly diadem he gives.
And that—" but there he paused, then sighing, said,
"Is justly destined for a worthier head.
For when my father from his toils shall rest,
And late augment the number of the blessed, [350]
His lawful issue shall the throne ascend,
Or the collat'ral line, where that shall end.[98]
His brother, though oppressed with vulgar spite,
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 ev'n th' offending crowd will find,
For sure he comes of a forgiving kind. [360]
Why should I then repine at Heaven's decree,
Which gives me no pretense to royalty?
Yet oh 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.[99]
Why am I scanted by a niggard-birth?
My soul disclaims the kindred of her earth, [370]

---

96 **nature's holy bands** the fact that Charles is his father.

97 **prevents** anticipates.

98 **where that shall end** if legitimate descendants are not to be found ("lawful issue . . . shall end") Charles' siblings ("collateral line") will properly succeed to the crown.

99 **my mother's mold** the character (mold) I have inherited from my mother.

And made for empire, whispers me within,
Desire of greatness is a god-like sin."

Him staggering so when Hell's dire agent found,
While fainting virtue scarce maintained her ground,
He pours fresh forces in, and thus replies,

"Th'eternal God, supremely good and wise,
Imparts not these prodigious gifts in vain.
What wonders are reserved to bless your reign?
Against your will your arguments have shown
Such virtue's only giv'n to guide a throne. [380]
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?
Let him give on till he can give no more,
The thrifty *Sanhedrin*[100] shall keep him poor, [390]
And every shekel which he can receive,
Shall cost a limb of his prerogative.
To ply him with new plots, shall be my care,
Or plunge him deep in some expensive war,
Which, when his treasure can no more supply,
He must, with the remains of kingship, buy.
His faithful friends, our jealousies and fears
Call Jebusites and Pharaoh's pensioners,
Whom, when our fury from his aid has torn,
He shall be naked left to public scorn. [400]
The next successor,[101] whom I fear and hate,
My arts have made obnoxious to the state,
Turned all his virtues to his overthrow,

---

[100] ***Sanhedrin*** Parliament, whose only means of directing the king was by their control of the public purse.

[101] **successor** Charles' brother, James.

And gained[102] our elders to pronounce a foe.
His right, for sums of necessary gold,
Shall first be pawned, and afterwards be sold,
Till time shall ever-wanting David draw,
To pass your doubtful title into law.
If not, the people have a right supreme
To make their kings, for kings are made for them. [410]
All empire is no more than pow'r in trust
Which, when resumed,[103] can be no longer just.
Succession, for the general good designed,
In its own wrong[104] a nation cannot bind.
If altering that the people can relieve,[105]
Better one suffer, than a nation grieve.
The Jews well know their pow'r. Ere Saul they chose,
God was their king, and God they durst depose.[106]
Urge now your piety, your filial name,
A father's right, and fear of future fame,[107] [420]
The public good, the universal call,
To which even Heav'n submitted, answers all.[108]
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.[109]

---

[102] **gained** won over, persuaded.

[103] **resumed** taken back, withdrawn.

[104] **its own wrong** to the nation's own detriment.

[105] **altering that . . . relieve** if the alteration of that (the succession) can relieve the people.

[106] **Saul . . . depose** In the First Book of Kings, the prophet Samuel criticizes the people for demanding that they be given a king rather than be ruled by the Lord (as a loose federation, trusting God to guide them).

[107] **right . . . fame** David (Charles) as king has the right to choose his heir, and history will evaluate Charles by whom he allowed to succeed him.

[108] **universal call . . . answers all** the demand of the Israelites for a king, which God yielded to, gives precedent that the popular will is an all-sufficient reason.

[109] **Nature's trick . . . posterity** don't let Charles' paternal affection towards you cloud your judgment, such feeling is meaningless, it's

Or let his kindness by th' effects be tried,
Or let him lay his vain pretense aside.
God said he loved your father. Could he bring
A better proof, than to anoint him king? [430]
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.[110]
He to his brother gives supreme command,
To you a legacy of barren land,
Perhaps th' old harp, on which he thrums his lays,
Or some dull Hebrew ballad in your praise. [440]
Then the next heir,[111] 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 in grief contains,
He meditates revenge who least complains,
And like a lion, slumb'ring 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, [450]
Till at the last, his time for fury found,
He shoots with sudden vengeance from the ground,
The prostrate vulgar,[112] passes o'er, and spares,
But with a lordly rage, his hunters tears.
Your case no tame expedients will afford,

---

just nature's way of tricking us into having and caring for offspring. The real motivation behind it is a selfish wish for immortality, if only by proxy.

110 **name of godly . . . cheat his heir** Charles would not deserve to be considered God-fearing if he deprived you of the crown, for in this case it is "after God's own heart to cheat his heir," that is, his brother James.

111 **next heir** James.

112 **prostrate vulgar** in the simile this refers to the hunting dogs, which cringe when the lion turns.

