

Mac Flecknoe:

A Satyr upon the Trew-Blue-Protestant Poet T.S._1

By John Dryden

Edited and annotated by Jack Lynch

Mac Flecknoe appeared in an unauthorized edition in October 1682; it describes the king of Nonsense, Richard Flecknoe, looking for a successor to his throne, and settling on Thomas Shadwell. This text reproduces the version of 1684.

All humane things are subject to decay,
And, when Fate summons, Monarchs must obey:
This Fleckno 2 found, who, like Augustus, 3 young
Was call'd to Empire, and had govern'd long:
In Prose and Verse, was own'd, 4 without dispute [5]
Through all the Realms of Non-sense, absolute.
This aged Prince now flourishing in Peace,
And blest with issue of a large increase, 5
Worn out with business, did at length debate
To settle the succession of the State: 6 [10]
And pond'ring which of all his Sons was fit
To Reign, and wage immortal War with Wit; 7
Cry'd, 'tis resolv'd; for Nature pleads that He
Should onely rule, who most resembles me:
Sh—— 8 alone my perfect image bears, [15]
Mature in dullness from his tender years.
Sh—— alone, of all my Sons, is he
Who stands confirm'd in full stupidity.
The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,
But Sh—— never deviates into sense. [20]
Some Beams of Wit on other souls may fall,
Strike through and make a lucid interval;
But Sh——'s genuine night admits no ray,
His rising Fogs prevail upon the Day:
Besides his goodly Fabrick 9 fills the eye, [25]
And seems design'd for thoughtless Majesty:
Thoughtless as Monarch Oakes, that shade the plain,
And, spread in solemn state, supinely reign.
Heywood and Shirley were but Types of thee, 10
Thou last great Prophet of Tautology: 11 [30]
Even I, a dunce of more renown than they,
Was sent before but to prepare thy way;
And coarsely clad in Norwich druggot 12 came
To teach the nations in thy greater name.
My warbling Lute, the Lute I whilom 13 strung [35]

When to King John of Portugal I sung, 14
 Was but the prelude to that glorious day,
 When thou on silver Thames did'st cut thy way,
 With well tim'd Oars before the Royal Barge,
 Swell'd with the Pride of thy Celestial charge; [40]
 And big with Hymn, Commander of an Host,
 The like was ne'er in Epsom blankets toss'd. 15
 Methinks I see the new Arion 16 Sail,
 The Lute still trembling underneath thy nail.
 At thy well sharpned thumb from Shore to Shore [45]
 The Treble squeaks for fear, the Bases roar:
 Echoes from Pissing-Ally, 17 Sh—— call,
 And Sh—— they resound from A—— Hall. 18
 About thy boat the little Fishes throng,
 As at the Morning Toast, 19 that Floats along. [50]
 Sometimes as Prince of thy Harmonious band
 Thou wield'st thy Papers in thy threshing hand.
 St. André's feet 20 ne'er kept more equal time,
 Not ev'n the feet of thy own Psyche's rhyme:
 Though they in number 21 as in sense excell; [55]
 So just, so like tautology they fell,
 That, pale with envy, Singleton 22 forswore
 The Lute and Sword which he in Triumph bore
 And vow'd he ne'er would act Villerius 23 more.
 Here stopt the good old Syre; and wept for joy [60]
 In silent raptures of the hopefull boy.
 All arguments, but most his Plays, perswade,
 That for anointed dullness he was made.

Close to the Walls which fair Augusta 24 bind,
 (The fair Augusta much to fears inclin'd 25) [65]
 An ancient fabrick, rais'd t' inform the sight,
 There stood of yore, and Barbican it hight: 26
 A watch Tower once; but now, so Fate ordains,
 Of all the Pile 27 an empty name remains.
 From its old Ruins Brothel-houses rise, [70]
 Scenes of lewd loves, and of polluted joys.
 Where their vast Courts, the Mother-Strumpets keep,
 And, undisturb'd by Watch, in silence sleep.
 Near these a Nursery erects its head,
 Where Queens are form'd, and future Hero's bred; [75]
 Where unfledg'd Actors learn to laugh and cry,
 Where infant Punks 28 their tender Voices try,
 And little Maximins 29 the Gods defy.
 Great Fletcher never treads in Buskins here,
 Nor greater Johnson dares in Socks appear; 30 [80]
 But gentle Simkin 31 just reception finds
 Amidst this Monument of vanisht minds:
 Pure Clinches, 32 the suburban Muse affords;
 And Panton waging harmless war with words.
 Here Fleckno, as a place to Fame well known, [85]

