

## THE MOCK-HEROIC IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** The term 'mock-heroic' poetry, as the name suggests, is a burlesque of the heroic poetry or epic poetry. A classical epic is a narrative in poetry of some heroic action of a heroic character, written in a language which corresponds to the elevated theme. There is an intensity of feeling and the expression is dignified. Some examples of the classical epic are Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, Virgil's Aeneid and Milton's Paradise Lost. A mock-epic parodies the style and conventions and characters of a serious epic. The parody is not meant as a mockery of the epic, but is a means to ridicule some object which the poet disapproves of or wishes to satirize.

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**Introduction:** The mock-heroic genre works through the device of disproportion or incongruity. The epic devices suggest nobility and grandeur. When these conventions are applied to trivial objects, there results a sense of incongruity. The reader is forced to see the difference between ordinary mortals and the heroic times which were the subject of classical epics. Thus the mock-heroic technique is suitable for satiric purposes. Seriousness of style forces one's attention all the more on the triviality of subject. The manner is exalted but the thing described is insignificant. The discrepancy between manner and matter produces satiric effect.

**An epic** is a narrative in poetry of some heroic action of a heroic character, written in a language which corresponds to the elevated theme. A mock-epic parodies the style and conventions and characters of a serious epic. The parody is not meant as a mockery of the epic, but is a mean to ridicule some object which the poet wishes to satirize. Seriousness of style forces one's attention all the more on the triviality of subject. The manner is exalted but the thing described is insignificant.

'MacFlecknoe' or 'A satyr upon the True-Blew-Protestant Poet, T.S.' (1678) is the first mock heroic poem in English written by John Dryden. This mock epic is a poetic form which uses the epic structure on a miniature scale. It deals with a trivial subject through which the poet makes the subject ridiculous in a framework entirely inappropriate to its importance. It is a

### **Mac Flecknoe": Herald of Mock-epic Tradition**

One can assign to Dryden's Mac Flecknoe the position of heralding the mock-heroic tradition in English poetry. Dryden seems to have conceived the mock-heroic or burlesque as a kind of anti-image of the truly heroic. In a prefatory letter to Annus

Mirabilis, he says that "heroic Poesie" begets admiration, while images of the Burlesque beget laughter, "for the one shows Nature beautified .... the other shows her deformed... at which we cannot forbear to laugh, because it is a deviation from Nature."

Dryden considered the mock-heroic technique as a very suitable form for satiric purposes. He took inspiration from the French poet Boileu's *Le Lutrin* in which he found a fine mixture of the majesty of the heroic and the bite of the satire. Mac Flecknoe is thus a satire in the mock-heroic technique. Finding himself with the task of having to demolish Thomas Shadwell, Dryden could not have chosen a better method of satire. Few devices could be better than that of elevating a character, and in the process, deflating him to the level of a pigmy; as Ian Jack observes.

Mac Flecknoe has a mock-heroic form. The basic action, though it is not a great complex one, could easily fit heroic poetry. It deals with the choice of a successor to a kingdom and a coronation. The "mockery" is evident when we realize that the Kingdom is that of Nonsense and the coronation is that of a Prince of Dullness.'

The very opening of Mac Flecknoe is characterized by epic exaltation with the resulting comic effect:

The opening lines have the ponderous ring of noble heroic poetry. It is in the sixth line that the deflation comes. Flecknoe had ruled unopposed - in the "realms of Nonsense absolute." An aged monarch, he now sought to abdicate and find a suitable heir to his

throne. The exalted tone contrasts ludicrously with the fact that Flecknoe was a symbol of inferior versifiers.