Resolve on death or conquest by the sword
Which for no less a stake than life, you draw,
And self-defense is Nature's eldest law.
Leave the warm[113] people no considering time,
For then rebellion may be thought a crime. [460]
Prevail[114] yourself of what occasion gives,
But try your title while your father lives,
And that your arms may have a fair pretense,
Proclaim you take them in the king's defense,
Whose sacred life each minute would expose
To plots from seeming friends and secret foes.
And who can sound the depth of David's soul?
Perhaps his fear his kindness may control.[115]
He fears his brother, though he loves his son,
For plighted vows[116] too late to be undone. [470]
If so, by force he wishes to be gained,
Like women's lechery,[117] to seem constrained.
Doubt not,[118] 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)
Not stained with cruelty, nor puffed with pride, [480]
How happy had he been, if destiny
Had higher placed his birth, or not so high!
His kingly virtues might have claimed a throne,
And blessed all other countries but his own.[119]

---

113 **warm** overheated by the Popish Plot.

114 **prevail** avail.

115 **perhaps . . . control** despite his actual wishes, Charles' love to you may be restrained by his fear of James.

116 **plighted vows** the promise of succession already made to James.

117 **like women's lechery** like a woman who is sexually interested.

118 **Doubt not** do not be restrained by doubts.

119 **other countries but his own** had he been born in another country, where the succession was not well and incontestably placed.

But charming greatness since so few refuse,[120]
'Tis juster to lament him, than accuse.
Strong were his hopes a rival to remove,
With blandishments to gain the public love,
To head the faction while their zeal was hot,
And popularly prosecute the plot. [490]
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 pow'r of monarchy too much,
Mistaken men, and patriots in their hearts,
Not wicked, but seduced by impious arts.
By these the springs of property[121] were bent,
And wound so high, they cracked the government. [500]
The next for interest sought t' embroil the state,
To sell their duty at a dearer rate,
And make their Jewish[122] markets of the throne,
Pretending public good, to serve their own.
Others thought kings an useless heavy load,
Who cost too much, and did too little good.
These were for laying honest David by,
On principles of pure good husbandry.[123]
With them joined all th' haranguers of the throng,
That thought to get preferment by the tongue. [510]
Who follow next, a double danger bring,
Not only hating David, but the king,
The *Solymaean* rout;[124] well versed of old

---

120 **charming greatness . . . refuse** since few can resist the allure of an opportunity to advance themselves.

121 **By these the springs of property** the landowning class. The "springs of property" are economic motivation. A spring can be any compelling or actuating force. Here the image of a clock's mainspring is suggested.

122 **Jewish** money-grubbing.

123 **husbandry** household management.

124 ***Solymean* rout** the rabble of Jerusalem, that is, of London. From the Latin version of the name Jerusalem, *Hierosolyma*.

In godly faction, and in treason bold,
Cow'ring and quaking at a conqu'ror's sword,
But lofty to a lawful prince restored,
Saw with disdain an ethnic[125] plot begun,
And scorned by Jebusites to be out-done.
Hot Levites headed these, who pulled before
From th' Ark, which in the Judges' days they bore,
Resumed their cant, and with a zealous cry,
Pursued their old beloved theocracy,[126]
Where Sanhedrin and Priest enslaved the nation,
And justified their spoils by inspiration,
For who so fit for reign as Aaron's race,
If once dominion they could found in Grace?
These led the pack. Though not of surest scent,
Yet deepest mouthed[127] against the government.
A numerous host of dreaming saints succeed,
Of the true old enthusiastic breed,
'Gainst form and order they their pow'r employ,
Nothing to build, and all things to destroy.
But far more numerous was the herd of such,
Who think too little, and who talk too much.
These, out of mere instinct, they knew not why,
Adored their father's God, and property,[128]
And by the same blind benefit of fate,
The Devil and the Jebusite did hate.
Born to be saved even in their own despite,
Because they could not help believing right.
Such were the tools, but a whole Hydra more
Remains, of sprouting heads, too long to score.

---

[125] **Ethnic** gentile, not English, here used to mean Catholic.

[126] **Levites . . . theocracy** the Levites were the priests in ancient Israel, who had transported the Ark of the Covenant in a wagon until David placed it in Jerusalem. The reference here is to non-conforming divines who were deprived of their places for failure to accept the norms of the Anglican Church. Scorning to be outdone (in mischief) by the Jebusites (Catholics), they plot to restore the Puritan theocracy.

[127] **deepest mouth'd** baying loudest.

[128] **These . . . their fathers' God, and property** well-off stolid mainstream believing Protestants.