Ambitiously design'd his Sh——'s Throne.
For ancient Decker 33 prophec'd long since,
That in this Pile should reign a mighty Prince,
Born for a scourge of wit, and flail of sense:
To whom true dullness should some Psyches owe, [90]
But worlds of Misers 34 from his pen should flow;
Humorists and hypocrites it should produce,
Whole Raymond families, and Tribes of Bruce.

Now Empress Fame had publisht the renown,
Of Sh——'s coronation through the town. [95]
Rous'd by report of fame, the nations meet,
From near Bun-Hill, and distant Watling-street. 35
No Persian Carpets spread th'imperial way,
But scatter'd limbs of mangled poets lay:
From dusty shops neglected authors come, [100]
Martyrs of Pies, and Reliques of the Bum. 36
Much Heywood, Shirly, Ogleby there lay,
But loads of Sh—— almost choakt the way. 37
Bilk't Stationers 38 for Yeomen stood prepar'd,
And H—— 39 was Captain of the Guard. [105]
The hoary 40 Prince in Majesty appear'd,
High on a Throne of his own Labours rear'd.
At his right hand our young Ascanius 41 sat
Rome's other hope, and pillar of the State.
His Brows thick fogs, instead of glories, grace, [110]
And lambent dullness plaid arround his face.
As Hannibal did to the Altars come,
Sworn by his Syre a mortal Foe to Rome; 42
So Sh—— swore, nor should his Vow bee vain,
That he till Death true dullness would maintain; [115]
And in his father's Right, and Realms defence,
Ne'er to have peace with Wit, nor truce with Sense.
The King himself the sacred Unction made, 43
As King by Office, and as Priest by Trade: 44
In his sinister hand, instead of Ball, 45 [120]
He plac'd a mighty Mug of potent Ale;
Love's Kingdom 46 to his right he did convey,
At once his Sceptre and his rule of Sway;
Whose righteous Lore the Prince had practis'd young,
And from whose Loyns recorded Psyche sprung, [125]
His Temples last with Poppies 47 were o'er spread,
That nodding seem'd to consecrate his head:
Just at that point of time, if Fame not lye,
On his left hand twelve reverend Owls did fly.
So Romulus, 'tis sung, by Tyber's Brook, [130]
Presage of Sway from twice six Vultures took. 48
Th' admiring throng loud acclamations make,
And Omens of his future Empire take.
The Syre then shook the honours of his head,
And from his brows damps of oblivion shed [135]

Full on the filial dullness: long he stood,
 Repelling from his Breast the raging God;
 At length burst out in this prophetick mood:
 Heavens bless my Son, from Ireland let him reign
 To farr Barbadoes on the Western main; [140]
 Of his Dominion may no end be known,
 And greater than his Father's be his Throne.
 Beyond loves Kingdom let him stretch his Pen;
 He paus'd, and all the people cry'd Amen.
 Then thus, continu'd he, my Son advance [145]
 Still in new Impudence, new Ignorance.
 Success let other teach, learn thou from me
 Pangs without birth, and fruitless industry.
 Let Virtuoso's in five years be Writ;
 Yet not one thought accuse thy toyl of wit. [150]
 Let gentle George 49 in triumph tread the Stage,
 Make Dorimant betray, and Loveit rage;
 Let Cully, Cockwood, Fopling, charm the Pit,
 And in their folly show the Writers wit.
 Yet still thy fools shall stand in thy defence, [155]
 And justify their Author's want 50 of sense.
 Let 'em be all by thy own model made
 Of dullness, and desire no foreign aid:
 That they to future ages may be known,
 Not Copies drawn, but issue of thy own. [160]
 Nay let thy men of wit too be the same,
 All full of thee, and differing but in name;
 But let no alien S—dl—y 51 interpose
 To lard with wit thy hungry Epsom prose.
 And when false flowers of Rhetorick thou would'st cull, [165]
 Trust Nature, do not labour to be dull;
 But write thy best, and top; and in each line,
 Sir Formal's 52 oratory will be thine.
 Sir Formal, though unsought, attends thy quill,
 And does thy Northern Dedications 53 fill. [170]
 Nor let false friends seduce thy mind to fame,
 By arrogating Johnson's Hostile name. 54
 Let Father Fleckno fire thy mind with praise,
 And Uncle Ogleby thy envy raise.
 Thou art my blood, where Johnson has no part; [175]
 What share have we in Nature or in Art?
 Where did his wit on learning fix a brand,
 And rail 55 at Arts he did not understand?
 Where made he love in Prince Nicander's 56 vein,
 Or swept the dust in Psyche's humble strain? [180]
 Where sold he Bargains, Whip-stitch, kiss my Arse, 57
 Promis'd a Play and dwindled to a Farce?
 When did his Muse from Fletcher scenes purloin,
 As thou whole Eth'ridg dost transfuse to thine?
 But so transfus'd as Oyl on Waters flow, [185]