### **Serious Diction for Trivial Matters**

Dryden was a great master at mixing and balancing the majesty of heroic poetry and the venom of satiric verse. What high-flown words are used to achieve the very opposite effect, i.e. the deflation of the victim! He shows ability at using "magnificent abuse". Flecknoe's speech is fraught with ironical praise:

The direct abuse is couched in notes of smooth politeness with the help of the polished heroic idiom. Terms such as "Empress Fame," "the nations meet", "the renown of Shadwell's coronation" sound dignified and solemn. Applied to a stupid man, they make the man look ridiculous. Nowhere is vituperative language of abuse employed, but the deadly effect is achieved through ironic politeness. Dryden makes a clever use of words. This is especially so in the lines which describe "the hoary prince" sitting majestically on a throne built of his own efforts, i.e., his own worthless books, and the loads of Shadwell "almost choking" the way to the throne. While the note is one of extreme deference, the meaning is clearly that of ridicule. The mock-heroic idiom makes use of irony in an effective manner - laughter arises out of the discrepancy between the elevated words and the meaning they convey.

Shadwell is and never deviates into sense. His tragic scenes are amusing, and his comic scenes so dull, that audiences go to sleep. His satires are inoffensive and never 'bite'. He is sterile as far as creativity is concerned. All the time, flattering terms are used to deflate the hapless victim. Dryden does not belittle Shadwell; his method is to praise his defects in grandiloquent words. Shadwell's "goodly fabric fills the eye", but seems designed for "thoughtless majesty". The combination of "thoughtless" and "majesty" is a masterpiece of ironic politeness. Nor should Shadwell claim to have any relationship with Ben Jonson on account of his portly frame, for Shadwell's bulk is mere flatulence, or emptiness of wit and sense. The tone of ironic praise adds "authority to the condemnation."

### **Ironical Politeness: Devastating Weapon of the Mock-Heroic**

Ironical politeness is the basic aspect of the mock-heroic technique and is used with telling effect in Mac Flecknoe. Mac Flecknoe is Thomas Shadwell

and he is chosen as fit heir to the throne of Nonsense. The degrading situation is spoken of in terms of great achievement. Flecknoe waxes eloquent on the particular skill and talents of Shadwell which make him best suited for the position.

The polite tone of praise is devastating in its satiric effect when Flecknoe declares that Shadwell alone of all his sons was "mature in dullness from his tender years" and stood confirmed in stupidity. Others might sometimes allow a ray of intelligence into the darkness of their stupidity, but not so Shadwell. He was supreme in his dullness, and 'rising fogs' ensured an eternal lack of wit. The words in the opening passage, such as "empire", "governed" "prince", "realms", "the succession of the state", "to reign", etc., are all exalted in tone. The ironic and ludicrous effect comes up when they are applied to the situation, namely; the coronation of a Prince of Dullness over the realms of Nonsense. The manner is often like Milton's, but the effect is satirical. Flattering language is used to pour ridicule over the victim. The gap between the great matters suggested by the diction and the ludicrousness of the context is so wide and striking that laughter is bound to result.

### **Deflation through the Process of Elevation**

The aim of the mock-heroic form is to deflate a victim by enhancing him. Dryden never belittles Shadwell. He constantly enhances his victim - he calls him Prince, monarch, mature, etc. It is the context in which these words are used which punctures the victim to collapse into insignificance. Dryden, as T.S. Eliot observes, 'makes his object great in a way contrary to expectation; and the total effect is due to the transformation of the ridiculous into poetry.' By using elevated words, ideas and images for Shadwell, Dryden reduces him to a helplessly ridiculous level. The basic joke of Mac Flecknoe is that Shadwell was fit to be described in heroic style. A small man is not ridiculous by himself; he becomes ridiculous when dressed up in a suit of armor meant for a hero.

### **Creation of a Pseudo-Hero**

Mac Flecknoe is a "pseudo-hero", heroic only in bulk. The comparison of Shadwell with the "monarch oaks" which "shade the plain and supinely reign" is intended to expose the hollowness of Shadwell. He is bulky like the oak and equally devoid of thinking power. The phrase "thoughtless majesty" is replete

with an ironical suggestion. The terms "fabric" and "goodly" suggest massive structure; "swelled with pride" and "big with hymn" similarly suggest intellectual grossness. Apparently innocent words assume ironic amplitude - "mature" in conjunction with "dullness" carries a sense of saturated repletion of stupidity and vacuity. Like the heroes of the genuine epic, Shadwell is "stamped" on his surroundings: the low quarters of London form a fitting background, or universe for our "hero." He is fit for the place,

