

# Studies in English, New Series

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Volume 9

Article 9

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1-1-1991

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### Recommended Citation

Blann, Robinson (1991) "Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel"," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 9 , Article 9.

Available at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies\\_eng\\_new/vol9/iss1/9](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol9/iss1/9)

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## Blann: Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel"

### DRYDEN'S "ABSALOM AND ACHITOPHEL"

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Once, when commenting on his brilliant political satire "Absalom and Achitophel," John Dryden mentioned that he thought his verse caricature of Zimri (George Villiers, the second Duke of Buckingham) "worth the whole poem."<sup>1</sup> Now probably no one since Dryden has assessed the Zimri excerpt so highly, but even if this literary master of the age was guilty of exaggeration, his comment does give one pause, because, for one thing, the passage is such an extraordinary one. That the poet recognized this strikes me as significant, at least for those who study this lengthy political put-down. The poem's length itself generally causes any detailed study to be of the parts rather than of the whole, and Dryden's laudatory equation of his favorite part of the poem with its entirety can perhaps be taken as a directive from the poet to see the witty portrait of Zimri as a microcosm of the full one thousand odd line poem. Be that as it may, the short, twenty-five line Zimri section (ll. 543-68) does admirably showcase Dryden's skill with the heroic couplet.

Because of his high social position, Zimri stands "In the first Rank" (l. 544) of "the Malecontents" (l. 492) that Dryden surveys and his portrait fittingly precedes those of the lesser born villains Shimei (Slingsby Bethel) and Corah (Titus Oates). Dryden's memorable picture of Zimri is prefaced by an overview (ll. 491-542) of all the "differing Parties" (l. 493) that seek "For several Ends...the same [rebellious] Design" (l. 494). Zimri, of course, is only one of this divergent "Hydra.../...of sprouting heads" (ll. 541-42), but because of his characteristic changeability he represents all of the misguided rebels. In fact, he seems to be the "Hydra" himself.

Some of their Chiefs were Princes of the Land  
In the first Rank of these did Zimri stand:  
A man so various, that he seem'd to be,  
Not one, but all Mankinds Epitome.

(ll. 543-46)

Punning on "Rank," Dryden has his readers smell this "Hydra" before he shows him. The poet adds irony to the line by having his unstable subject "stand," as if that were possible given the extremely malleable condition of the man—one that is "so various" that he virtually melts into a woefully inconsistent Everyman. The humorous

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tone of the lines is made even more so by the screeching long "e" assonance and the double syllable rhyme which conclude this initial summation of Zimri's multifaceted character: "he seemed to be/...Mankinds Epitome."

Another feature that Dryden begins here and continues throughout much of the Zimri portrait is the use and overuse of caesura as a metrical mimicry of Zimri's chameleon-like nature.

Stiff in opinions, always in the wrong;  
Was everything by starts, and nothing long:  
But, in the course of one revolving Moon,  
Was Chymist, Fidler, States-Man, and Buffoon:  
Then all for Woman, Painting, Rhiming, Drinking;  
Besides ten thousand freaks that dy'd in thinking.

(ll. 547-52)

Simply count the commas. With the stop-and-go reading that all these caesuras dictate, Dryden has actually placed the reader in Zimri's place for a moment. We all pause repeatedly for the flurry of commas as inconstant Zimri changes from one role to another. Dryden is showing Zimri's (or Villier's) dilettante attempts at being a Renaissance all-round man, and this is fittingly paralleled by the staccato sound of these telling lines.

Another effect of Dryden's catalogue of Zimri's dalliances is the satiric undercutting of the entire line of items by the last words of the line. "Buffoon" and "Drinking" are both emotionally loaded terms that cast ridicule on everything that precedes them.

In satire the old guilt-by-association principle works in full force, and Dryden takes advantage of this by charging the rest of his Zimri rhetoric with negative values. Consider the devastating effects of the following phrases that Dryden uses to describe his aristocratic target: "ten thousand freaks" (l. 552), "Blest madman" (l. 553), "Rayling" (l. 555), "Extreams" (l. 559), "Desert" (l. 560), "Begger'd by fools" (l. 561), and "wicked but in will" (l. 567). The "freaks," of course, refer to the multiple masks that Zimri has donned "in the course of one revolving Moon" (l. 549). For Dryden's readers, the "moon" would automatically be linked with lunacy, and, sure enough, Zimri's manifold poses have all "dy'd in thinking" (l. 552). Naturally, cerebration is a fatal activity for any fool.

Since Zimri is such a "Buffoon" and since he is indeed blessed with money, Dryden's oxymoron, "Blest Madman," is not as puzzling an epithet as it first appears, but is appropriate after all. This important fool is not to be feared, but, if anything, he is to be pitied—especially

after his erstwhile companions "Desert" him once they have "had his Estate" (l. 562).

Dryden indulges in another rhetorical technique in finishing up his puncturing portrait of Zimri, and that is his use of the poetic equivalent of the balanced sentence. Zimri is established as a changeable creature of either-or extremities, and the syntax as well as the semantics of Dryden's lines reflect this paralleled structure: "So over Violent, or over Civil,/That every man, with him, was God or Devil" (ll. 567-68). The result of this juxtaposition of oppositions is, for the reader, like viewing a verbal tennis match. Dryden continues this volleying with "Nothing went unrewarded, but Desert" (l. 560), and, following this aphoristic irony, he delivers another series of counterpointed phrases:

He had his Jest, and they had his Estate.  
He laught himself from Court, then sought Relief  
By forming Parties, but could ne're be Chief.

(ll. 562-64)

Dryden concludes his sullyng summation of this pathetic, stereotyped aristocrat with the best of his balanced phrases: "He left not Faction, but of that was left" (l. 568). The sentence mirrors itself in its inversion as it carefully counterpoises "left" with "left" and, at the same time, emphatically recalls the rhyming word "bereft" (l. 569) of the preceding line. Finally, Dryden's punning with "Faction" (meaning "dissension" in the first instance and "the political party of dissenters" in the second instance [when referred to by "that"]) is simply representative of his stunning word play throughout this short section. And it is interesting to remember that the poet claimed to value this short section as much as the entire poem.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Dennis Davison, *Dryden* (London: Evans, 1968), p. 123.