His always floats above, thine sinks below.
 This is thy Province, this thy wondrous way,
 New Humours to invent for each new Play: 58
 This is that boasted Byas of thy mind,
 By which one way, to dullness, 'tis inclin'd, [190]
 Which makes thy writings lean on one side still,
 And in all changes that way bends thy will.
 Nor let thy mountain belly make pretence
 Of likeness; 59 thine's a tympany 60 of sense.
 A Tun 61 of Man in thy Large bulk is writ, [195]
 But sure thou'rt but a Kilderkin 62 of wit.
 Like mine thy gentle numbers feebly creep,
 Thy Tragick Muse gives smiles, thy Comick sleep. 63
 With whate'er gall thou sett'st thy self to write,
 Thy inoffensive Satyrs never bite. [200]
 In thy felonious heart, though Venom lies,
 It does but touch thy Irish pen, and dyes.
 Thy Genius calls thee not to purchase fame
 In keen Iambicks, but mild Anagram: 64
 Leave writing Plays, and choose for thy command [205]
 Some peaceful Province in Acrostick Land.
 There thou maist wings display and Altars raise,
 And torture one poor word Ten thousand ways.
 Or if thou would'st thy diff'rent talents suit,
 Set thy own Songs, and sing them to thy lute. [210]
 He said, but his last words were scarcely heard,
 For Bruce and Longvil had a Trap prepar'd,
 And down they sent the yet declaiming Bard.
 Sinking he left his Drugget robe behind,
 Born upwards by a subterranean wind. [215]
 The Mantle fell to the young Prophet's part, 65
 With double portion of his Father's Art.

Notes

1. Thomas Shadwell, a poet and playwright.
2. Richard Flecknoe, an Irish Catholic priest and minor poet. Why Dryden singles him out for ridicule isn't clear.
3. Augustus became emperor of Rome when he was still young, and ruled during Rome's greatest age.
4. Own'd, "admitted" or "acknowledged."
5. That is, "blessed with many offspring."
6. In other words, to settle who was to succeed him as king.
7. Wit, "The powers of the mind; the mental faculties; the intellects" (Johnson).
8. Shadwell.
9. Goodly Fabrick, "significant body." Shadwell was fat.