Some of their chiefs were princes of the land,
In the first rank of these did Zimri[129] 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 by starts, and nothing long,
But in the course of one revolving moon,
Was chemist, fiddler, statesman, and buffoon, [550]
Then all for women, painting, rhyming, drinking ,
Besides ten thousand freaks[130] that died in thinking.
Blessed madman, who could every hour employ,
With something new to wish, or to enjoy!
Railing and praising were his usual themes,
And both (to show his judgment) 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. [560]
Beggared by fools, whom still he found[131] too late,
He had his jest, and they had his estate.
He laughed himself from court, then sought relief
By forming parties,[132] but could ne'er be chief,

---

[129] **Zimri** a character from the Book of Numbers, hundreds of years out of synch with the story, chosen because Zimri was famous for sleeping with the wrong women. The reference is to George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham, a friend of Charles who shared his exile, but slipped back to England to marry the daughter of the parliamentary general Fairfax—a sufficient instance of his swashbuckling and mercurial nature. Despite this defection, he regained Charles' favor after the Restoration and became a chief minister, which for him entailed some meddling in government policy and a great deal of rake-hell revelry. He had a Renaissance man's breadth of interests, but his excesses kept him at the level of dilettante.

[130] **freaks** sudden whims, interests or inspirations.

[131] **found** found (out), discovered the true character of.

[132] **forming parties** in the 1670s Buckingham decided to mend his ways, pay his debts, and take a stand with the parliamentary opposition to the court. He was active in prosecuting those implicated in the Popish Plot, though he never went so far as to champion Monmouth

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.

Titles and names 't were tedious to rehearse
Of lords, below the dignity of verse.[133] [570]
Wits, warriors, commonwealths-men, were the best,
Kind husbands and mere nobles all the rest.[134]
And, therefore in the name of dullness,[135] be
The well-hung Balaam and cold Caleb[136] free.
And canting Nadab let oblivion damn,
Who made new porridge for the Paschal Lamb.[137]
Let friendship's holy band some names assure,
Some their own worth, and some let scorn secure.

---

or advocate the exclusion of James. This turnabout cost him Charles' favor, but didn't earn his hatred, so Dryden describes him as ridiculous rather than evil.

133 **Titles . . . dignity of verse** it would be beneath the dignity of poetry to enumerate the opposition characters simply on the basis of their social rank.

134 **Wits . . . the rest** those who distinguished themselves in literature, military service or as parliamentarians were the most eminent, the rest were simple family men, and lesser nobility.

135 **in the name of dulness . . .** so as not to be tedious, I shall not enumerate.

136 **Balaam . . . Caleb** following the New Testament, which uses the name Balaam to mean "sensualist." The reference is to the Earl of Huntington, one of Shaftesbury's (Achitophel's) partisans, who, by this account, was physically well endowed. The Biblical resonance of the name Caleb, and the Whig partisan to whom it refers, are in-jokes lost to history. All one can say is that the Caleb in question lacked the instinctual drives that distinguished "Balaam."

137 **Nadab . . . Paschal Lamb** in Leviticus, Nadab was a son of Aaron who showed an ill-fated enthusiasm for religion. Nadab here refers to Lord Howard of Esrick, another Shaftesbury partisan, an old-time republican and Anabaptist preacher (hence "canting"). While imprisoned in the Tower in 1681, he improvised a holy communion for himself, using "lambs-wool," a concoction of ale, roasted apples and sugar.

Nor shall the rascal rabble here have place,
Whom kings no titles gave, and God no grace,
Not bull-faced Jonas,[138] who could statutes draw
To mean rebellion, and make treason law,
But he, though bad, is followed by a worse,
The wretch, who heav'n's anointed dared to curse,
Shimei,[139] whose youth did early promise bring
Of zeal to God, and hatred to his king,
Did wisely from expensive sins refrain,
And never broke the Sabbath, but for gain,
Nor ever was he known an oath to vent,
Or curse, unless against the government.
Thus, heaping wealth, by the most ready way
Among the Jews, which was to cheat and pray,
The city, to reward his pious hate
Against his master, chose him magistrate.
His hand a vare[140] of justice did uphold,
His neck was loaded with a chain of gold.
During his office, treason was no crime.
The sons of Belial[141] had a glorious time,

---

138 **Jonas** Sir William Jones, attorney general from 1675-79, vigorous prosecutor of those accused in the Popish plot. Elected to Parliament, he became a chief supporter of the Exclusion Bill, making deft use of his superior legal knowledge. The Biblical name Jonas, a variant of Jonah, was chosen because it sounds like "Jones."

139 **Shimei** in the Second Book of Samuel, Shimei is a man who curses David fleeing from Absalom's rebellion. Shimei here refers to Slingsby Bethel, one of the elected sheriffs of London who as such took part in selecting all jurymen (including those in Shaftesbury's trial). He was a trader in leather by profession, and a veteran of the parliamentary army, and this may be sufficient explanation of Dryden's "cheat and pray." Through the derogation of Bethel one easily discerns the outline of a hardworking Protestant merchant, abstemious, pious and concerned for liberty. We should note that the subtext of anti-Semitism here becomes explicit. Edward I had expelled the Jews from England in 1290. They would only be readmitted under Cromwell. At the time of this poem, fewer than 400 Jews lived in England.

140 **vare** rod, staff.