### **Comparison with Heroic Figures for Deflation**

Much of the deflation in mock-heroic poetry is achieved through the clever device of drawing parallels between the satiric object and legendary heroes. It is the "joyful business of comparing small men to giants and making pigmies of them in the process," as Ian Jack comments. Flecknoe is solemnly compared to Augustus, the great Emperor of Rome. The comparison does not enhance Flecknoe; it deflates him. Similar is the effect when 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 along the Thames in a barge. His lute 'trembles' under his fingers and fearful noises emanate from the strings being played by a "well-sharpened" thumb. Irony is apparent when the "prince of the harmonious band", i.e., Shadwell, proves to be popular in such a great number of sordid and neglected localities of London.

Shadwell is compared to Ascanius, Rome's other hope and pillar of the state. He is compared to Hannibal, the hero of Carthage. But whereas Hannibal swore eternal hostility to Rome at the early age of nine, Shadwell swears to wage perpetual war on wit and intelligence. If Romulus, the great founder of Rome, saw twelve vultures as an omen, Shadwell's coronation is marked by the portentous flight of twelve owls. Shadwell is given a touch of being a Christ-figure when Flecknoe declares that even his own dullness was merely a prelude to Shadwell's. He had been sent before to prepare the way for Shadwell, to teach the nations in his greater name. The implication is that Flecknoe is playing the role of John the Baptist to Shadwell's Christ.

The effect of such "elevated" comparisons is bound to be comic. It is also satirical. It does not

render the great heroes small, but makes Flecknoe and Shadwell even small than they really are.

### **Ludicrous Setting for Coronation**

Mock-heroic style is exemplified in the lines which describe the setting of Shadwell's coronation. Pomp and show mark the scene. London is termed "fair Augusta" where "an ancient fabric" rose to the sight. It was a place where ancient prostitutes lived and where dull-witted plays like Shadwell's *The Humorous* were applauded by foolish audiences. No Persian carpets lined the way, but stacks of dull books were strewn all over. Ruined publishers formed a guard of honor for Shadwell.

Inflated language, which forces attention to the triviality of the actual situation, is used to describe the coronation ceremony. The incompatibility raises laughter and lends poignancy to the satire against Shadwell in particular, and bad writing in general.

### **The Ending of the Poem: Culmination of Mock-Heroic**

The speech of Flecknoe comes to an abrupt end and a miraculous disappearance of the speaker takes place. Two heroes from Shadwell's *The Virtuoso* pull a trap-door beneath Flecknoe and he disappears. His mantle is wafted upwards by a subterranean wind and falls on Shadwell along with a double portion of his father's art. The scene is an obvious travesty of the Biblical story of Elijah and Elisha. Once again, and for the 1st time in the poem, the elevated comparison leads to complete deflation.

### **"Mac Flecknoe": Not Strictly Mock-Heroic**

It is true that Mac Flecknoe is not a mock-heroic poem in the complete sense of the term, as Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* or *Dunciad* are. In Pope's work, all the epic devices are used in a burlesque form. To that extent, we can call Mac Flecknoe mock-heroic only in a very loose sense. Its satire, of course, functions through apparent praise, but it does not use devices such as the invocation, epic simile, digressions and supernatural machinery. Its slight plot is not really concerned with a heroic "action" but with an incident, i.e., a coronation. Further, there is plenty of direct satire in Mac Flecknoe which entitles it to be classified more as satire than as mock-epic. But we must remember that Mac Flecknoe was a beginning of the mock-heroic tradition in English literature. There is hardly any poem before it which

used to such great effect, the mock-heroic devices of grave and pompous irony; expressed in lofty and solemn-sounding verse. It certainly pointed the way to Pope's Dunciad.

### Conclusion

Mac Flecknoe, though not a mock-epic in the strict sense of the term, uses the mock-heroic technique very effectively for satiric purposes. The elegant diction contributes to Shadwell's caricature. The absurdity of the inflated speeches is obvious. We have solemn descriptions of omens, ponderous genuflections to the bad writers, and the empty ring of rhetorical gesture:

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