

Mac Flecknoe as a mock-heroic poem

The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and poetics describe ‘mock-epic’ and ‘mock-heroic’ as:

Terms used in a broad sense to describe a satiric method in poetry and prose and, more specifically, a distinct sub-genre or kind of poetry which seeks a derisive effect by combining formal and elevated language with a trivial subject.

Through this poem, Dryden aims to satirise his fellow contemporary poet and rival Thomas Shadwell. Mac Flecknoe starts with the king, Flecknoe, musing on the best candidate among his sons to succeed him. The ‘mockery’ is evident when we realise that the said kingdom is the kingdom of dullness and nonsense and the coronation likewise is that to the throne of Dullness. Dryden raises Shadwell to an unsought dignity that he cannot sustain. It is a make-believe dignity, of course, as the readers are informed that the throne is a throne of ‘dullness’. But so subtly does Dryden go to work in the heroic idiom that the words constantly give us a confused impression of grandeur, and it is only after a moment’s reflection that we realise that what seemed to be praise, is, in fact, denigration of the deadliest kind. What high-flown words are used to achieve the very opposite effect, i.e, the deflation of Mac Flecknoe. Flecknoe speech is fraught with ironical praise:

Success let others teach, learn thou from me

Pangs without birth, and fruitless industry.

Words/phrases such as “Empress Fame”, “the nations meet”, sound dignified and solemn. Dryden’s clever choice of diction is evident in lines which describe “the hoary Prince” sitting majestically on a throne built of his own efforts, i.e., his own worthless books, and loads of Shadwell “almost choking” the way to the throne. Also remarkable for its satiric effect is when Flecknoe declares that Shadwell alone of all his sons is “mature in dullness” and “who stands confirmed in full stupidity”.

Flecknoe is solemnly compared to Augustus but the comparison is intended to deflate Flecknoe. Similarly, Shadwell is compared to Arion, the legendary Greek musician. Arion jumped out of his ship when threatened by murderous sailors. His music charmed even the dolphins, one of which carried him on its back safely to the shore. Shadwell, however, can only attract “little fishes” as he travels the song *The Thames in a barge*.

As *Mac Flecknoe* proceeds, its effects are more coarsely achieved, as it concludes with Flecknoe dropped through the trapdoor to the ‘hell’ beneath:

Down they sent the yet declaiming bard.
Sinking he left his drugget robe behind,
Born upwards by a subterranean wind.
The Mantle fell to the young Prophet’s part,
With double portion of his father’s art.

We witness how Dryden denigrates Shadwell through his high elevated diction fitted to describe the regalia and fanfare of monarchs and their kingdoms.

Critics have called Mac Flecknoe mock-heroic in a very loose sense of the term as the poem lacks in heroic actions and concerns itself with just coronation.

Praising the mock-heroic elements in Mac Flecknoe, T.S. Eliot says that the most fun element in Mac Flecknoe is the “most sustained display of surprise after surprise of wit from line to line... Dryden’s method here is something very near to parody; he applies vocabulary, images and ceremony which arouse epic associations of grandeur, to make an enemy helplessly ridiculous... he makes his object great in a way contrary to expectations, and the total effect is due to the transformation of the ridiculous in poetry”.