141 **sons of Belial** a Biblical catch-phrase, meaning "evil men." The

For Shimei, though not prodigal of pelf,[142]
Yet loved his wicked neighbor as himself.
When two or three were gathered to declaim
Against the monarch of Jerusalem,
Shimei was always in the midst of them.
And, if they cursed the king when he was by,
Would rather curse, than break good company.
If any durst his factious friends accuse,
He packed a jury of dissenting Jews,
Whose fellow-feeling, in the godly cause,
Would free the suff'ring saint from human laws.
For laws are only made to punish those
Who serve the king, and to protect his foes.
If any leisure time he had from pow'r,
(Because 'tis sin to misemploy an hour)
His business was, by writing, to persuade,
That kings were useless, and a clog to trade.
And, that his noble style he might refine,
No Rechabite[143] more shunned the fumes of wine.
Chaste were his cellars, and his shrieval board[144]
The grossness of a city feast abhorred.
His cooks, with long disuse, their trade forgot,
Cool was his kitchen, though his brains were hot.
Such frugal virtue malice may accuse,
But sure 'twas necessary to the Jews,
For towns once burnt,[145] such magistrates require
As dare not tempt God's providence by fire.
With spiritual food he fed his servants well,
But free from flesh, that made the Jews rebel,[146]

Hebrew etymology of Belial is obscure. By the early Christian period it had become the name of a demon.

142 **pelf** wealth or riches, especially dishonestly acquired.

143 **Rechabite** a clan in ancient Israel, mentioned in Jeremiah 30, whose custom it was to abstain from wine.

144 **shrieval** sheriff's. Bethel discontinued the custom of the new sheriffs providing a feast for the alderman. His economies, though they would be considered sensible today, were a break with tradition.

145 **burnt** reference to the 1666 fire of London.

146 **flesh, that made the Jews rebel** the reference is to the complaints of the rebellious Israelites in the desert, that while they were slaves in

And Moses' laws he held in more account
For forty days of fasting in the mount.
To speak the rest, who better are forgot,
Would tire a well-breathed witness of the plot.
Yet, Corah,[147] thou shalt from oblivion pass;
Erect thyself thou monumental brass,[148]
High as the serpent[149] of thy metal made,
While nations stand secure beneath thy shade.
What though his birth were base, yet comets[150] rise
From earthy vapors e'er they shine in skies.
Prodigious actions may as well be done
By weaver's[151] 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,
Whose oath with martyrdom did Stephen[152] grace?
Ours was a Levite, and as times went then,
His tribe were God Almighty's gentlemen.
Sunk were his eyes, his voice was harsh and loud,
Sure signs he neither choleric was, nor proud.[153]

Egypt, they at least had meat to eat. Shimei, by implication, avoids future complaint by accustoming his dependents to privations.

147 **Corah** in the Book of Numbers, Corah is a Levite who questions Moses' claim to supreme religious authority. God causes the ground to open up and swallow him and his followers. The contemporary reference is to Titus Oates. The portrait given here is drawn to the life.

148 **erect thyself thou monumental brass** stand up tall, you monument to insolence. "Brass" had the same meanings for Dryden that it does for us.

149 **serpent** in The Book of Numbers, chapter 21, the Israelites are troubled by venomous snakes. "And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived."

150 **comets** held to be portentous since antiquity.

151 **weaver's** Oates' father was a weaver.

152 **Stephen** Saint Stephen, according to Acts 6-7, was falsely accused of blasphemy before the Sanhedrin and stoned to death, thus becoming the first Christian martyr.

153 **choleric . . . proud** ironic. Oates was extremely angry and arrogant.

His long chin prov'd his wit, his saint-like grace
A church vermilion and a Moses's face.[154]
His memory, miraculously great,
Could plots, exceeding man's belief, repeat—
Which therefore cannot be accounted lies,
For human wit could never such devise.
Some future truths are mingled in his book,
But, where the witness failed, the prophet spoke.[155]
Some things like visionary flights appear,
The spirit caught him up, the Lord knows where,
And gave him his rabbinical degree,
Unknown to foreign university.[156]
His judgment yet his mem'ry did excel,
Which pieced his wondrous evidence so well,
And suited to the temper of the times,
Then groaning under Jebusitic crimes.
Let Israel's foes suspect his heav'nly call,
And rashly judge his writ apocryphal,
Our laws for such affronts have forfeits made,
He takes his life, who takes away his trade.[157]
Were I myself in witness Corah's place,
The wretch who did me such a dire disgrace,
Should whet my memory, though once forgot,
To make him an appendix of my plot.
His zeal to heav'n made him his prince despise,
And load his person with indignities,
But zeal peculiar privilege affords,
Indulging latitude to deeds and words,
And Corah might for Agag's murder[158] call,

---

[154] **church vermilion . . . Moses' face** his face was as red as a cardinal's robes ("church vermilion") and his expression was solemnly pious. Once again the syntax is Latin.