10. Thomas Heywood and James Shirley, seventeenth-century playwrights not widely admired in Dryden's day. Types is a technical term from theology, a kind of foreshadowing of a future figure.
11. Tautology is a redundancy or a logical error in which the obvious is stated: for instance, "Either it will rain or it won't rain."
12. Norwich druggat, coarse woolen cloth. Shadwell came from Norfolk.
13. Whilom, an outdated word meaning "once" or "in the past." It was a favorite word of Edmund Spenser.
14. Shadwell lived in Portugal and dedicated some of his work of King John.
15. Shadwell was the author of a play called Epsom Wells, but the line "Such a fellow as he deserves to be tossed in a blanket" is actually in Shadwell's *Virtuoso*.
16. In Greek myth, Arion is a poet and musician who was carried across the ocean by dolphins.
17. A real alley in seventeenth-century London.
18. Apparently Aston Hall, a place otherwise unknown.
19. Toast, "waste."
20. St. André was a French dancing-master — an unreputable profession — and did the choreography for Shadwell's *Psyche*.
21. Number, "Verses; poetry" (Johnson).
22. John Singleton, a court musician.
23. Villerius is a character in *The Siege of Rhodes*, an opera by William Davenant.
24. Augusta, used here for London.
25. London had just gone through "the Popish Plot," in which a number of Catholics were falsely accused of planning the murder of the king.
26. The Barbican, a fortified wall, stood in Aldersgate Street in London. Hight is an archaic word for "was called."
27. Pile, "An edifice; a building" (Johnson).
28. Punk, "A whore; a common prostitute; a strumpet" (Johnson).
29. Maximin was a character in Dryden's *Tyrannic Love*. He was a bombastic hero.
30. John Fletcher and Ben Jonson, early seventeenth-century playwrights. Fletcher was best known for his tragedies, associated with the "buskin" (the kind of shoe worn in stage tragedies); Jonson was famous for his comedies, where "socks" were worn. Johnson's definition of sock explains it: "The shoe of the ancient comick actors, taken in poems for comedy, and opposed to buskin or tragedy."
31. Simkin, like Panton below, a stock character in plays for a simpleton.
32. Clinch, "A word used in a double meaning; a pun; an ambiguity; a duplicity of meaning, with an identity of expression" (Johnson).
33. Thomas Dekker, attacked by Ben Jonson in *The Poetaster*.
34. *The Miser*, *The Humorists*, and *The Hypocrite* were plays by Shadwell. Raymond and Bruce are characters from them.
35. Bun Hill and Watling Street were in fact very close, suggesting the limited range of Shadwell's real influence.
36. Paper was expensive. When books ceased to sell, their paper would be used for other purposes — sometimes to line pie tins, sometimes as toilet paper.
37. Sh—— is "Shadwell," and the verse requires two syllables, but we're also invited to imagine other words beginning with sh.
38. Bilk't Stationers, "cheated booksellers."
39. Henry Herringman, Shadwell's and Dryden's publisher.
40. Hoary, literally "white" as if with hoarfrost, metaphorically "old" (with white hair).
41. Ascanius, the son of Aeneas.

42. Hasdrubal made his son Hannibal, ruler of the Carthaginians, swear to hate Rome forever.
43. Unction, the application of sacramental oil at a coronation.
44. Flecknoe was a priest.
45. A king holds a globe in his left ("sinister") hand during coronation.
46. Love's Kingdom is a play by Shadwell.
47. Poppies are used to produce opium, to which Shadwell was addicted.
48. In other words, "It is said [by Plutarch, whom Dryden helped to translate] that Romulus [the founder of Rome] predicted his reign from twelve vultures near the River Tiber."
49. Sir George Etherege, a contemporary playwright. The characters mentioned in the next few lines come from his plays.
50. Want, "lack."
51. Sir Charles Sedley, who contributed to Shadwell's Epsom-Wells.
52. Sir Formal Trifle, a character in Shadwell's Virtuoso.
53. Shadwell dedicated some of his plays to the Duke and Duchess of Newcastle, in the north of England.
54. Shadwell admired Jonson, and tried to imitate his style.
55. Rail, "To use insolent and reproachful language; to speak to, or to mention in opprobrious terms" (Johnson).
56. Prince Nicander is a character in Shadwell's Psyche.
57. Phrases from Shadwell's plays.
58. Johnson defines humour as "The different kind of moisture in man's body, reckoned by the old physicians to be phlegm, blood, choler, and melancholy, which, as they predominated, were supposed to determine the temper of mind" and "General turn or temper of mind." Jonson was famous for his "comedies of humors," in which each character's "temper of mind" was exaggerated; Shadwell tried to imitate his style.
59. Likeness, that is, to Ben Jonson, who was also fat.
60. Tympany, "tumor" or "swelling."
61. Tun, a large barrel or cask for wine.
62. A kilderkin is a quarter of a tun.
63. In other words, your tragedies make people laugh, and your comedies put people to sleep.
64. Iambicks are satires, since Greek satirical verse was written in iambic verse. Anagrams (rearranged letters), acrostics (poems in which the first letter of each verse spells out a word), and wings and altars (poems written in the form of pictures) were all examples of "false wit."
65. A reference to Elisha's taking up Elijah's mantle in 2 Kings 2:9-13.