[155] **the prophet spoke** (ironic). If Oates made any assertions in his testimony ("his book") that were not true, it must be assumed they would be true at a later date.

[156] **foreign university** Oates claimed (falsely) that he had been made a Doctor of Divinity at Salamanca.

[157] **his trade** (ironic). Oates' trade is perjury, and to prevent him would be to unlawfully deprive him of his livelihood.

[158] **Agag's murder** the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel: 15) demanded that

In terms as coarse as Samuel used to Saul.
What others in his evidence did join,
(The best that could be had for love or coin)
In Corah's own predicament will fall,
For witness[159] is a common name to all.

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.
Th' admiring crowd are dazzled with surprise,
And on his goodly person feed their eyes.
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 e'er he spoke,
Few words he said; but easy those and fit,
More slow than Hybla[160] drops, and far more sweet.

"I mourn, my country-men, 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 a son!
Now all your liberties a spoil are made,

King Saul execute King Agag in accord with God's command, and scolded him soundly when he hesitated to obey. Agag here does not refer to anyone specific, but calls to mind that several eminent persons were executed on Oates' testimony, such as William Howard, 1st Viscount Stafford, a politically inactive but Catholic peer.

159 **what others . . . witness** the others who joined Oates in false witness ("evidence") will share his eventual fate.

160 **Hybla** a town in ancient Sicily, famed for its honey.

Egypt and Tyrus[161] 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[162] embraces old, [710]
Exalts his enemies, his friends destroys,
And all his pow'r 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.
Take then my tears, (with that he wiped his eyes)
'Tis all the aid my present pow'r supplies.
No court-informer can these arms[163] accuse,
These arms may sons against their fathers use, [720]
And, 'tis my wish, the next successor's reign
May make no other Israelite complain."

Youth, beauty, graceful action, seldom fail,
But common interest always will prevail,
And pity never ceases to be shown
To him, who makes the people's wrongs his own.
The crowd (that still believe their kings oppress)
With lifted hands their young messiah bless,
Who now begins his progress to ordain,
With chariots, horsemen, and a num'rous train: [730]
From east to west his glories he displays, [164]
And, like the sun, the promised land surveys.

---

[161] **Egypt and Tyrus** France and Holland.

[162] **brib'd . . . Bathsheba's** It was an open secret that Louis XIV was bribing English politicians, Whig and Tory, and subsidizing the king. Bathsheba was the Biblical David's ill-gotten wife, here she refers to Louise de Kéroualle, a French Catholic agent and mistress to the king.

[163] **arms** weapons, that is, his tears.

[164] **displays** in the summer of 1680 Monmouth went on a tour of the countryside where he was met with festivities and cries of "God save our Protestant Duke!"

Fame runs before him, as the morning star,
And shouts of joy salute him from afar.
Each house receives him as a guardian god,
And consecrates the place of his abode.
But hospitable treats did most commend
Wise Issachar,[165] his wealthy western friend.
This moving court, that caught the people's eyes,
And seemed but pomp, did other ends disguise. [740]
Achitophel had formed it, with intent
To sound the depths and fathom, where it[166] went,
The people's hearts, distinguish friends from foes
And try their strength, before they came to blows.
Yet all was colored with a smooth pretense
Of specious love, and duty to their prince.
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.[167] [750]
Thus, in a pageant show, a plot is made,
And peace itself is war in masquerade.
Oh foolish Israel! Never warned by ill,
Still the same bait, and circumvented still!
Did ever men forsake their present ease,
In midst of health imagine a disease,
Take pains contingent mischiefs to foresee,
Make heirs for monarchs, and for God decree?[168]
What shall we think! Can people give away

---

[165] **Issachar** this son of Jacob was noted (Genesis 49) for his love of wealth; the reference is to Thomas Thynne, a wealthy friend and supporter of Monmouth.

[166] **it** Monmouth's procession.

[167] **a brother and a wife** as the Plot developed, it implicated the king's Catholic wife, Catherine, and his brother, James, who had converted to Catholicism.

[168] **Did ever men . . . for God decree** can people be so foolish as to imagine they have a disease when they are perfectly healthy, and take potentially harmful measures for threats that are merely possible ("contingent")? The people do something very like this when they take it upon themselves to decide the royal succession, which should be left to God.

Both for themselves and sons, their native sway?[169] [760]
Then they are left defenseless to the sword
Of each unbounded arbitrary lord,
And laws are vain, by which we right enjoy,
If kings unquestioned can those laws destroy.[170]
Yet, if the crowd be judge of fit and just,
And kings are only officers in trust,
Then this resuming cov'nant was declared
When kings were made, or is for ever barred.[171]
If those who gave the scepter could not tie
By their own deed their own posterity, [770]
How then could Adam bind his future race?
How could his forfeit on mankind take place?
Or how could heavenly justice damn us all
Who ne'er consented to our father's fall?[172]
Then kings are slaves to those whom they command,
And tenants to their people's pleasure stand.[173]
Add, that the pow'r for property allowed,
Is mischievously seated in the crowd,
For who can be secure of private right,
If sovereign sway may be dissolved by might?[174] [780]

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169 **their native sway** the government which is proper to them.

170 **Then they . . . destroy** if rule can be entrusted to whatever "arbitrary lord" the people like, then there is no basis for restraining power so casually given. If a king can arbitrarily ("unquestioned") overrule the laws of succession, what rightful laws can't he dismiss?

171 **Yet, if . . .barred** if indeed the people decide what government is legitimate, they must have reserved the right to reclaim control of government ("this resuming covenant") or else (as Dryden will argue) they gave up that right in perpetuity when they first instituted kingship.

172 **If those who gave . . . father's fall** if the people did not delegate rule to kings irrevocably, then how could Adam's sin have bound all succeeding generations in his guilt.

173 **Then kings . . . stand** then kings would exist to serve their people, and only have power on loan (which Dryden thinks preposterous).

174 **Add . . . might** what's more, if all rights of ownership ("power for property") are only provisional, and are conferred by the people, then further problems result. The might of the majority can abrogate any private right at all.

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.
What standard is there in a fickle rout,
Which, flowing to the mark,[175] runs faster out?
Nor only crowds, but sanhedrins[176] may be
Infected with this public lunacy,
And share the madness of rebellious times,
To murder monarchs for imagined crimes. [790]
If they may give and take whene'er they please,
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.
All other errors but disturb a state,
But innovation is the blow of fate. [800]
If ancient fabrics[177] nod, and threat to fall,
To patch the flaws, and buttress up the wall,
Thus far 'tis duty, but here fix the mark,
For all beyond it is to touch our Ark.[178]
To change foundations, cast the frame anew,
Is work for rebels who base ends pursue,
At once divine and human laws control,
And mend the parts by ruin of the whole.
The tamp'ring world is subject to this curse,
To physic their disease into a worse. [810]

Now what relief can righteous David bring?
How fatal 'tis to be too good a king!

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[175] **mark** (nautical) a knot in a line used to measure the depth of water. The desires of the rabble (the "fickle rout") rise ("flow") and even more quickly ebb without regard to reason or logic ("standard").

[176] **sanhedrins** parliaments.

[177] **fabrics** Latinism, from *fabrica:* building, construction.

[178] **Ark** the Ark of the Covenant, the most holy of objects.

Friends he has few, so high the madness grows,
Who dare be such, must be the people's foes.
Yet some there were, ev'n in the worst of days,
Some let me name, and naming is to praise.

In this short file Barzillai[179] first appears,
Barzillai crowned with honor and with years.
Long since, the rising rebels he withstood
In regions waste, beyond the Jordan's flood,
Unfortunately brave to buoy the state,
But sinking underneath his master's fate.
In exile with his god-like prince he mourned,
For him he suffered, and with him returned.
The court he practiced, not the courtier's art.
Large was his wealth, but larger was his heart
Which well the noblest objects knew to choose,
The fighting warrior, and recording Muse.[180]
His bed could once a fruitful issue boast,
Now more than half a father's name is lost.
His eldest hope,[181] with every grace adorned,
By me (so Heav'n will have it) always mourned,
And always honored, snatched in manhood's prime
By unequal Fates, and Providence's crime:
Yet not before the goal of honor won,
All parts fulfilled, of subject and of son.

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[179] **Barzillai** an old man of Gilead, loyal to David during Absalom's rebellion (2 Samuel: 17, 19). This is James Butler, Duke of Ormonde, who served as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland ("in regions waste, beyond the Jordan's flood") under Charles I, and shared the hardships of exile with Charles II, on whose restoration he was rewarded for his service. He fell out of favor for nearly a decade due to the machinations of the mercurial Buckingham, who thought Ormonde was an old bore with out-of-date ideas. Yet Ormonde never flagged in his loyalty to the crown. Indeed, a modern Barzillai.

[180] **Muse** Ormonde was a friend and patron to Dryden, who would dedicate his edition of Plutarch to him in 1683.

[181] **His eldest hope** Ormonde had six sons and two daughters. "His eldest hope," Thomas, the second to last of his surviving sons, died in 1680. Dryden here offers his condolences in an elegant, heartfelt elegy.

Swift was the race, but short the time to run.
O narrow circle, but of pow'r divine,
Scanted in space, but perfect in thy line!
By sea, by land, thy matchless worth was known,
Arms thy delight, and war was all thy own.
Thy force infused, the fainting Tyrians propped,
And haughty Pharaoh found his fortune stopped.
O ancient honor, O unconquered hand,
Whom foes unpunished never could withstand!
But Israel was unworthy of thy name,
Short is the date of all immoderate fame.
It looks as Heav'n our ruin had designed,
And durst not trust thy fortune and thy mind.[182]
Now, free from earth, thy disencumbered soul
Mounts up, and leaves behind the clouds and starry pole.
From thence thy kindred legions may'st thou bring,
To aid the guardian angel of thy king.
Here stop my Muse, here cease thy painful flight,
No pinions can pursue immortal height.
Tell good Barzillai thou canst sing no more,
And tell thy soul she should have fled before,
Or fled she with his life,[183] and left this verse
To hang on her departed patron's hearse?
Now take thy steepy flight from Heav'n, and see
If thou canst find on earth another he.
Another he would be too hard to find,
See then whom thou canst see not far behind.
Zadok[184] the priest whom, shunning, pow'r and place,

[182] **and thy mind** it is as though Heaven intended our doom and feared that if you lived, you would prevent it.

[183] **or fled she with his life** the dirge ends with elaborate excuses for its insufficiency. Dryden's muse should not even have attempted to write an elegy worthy of Ormonde's son she "should have fled before" undertaking it. Or it may be that Dryden's muse perished with grief ("fled she with his life") leaving behind only these verses. In Dryden's time such tortuous expressions were considered grand and solemn.

[184] **Zadock** a priest who attempted to follow David into exile, along with a band of Levites bearing the Ark. David ordered them back to Jerusalem (2 Samuel: 15). The modern reference is William Sancroft,

His lowly mind advanced to David's grace.[185]
With him the *sagan*[186] of Jerusalem,
Of hospitable soul and noble stem;
Him of the western dome,[187] whose weighty sense
Flows in fit words and heavenly eloquence.
The prophet's sons[188] by such example led, [870]
To learning and to loyalty were bred,
For colleges on bounteous kings depend,
And never rebel was to arts a friend.
To these succeed the pillars of the laws,
Who best could plead, and best can judge a cause.
Next them a train of loyal peers ascend,
Sharp judging Adriel,[189] the Muse's friend,
Himself a Muse—in Sanhedrin's debate
True to his prince; but not a slave of state,
Whom David's love with honors did adorn, [880]
That from his disobedient son[190] were torn.
Jotham[191] of piercing wit and pregnant thought,
Endowed by Nature, and by learning taught
To move assemblies, who but only tried
The worse awhile, then chose the better side,
Nor chose alone, but turned the balance too—
So much the weight of one brave man can do.

Archbishop of Canterbury. This and the following names add nothing to the poem. By them Dryden payed appropriate compliments to persons opposed to the Exclusion Bill, favored by the king, or patrons to himself. Where the poet's description exhausts the interest of the person mentioned, I shall simply note the name, and give the Biblical context, where this is meaningful.

185 **lowly . . . grace** his humility won the king's favor.

186 **sagan** Hebrew title meaning "deputy high priest." This is Henry Compton, Bishop of London.

187 **western dome** John Dolben, Dean of Westminster Abbey. "Dome" (from the Latin *domus*, home) can mean any large, stately building. Its position on the western bank of the Thames accounts for "west."

188 **prophet's sons** the students at the Westminster school.

189 **Adriel** John Sheffield, third Earl of Mulgrave.

190 **disobedient son** in 1679 Monmouth was deprived of certain government offices, which were transferred to Mulgrave.

191 **Jotham** George Savile, Marquis of Halifax.

Hushai,[192] the friend of David in distress,
In public storms of manly steadfastness.
By foreign treaties he informed his youth,
And joined experience to his native truth.
His frugal care supplied the wanting throne,
Frugal for that, but bounteous of his own.
'Tis easy conduct when exchequers flow,
But hard the task to manage well the low,
For sovereign power is too depressed or high,
When kings are forced to sell, or crowds to buy.
Indulge one labor more, my weary Muse,
For Amiel,[193] who can Amiel's praise refuse?
Of ancient race by birth, but nobler yet
In his own worth, and without title great.
The Sanhedrin long time as chief he ruled,
Their reason guided, and their passion cooled.
So dext'rous was he in the crown's defense,
So formed to speak a loyal nation's sense,
That as their band was Israel's tribes in small,
So fit was he to represent them all.
Now rasher charioteers the seat ascend,
Whose loose careers his steady skill commend.
They, like th' unequal ruler of the day,[194]
Misguide the seasons and mistake the way,
While he withdrawn at their mad labor smiles,
And safe enjoys the sabbath of his toils.

These were the chief, a small but faithful band
Of worthies, in the breach who dared to stand,
And tempt th' united fury of the land.
With grief they viewed such powerful engines bent,
To batter down the lawful government,
A numerous faction, with pretended frights

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[192] **Hushai** Laurence Hyde, Earl of Rochester. He served as ambassador ("by foreign treaties he informed his youth") and became in 1679 first lord of the Treasury ("his frugal care supplied the wanting throne").

[193] **Amiel** Edward Seymour.

[194] **unequal ruler of the day** Phaethon.

In sanhedrins to plume[195] the regal rights,
The true successor from the court removed,
The plot, by hireling witnesses, improved.
These ills they saw, and as their duty bound,
They showed the king the danger of the wound,
That no concessions from the throne would please,
But lenitives[196] fomented the disease,
That Absalom, ambitious of the crown,
Was made the lure to draw the people down,
That false Achitophel's pernicious hate,
Had turned the plot to ruin church and state,
The council[197] violent, the rabble worse,
That Shimei taught Jerusalem to curse.

With all these loads of injuries oppressed,
And long revolving in his careful breast
Th' event of things, at last, his patience tired,
Thus from his royal throne, by heav'n inspired,
The god-like David spoke, and, awful fear!
His train their Maker in their master hear.

"Thus long have I by native mercy swayed,
My wrongs dissembled, my revenge delayed,
So willing to forgive th'offending age,
So much the father did the king assuage.
But now so far my clemency they slight,
Th'offenders question my forgiving right.
That one was made for many, they contend—
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 shew I am not good by force.
Those heaped affronts that haughty subjects bring,
Are burdens for a camel, not a king.
Kings are the public pillars of the state,

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195 **plume** pluck bare, despoil.

196 **lenitives** medications to ease discomfort.

197 **council** Privy Council.

Born to sustain and prop the nation's weight.
If my young Sampson 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!
With how few tears a pardon might be won
From Nature, pleading for a darling son! [960]
Poor pitied youth, by my paternal care,
Raised up to all the heights his frame could bear.
Had God ordained his fate for empire born,
He would have given his soul another turn.
Gulled with a patriot's name, whose modern sense
Is one that would by law 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? [970]
His old instructor,[198] e'er he lost his place,
Was never thought endued with so much grace.
Good heav'ns, how faction can a patriot paint!
My rebel ever proves my people's saint.
Would *they* impose an heir upon the throne?
Let sanhedrins be taught to give their own. [199]
A king's at least a part of government;
And mine as requisite as their consent.
Without my leave a future king to choose,
Infers a right the present to depose. [980]
True, they petition me t'approve their choice,
But Esau's hands suit ill with Jacob's voice.[200]

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[198] **his old instructor** Achitophel (Shaftesbury). Charles marvels that Shaftesbury's ideas find such a welcome when presented by Monmouth.

[199] **be taught to give their own** let Parliament learn it can only give what it has a right to, which does not include the crown.

[200] **with Jacob's voice** refers to the Biblical story in which Jacob puts goatskin on the backs of his hands to fool his blind father into thinking he is his more hirsute elder brother Esau, and thereby obtain the blessing intended for Esau. Jacob says, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." Here the meaning is parliament's aggressive agenda belies the polite form of

My pious subjects for my safety pray,
Which to secure, they take my pow'r away.
From plots and treasons Heav'n preserve my years
But save me most from my petitioners.
Unsatiate as the barren womb or grave,
God cannot grant so much as they can crave.[201]
What then is left but with a jealous eye
To guard the small remains of royalty? [990]
The law shall still direct my peaceful sway,
And the same law teach rebels to obey.
Votes shall no more established pow'r control,
Such votes as make a part exceed the whole.
No groundless clamors shall my friends remove,
Nor crowds have pow'r to punish ere they prove.
For gods, and god-like kings their care express,
Still to defend their servants in distress.
Oh that my pow'r to saving were confined,
Why am I forced, like Heav'n, against my mind, [1000]
To make examples of another kind?
Must I at length the sword of justice draw?
Oh cursed effects of necessary law!
How ill my fear they by my mercy scan—
Beware the fury of a patient man.
Law they require, let law then show her face;
They could not be content to look on grace,
Her hinder parts, but with a daring eye
To tempt the terror of her front, and die.[202]
By their own arts 'tis righteously decreed, [1010]
Those dire artificers of death shall bleed.
Against themselves their witnesses will swear,
Till viper-like their mother plot they tear,

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its demands.

201 **they can crave** alludes to Proverbs: 30: 15-16: "There are three things that are never satisfied, yea, four things say not, It is enough: The grave; and the barren womb; the earth that is not filled with water; and the fire that saith not, It is enough."

202 **and die** refers to Exodus: 33, where Moses asks to gaze upon the face of God's glory, and is told no man may gaze upon it directly and live.

And suck for nutriment that bloody gore
Which was their principle of life before.
Their Belial with the Belzebub will fight,[203]
Thus on my foes, my foes shall do me right.
Nor doubt th' event, for factious crowds engage
In their first onset, all their brutal rage.
Then, let 'em take an unresisted course, [1020]
Retire and traverse, and delude their force,
But when they stand all breathless—urge the fight
And rise upon 'em with redoubled might!
For lawful pow'r is still superior found,
When long driv'n back, at length it stands the ground."

He said. Th' 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 god-like David was restored, [1030]
And willing nations knew their lawful lord.

[203] **will fight** allusion to Mark 3: 22-24, "And the scribes which came down from Jerusalem said, He hath Beelzebub, and by the prince of the devils casteth he out devils. And he called them unto him, and said unto them in parables, How can Satan cast out Satan? And if a kingdom be divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand."