Absalom and Achitophel

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN DRYDEN

John Dryden was born the first of 14 children to Erasmus Dryden and Mary Pickering in Aldwincle, a small civil parish in the eastern part of England. Dryden's maternal grandfather was the village rector, and his paternal grandfather, Sir Erasmus Dryden, 1st Baronet, was a respected Member of Parliament. In 1644, Dryden went to Westminster School, a public school in London, which he references fondly in his poem "Absalom and Achitophel." During Dryden's time at Westminster School, he wrote and published his first poem, a royalist elegy about the death of a classmate that allegorizes the execution of Charles I, in 1649. Dryden then attended Trinity College, Cambridge, and graduated in 1654 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. During the Interregnum—the period of time between the execution of Charles I and the restoration of Charles II in 1660, during which Oliver Cromwell ruled over England—Dryden returned to London and worked for Cromwell's Secretary of State. When the monarchy was restored, Dryden dominated the literary scene of Restoration England. He wrote numerous poems and public speeches, and he was frequently commissioned by King Charles to write directly on the crown's behalf. After the ban on theaters was lifted in 1663, Dryden began writing plays and quickly became famous for works such as *Marriage à la Mode* (1673) and *All for Love* (1678). While certainly famous for his plays, Dryden is perhaps remembered most for his satirical poems, such as "Absalom and Achitophel" (1681) and "Mac Flecknoe" (1682). Dryden married Lady Elizabeth Howard in 1663, and while their marriage was said to be rather unhappy, the couple had three sons—Charles, John, and Erasmus—whom they deeply loved and were very close to. Dryden served as the Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom from 1668 to 1688, and in his time he was both celebrated and condemned. Despite being born a Protestant, Dryden converted to Catholicism in 1686. He died in the year 1700 at the age of 68 in London due to complications of gout and was buried at Westminster Abbey.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the preface to "Absalom and Achitophel," John Dryden claims he is merely a historian, but had *he* originally created the biblical story he recounts in his poem, he would have included the reconciliation of Absalom and his father, King David. Absalom and David are thinly veiled metaphors for Charles II of England and his illegitimate son, James Scott, 1st Duke of Monmouth. In the poem, Dryden implies that the real-life story of Charles and Monmouth is not yet over, and there is plenty of time for wisdom and mercy. Sadly, this did not prove to be the case, and after the death of Charles II in 1685, Monmouth and an army of followers attempted to seize the crown from Charles's brother, James II, the next heir in the line of succession. James was a Roman Catholic, and Monmouth and his Protestant followers opposed a Roman Catholic on the throne. During the summer of 1685, the Monmouth Rebellion fought a sequence of battles against the English military led by John Churchill. Monmouth's army was ultimately defeated at the Battle of Sedgemoor on July 6, and on July 15, the 1st Duke of Monmouth was executed for treason. Monmouth's uncle, James II, ignored the people and Monmouth's pleas for mercy, even after Monmouth vowed to convert to Catholicism. James II remained on the throne until 1688, at which time he was overthrown by William of Orange during the Glorious Revolution. In 1701, the Act of Settlement was passed by Parliament, which officially excluded Roman Catholics from royal succession and mandated that the throne be occupied by Protestants only.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Satire, particularly political satire, became exceedingly popular in Restoration England as a means to address problems and injustices within the government and society as a whole, and John Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel" is one such work. Samuel Butler, an English satirical poet and Dryden's contemporary, wrote "Hudibras," a mock-heroic narrative poem based on the English Civil War, and published it in three parts in 1663, 1664, and 1678. The popularity of satire outlasted the Restoration, and Alexander Pope, another satirical poet, wrote and published "The Rape of the Lock" in 1712 about the unequal power relations present in England. Jonathan Swift continued the satirical tradition, and in 1729 he wrote an essay entitled *A Modest Proposal*, which is about England's impoverished Irish population. Satirical writing has continued to be an important part of the literary canon and includes other works such as Voltaire's *Candide*, William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, and, more recently, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Absalom and Achitophel"
- **When Written:** 1681
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1681
- **Literary Period:** English Restoration
- **Genre:** Political Satire, Poetry

- **Setting:** Israel, during the reign of King David
- **Climax:** Absalom decides to usurp David's throne and gives a speech to the people of Israel.
- **Antagonist:** Achitophel
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Famous Company. In 1658, Dryden walked in Oliver Cromwell's funeral procession with poets John Milton and Andrew Marvell, which inspired Dryden's poem "Heroic Stanzas" (1659).

The Court of Public Opinion. Dryden wrote a satirical poem about Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1st Earl of Shaftesbury—the Englishman who is allegorized by Dryden's Achitophel in "Absalom and Achitophel"—in 1682. Dryden titled the poem "The Medall" after the medal that was struck to celebrate Shaftesbury's acquittal for high treason after the Exclusion Crisis.

PLOT SUMMARY

In holy times, before religion made polygamy a sin, one man was not confined to one woman. Law did not forbid a man from taking both a mistress and a wife, and Israel's monarch, David, spread his royal seed across the land. Michal is his queen, but several women have "godlike David's" sons. Theses sons, however, are not of royal birth and thus cannot legally ascend the throne. Of all David's illegitimate sons, Absalom is the most loved and admired, by both the Jews and his father. Absalom is handsome and full of grace, and he has proven himself a hero fighting in foreign wars. David is filled with "secret joy" as he watches Absalom grow into a respected man, and in his son, David sees his own "youthful image." David's reign is peaceful and quiet, but the Jews, "a headstrong, moody, murmuring race," begin to desire more liberty. It is not long before the Jews revive the Good Old Cause to "raise up commonwealths and ruin kings."

The Jebusites, who are native to Israel, begin to lose their rights. Their taxes are increased, their land is seized, and their gods and religion are discredited. Their priests are incensed, and soon the plot, the "nation's curse," begins to circulate. The Jebusites, in a clandestine plan, infiltrate all areas of Israel, including the courts and brothels, looking for converts. The plot ultimately fails because it is lacking "common sense," but it also has a "deep and dangerous consequence." The Jebusite plot makes major waves within the government, and the people begin to rise up and rebel against David. Some even oppose David from within the government, and the most influential of these men is "false Achitophel." Achitophel is smart and accomplished, ambitious of power, and has flexible morals. He wants to either completely take over the government or destroy it, and he pretends to befriend David to accomplish just that. Absalom stokes Israel's discontent and tells everyone that David is a Jebusite. The Jews have a history of announcing a new king every 20 years or so, and Achitophel decides it is time to do just that. He knows that he can never be king, but if he must have one, he wants it to be Absalom.

Achitophel begins by publicly hailing Absalom's birth as royal. He claims Absalom will be the Jews' "savior," and that he is the answer to their prayers. Absalom's popularity soars, and even babies learn to say his name. Achitophel flatters Absalom with compliments of his superior virtue and reminds him that David, too, had to answer a call to the throne when he was in exile in Gath. The people are restless and crying for a new king, and Achitophel is sure if Absalom joins their cries with his royal blood, the people will choose him as their king. Absalom is flattered by Achitophel's words, but David's right to the crown is "unquestioned." David is a good king, Absalom says, he is kind and merciful, and he rarely draws blood. Absalom is certain that if the people are turning against David, he should not fan the flames of dissention. Besides, David gives Absalom everything, except his crown, and he has already told Absalom that he would give it to him if he could. The crown is, however, "justly destined for a worthier head."

After David, the crown moves down a "collateral line" to David's brother, who, regardless of his "vulgar spite," has a legitimate claim to the throne. Still, Absalom does wish he had been born into royalty, so he could rightfully assert his own claim to the crown. But to desire power that rightfully belongs to another, Absalom says, is a "godlike sin." Achitophel can see that Absalom is not yet convinced, so he steps up his game. He tells the young prince that God has made him virtuous for a reason—because he is meant to be king. David is "weak," Achitophel says, and now is the perfect time to challenge his power. Achitophel plans to wait until David has foolishly given the last of his money to the people, and then he will incite more public discord or bury David with expensive foreign wars. Achitophel admits that he despises David's brother, and most of the Jews hate him, too. The people have a right to choose their own king, Achitophel says, and they do not want David's brother. The time to claim the crown is now, if they wait until after David's brother is on the throne, they might not be able to ensure that Absalom is king.

To realize his plan, Achitophel joins the various "malcontents" of Israel to one final end—to strip David of his power and give it to Absalom. Many men assist Achitophel in his quest, including Zimri, Balaam, and Caleb, but none are as powerful as Shimei. Shimei robs and cheats the Jews every chance he gets, so they decide to make him their magistrate. Under his tenure as magistrate, treason is legal and he stacks juries with "dissenting Jews" to guarantee that the king's enemies are free and his supporters are imprisoned. Worse yet is Corah, who

engineered the plot. He is a priest, and his memory is impeccable. Thus, the people fail to see his deceit. Surrounded by such men, Absalom addresses the people. He claims he is outraged by their troubles, and he wishes he could suffer on their behalf. Absalom tells the people that he loves his father, but their liberty is at stake. Then he wipes a tear from his eye and tells the people his tears are all he has to give. As the people raise their arms to Absalom in praise, he departs with Achitophel and his men in a royal procession, visiting the people of Israel. Everywhere they go, Absalom is received with love and admiration, and Achitophel is easily able to identify any possible enemies to their cause.

"O foolish Israel!" the speaker of the poem cries. Absalom's procession is a charade, and is merely "war in masquerade." No one is safe if kings can be "dissolved by might." Plus, the speaker says, people are often wrong and a "faultless king" could be ruined. No sensible man would disrupt the government and dethrone their king, which will surely make their grievances worse. Despite this public opposition, however, there are still loyal men who stand by David, including Barzillani, who was in exile with David, as well as Zadock and Sagan of Jerusalem. Perhaps most loyal is Amiel, a government official who tirelessly subdues David's opposition from inside the ranks. These loyal men inform David of Absalom's ambition and Achitophel's deceit, and finally, having grown impatient, David addresses the people of Israel.

David tells the people that he has allowed his role as a father to cloud his judgement as a king, but he will now show them that he is "not good by force." Absalom's attempt to "shake" up the kingdom and seize the crown is not a threat to David, and if Absalom wants to continue his efforts, he must be prepared to "fall." David is the king, he says, and God will not allow such treason to come to pass. David is not afraid to draw his sword if he must, and he reminds the Jews to "beware the fury of a patient man." If the Jews want a fight, David is ready, and while they are "breathless" and exhausted, he will strike them down. As David speaks, thunder rocks the sky, and every Jew knows their rightful king.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Absalom – David's illegitimate son and the protagonist of "Absalom and Achitophel." David does not have any legitimate heirs to the throne, but Absalom is his favorite child. Absalom is handsome and ambitious, and he has made himself a hero at war. The people of Israel love Absalom almost as much as David does, and Achitophel believes that the Jews would accept Absalom as their king. Achitophel begins to encourage Absalom and herald his birth and blood as royal, and he tries to convince Absalom to rebel against David. Absalom, however, is not a malicious man, and he doesn't initially believe he has a right to the crown, but he is eventually worn down by Achitophel's flattery and his own growing desire for more power. Absalom agrees to rebel against David, and as he travels Israel in a procession with Achitophel, Absalom conforms to Achitophel's deceitful ways. Absalom and Achitophel mistake David's mercy and good nature for weakness, but David soon loses patience with both Absalom and Achitophel. David asserts his power as king before the people of Israel and effectively shuts down Absalom's rebellion, but Dryden never does say what becomes of Absalom. Absalom metaphorically represents Charles II's illegitimate son James Scott, the 1st Duke of Monmouth, who rebelled against Charles and the throne in Dryden's time. Through the character of Absalom, Dryden ultimately argues that Charles and his brother James both have a divine right to the crown that is not extended to Monmouth. Dryden's depiction of Absalom implies that Dryden does not think Monmouth a wholly terrible person, but someone who is merely tempted and blinded by power; however, Dryden also suggests that Monmouth's common birth automatically excludes him from ascending the throne. Dryden argues through Absalom that Monmouth's play to power, specifically his attempt to seize a position of power that rightfully belongs to another, is a sin against God. Dryden doesn't entirely denounce Absalom's ambition (he even celebrates his exploits at war), but he does argue that usurping the throne is completely unethical.

Achitophel – A deceitful counselor to King David and the antagonist of "Absalom and Achitophel." Of all the men who oppose David within the government, Achitophel is the most influential. He is smart, ambitious, and morally flexible. He pretends to be David's friend, but in actuality, he either wants to rule Israel or completely destroy it. Achitophel stokes the "malcontents" of the Jews and incites anti-Jebusite hysteria in an attempt to ruin David, and then he encourages David's son Absalom to rebel against him. Achitophel hates David's brother, the heir presumptive, and he wants to make sure that he never ascends the throne. Achitophel begins his plan to ruin David by claiming David is a Jebusite, and while he knows that his argument is "weak," he also knows the Jews fear the Jebusites, and his approach proves very effective. As Achitophel works on Absalom, Achitophel's trusted men wreak havoc with the Sanhedrin and try to bring David down from inside the government. Achitophel finally convinces Absalom to rebel, and they embark on a procession through Israel to further ingratiate Absalom with the people and identify enemies to their cause. However, Achitophel has mistaken David's mercy and mild temper for signs of weakness, and when David finally loses his patience, Achitophel is reminded of David's divine power. Dryden's Achitophel represents Anthony Ashley Cooper, the 1st Earl of Shaftesbury, a Member of Parliament during Dryden's time and the main supporter of the Exclusion Bill. Shaftesbury was the founder of the Whig party,

which sought to exclude Charles II's brother James from the throne, and he was a major opponent of Charles throughout his reign. What comes of Achitophel is never revealed in Dryden's poem, but historically speaking, Shaftesbury was tried for treason after encouraging Charles's son the Duke of Monmouth, to rebel against the crown, but he was later acquitted. Through Achitophel, Dryden suggests that Charles and James both have just claims to the throne and is not for Shaftesbury, Monmouth, or Parliament to infringe on that power.

David – The third king of Israel. David is a merciful and kind king who does not have a male heir to inherit the throne. As such, the crown will ascend down a "collateral line" after David's death to his brother. As he has many mistresses, David also has several illegitimate sons, but he loves Absalom the most, and the people of Israel likewise love Absalom and herald him as a national hero. David gives Absalom everything he wants, and he would give him the crown, too, if he could. Over time, however, David's dishonest counselor, Achitophel, begins to stir up resentment for David and encourages Absalom to rise up against his father to ensure that David's brother will not ascend the throne. Both Absalom and Achitophel confuse David's mild nature for weakness, and after David runs out of patience, he is forced to exert his God-given power over the people of Israel and remind Absalom, Achitophel, and the people that he can strike them all down if he chooses. As David speaks to the Jews, a massive crack of thunder is heard through the land, and all of Israel knows David is their rightful king. Dryden's David is an allegory for King Charles II of England, and like David, Dryden argues that Charles has a divine right to the throne, which Charles's son, the Duke of Monmouth tried to usurp in Dryden's time. Dryden was an ardent supporter of the monarchy and Charles II, and his portrayal of David in "Absalom and Achitophel" reflects this support, but he does not depict David as perfect. On the contrary, Dryden is critical of Charles's leniency and even pokes fun at his rumored promiscuity, but Dryden nevertheless implies that Charles has been chosen by God to be the king of England, and that right cannot be appropriated by Parliament or the people.

Saul – The first king of Israel. According to Dryden, God was the first king of Israel, but the Jews, who are "moody" and frequently unhappy with their king, oust God and make Saul their king. In the Bible, Saul favors David over his son Ishbosheth, and David is forced to go into exile. After Saul dies and Ishbosheth is made king, the Jews are again unhappy with their king and choose David. Saul represents Oliver Cromwell, who ruled the Commonwealth of England after Charles I was executed. Like Ishbosheth taking over from Saul and then being replaced by David, Cromwell's son reigned for a while after Cromwell's death before Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660. Through Saul and his association to Cromwell, Dryden implies that the English are never quite happy with their king and will find any reason to denounce one and appoint another.

David's Brother – The heir presumptive of Israel. David's brother never actually makes it into the poem, but Achitophel and Absalom refer to him multiple times. The crown will go to David's brother after David dies, and Achitophel does not want David's brother to ascend the throne and hopes to place Absalom there instead. Achitophel hates David's brother, and Absalom claims that David's brother is "oppressed with vulgar spite." David's brother represents James II, the brother of King Charles II and the next heir to the throne of England. James was a Roman Catholic, and the Exclusion Bill before Parliament in Dryden's time sought to exclude James from the throne. In "Absalom and Achitophel," Dryden implies that David's brother has a divine right to the throne, that he was bestowed the right to rule by God, and Dryden likewise implies that James II has a right to rule over England as well.

Corah – The most important of Achitophel's men. Corah is a priest, although he lies about his rabbinical degree, and he hatches the plot that helps Achitophel discredit David's brother and ingratiate Absalom to the people of Israel. Corah's memory is impeccable, and his account of the plot never once changes, which is why the Jews believe his fictitious plot. In the Bible, Corah leads a rebellion against Moses, and in Dryden's poem he represents Titus Oates, the Englishman who engineered the Popish Plot. Like Corah, Oates was a Puritan priest with a dubious rabbinical degree, and members of Parliament put stock into his unbelievable conspiracy because of his perfect memory and ability to tell and retell the plot without discrepancies.

Shimei – The most powerful of Achitophel's men. Shimei is a dishonest crook who steals and cheats the Jews every chance he gets, but the Jews appoint him as their magistrate anyway. Shimei stacks juries to punish David's supporters and set his enemies free, and during his tenure as magistrate, treason is not a crime. Shimei is one of David's tormentors in the Bible, and in Dryden's poem he represents Slingsby Bethel, the sheriff of London and a member of Parliament during Dryden's time who also supported the Exclusion Bill.

Zimri – One of Achitophel's men whom Dryden describes as a "buffoon" who has tried several professions. In the Bible, Zimri is king of Israel for seven days, but he is no real threat to David or the throne in "Absalom and Achitophel." Zimri likely represents George Villiers, the 2nd Duke of Buckingham, an English statesman and poet who had disgraced himself in war, organized an unsuccessful plot against the government, and was accused of treason. He played an active role within the Popish Plot.

The Pharaoh – The leader of Egypt and David's ally. Like many of the Jews, however, the Pharaoh only pretends to be friendly with David but is really just looking for ways to exploit him and the Jews. In Dryden's poem, the Pharaoh represents Louis XIV of France. Louis XIV was Catholic, as was most of France, and

the Protestants of England saw Charles II's relationship with Louis XIV as more proof that Charles was really a Catholic like his brother James and was going to force to the Protestants to conform to the Catholic religion.

Ishbosheth – Saul's son and the king of Israel briefly before David's reign. Dryden mentions Ishbosheth's short reign before David comes out of exile, but the finicky Jews don't want Ishbosheth as their king, so they push for David. Ishbosheth represents Oliver Cromwell's son Richard, who ruled England for a short time between Cromwell's death and the restoration of Charles II to the throne.

Jonas – One of Achitophel's more powerful men who has the ability to manipulate laws. Jonas is a prophet in the Bible, but in Dryden's poem he represents Sir William Jones, a member of Parliament who prosecuted many of the Catholics falsely accused in the Popish Plot and also supported the Exclusion Bill.

Barzillai – David's oldest and most trusted friend. Barzillai was with David when David was in exile after the death of Saul. He likely represents James Butler, 1st Duke of Ormond, who was likewise in exile with Charles II after the execution of Charles I. Ormond returned to England with Charles after the Restoration and was his close friend and ally.

Barzillai's Eldest Son – The son of one of David's trusted men, who has died and is forever mourned by the speaker of "Absalom and Achitophel." Barzillai's eldest son likely represents Thomas Butler, Earl of Ossory. Butler was the son of the 1st Duke of Ormond, who is represented in Dryden's Barzillai. The Earl of Ossory died in 1680, and Dryden dedicated his book of poems called *Fables* to him.

Jotham – One of David's trusted men. According to the Bible, Jotham is the king of Judah and the grandson of Zadock, but in Dryden's poem he represents George Savile, the nephew of the 1st Earl of Shaftesbury, the man allegorized in the character Achitophel. Savile was a stanch supporter of Charles II, and he is credited with being instrumental in defeating the Exclusion Bill in Parliament.

Amiel – One of King David's trusted and loyal men. Amiel is an important member of the Sanhedrin and helps to quell the uprising against David within the government. There are several Amiels in the Bible, so it is unclear which one Dryden is referring to here, but Amiel is thought to represent Edward Seymour, the speaker of the House of Commons in Parliament during Dryden's time and a famous supporter of King Charles II and an opponent of the Exclusion Bill.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Balaam – One of Achitophel's men. Balaam is a prophet in the Bible, and in "Absalom and Achitophel" he represents Theophilus Hastings, a Member of Parliament and proponent of the Exclusion Bill.

Caleb – One of Achitophel's men. Caleb is a spy in the Bible, and in Dryden's poem he represents Arthur Capel, Earl of Essex, a prominent advocate of the Exclusion Bill.

Nadab – One of Achitophel's men. In the Bible, Nadab disobeys God and is consumed by fire. In "Absalom and Achitophel," he represents William, Lord Howard Esrick, a Puritan preacher who supported the Exclusion Bill.

Zadock – One of David's trusted men. According to the Bible, Zadock is the High Priest of Israel, and in Dryden's poem he represents William Sancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury, a supporter of Charles II.

Sagan of Jerusalem – One of David's loyal men. In the Book of Samuel, Sagan of Jerusalem is a priest, but in "Absalom and Achitophel" he represents Henry Compton, Bishop of London and supporter of Charles II.

Adriel – Another of David's trusted men. In the Bible, Adriel is a nobleman in Israel and another of Barzillai's sons. In "Absalom and Achitophel," Adriel most likely represents John Sheffield, 3rd Earl of Mulgrave, who opposed Monmouth's succession to the crown and supported James II.

Hushai – One of David's loyal supporters. In the Bible, Hushai is David's friend who agrees to spy on Absalom during his rebellion. Here, Hushai represents Lawrence Hyde, Earl of Rochester, who fought against the Exclusion Bill in Parliament.

Amnon – Absalom's half-brother whom Absalom murders after he rapes Absalom's sister. David forgives Absalom for the murder of Amnon, which is proof of David's, thus Charles II's, mercy and forgiving nature.

Michal / David's Wife – The Queen of Israel. Michal is also the daughter of Saul, and she and David have no children. She represents Charles II's wife, Catherine of Braganza; like David and Michal, Charles and Catherine did not have children.

Annabel – Absalom's wife. She represents the Duke of Monmouth's wife, Anne, Countess of Buccleuch.

TERMS

Abbethdin – An officer of the high court in Israel. **Achitophel** is a member of the Abbethdin in "Absalom and Achitophel."

Egypt – Egypt is a metaphor for France in Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel." Like many members of the Sanhedrin, the **Pharaoh** of Egypt pretends to be **David**'s friend, but Egypt is really exploiting Israel through dishonest trade practices.

The Exclusion Crisis / The Exclusion Bill – A political crisis that began in England in 1679. The Exclusion Crisis was prompted by the mass anti-Catholic hysteria of the Popish Plot and involved three bills which sought to exclude Roman Catholics from royal succession. Charles II's brother and heir presumptive, James, was a Roman Catholic, and the Exclusion

Bill was a serious threat to his reign. The Exclusion Bill was never passed, and the crisis officially ended in 1681, but Catholics were ultimately banned from the throne in England in 1701. Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel" allegorizes the Exclusion Crisis through the biblical story of **David** and his son **Absalom**, who tries to discredit **David's brother** and eliminate him from royal succession. Dryden implies that the Exclusion Crisis was engineered and led by anti-Catholic extremists who attempted to exclude James II from the throne through deceptive and corrupt means, and his poem serves to expose such dishonest practices to the people of England.

The Good Old Cause – A reference to the Puritan Rebellions of the English Civil War (1642–1651). The English Civil War pitted King Charles I, who was supported by the Catholics, against Parliament, which was supported by the Puritans, a form of Protestantism. The war was a victory for Parliament; Charles I was executed and the Commonwealth of England was created. In "Absalom and Achitophel," Dryden refers to the uprising of the Jews in Israel to a revival of "the Good Old Cause" that is brought back to "raise commonwealths and ruin kings."

Israel – The biblical kingdom ruled by **David** in "Absalom and Achitophel," which serves as an allegory for Dryden's contemporary England.

The Jebusites – The native inhabitants of Jerusalem in Israel. In Dryden's poem, the Jebusites begin to lose all their rights; their taxes are raised, their land is seized, and their religion is discredited. The Jebusites are outnumbered by the Jews in Israel 10 to 1, and they are forced to live under **David**'s rule. There is widespread prejudice against the Jebusites in "Absalom and Achitophel," and **Achitophel** manages to turn the people against **David's brother** by claiming he is a Jebusite. The Jebusites are a metaphor for Roman Catholics during Dryden's own time, who were outnumbered by Protestants 10 to 1 and suffered similar discrimination in England.

The Jews – The inhabitants of Israel in "Absalom and Achitophel." In Dryden's poem, the Jews are a willful and temperamental bunch who are easily corrupted. They desire liberty beyond that which is already given to them by their generous king, **David**, and they easy fall for the deception of **Achitophel**'s plot to discredit **David's brother** and make David's illegitimate son **Absalom**, the new king. The Jews are a metaphor for the English during Dryden's contemporary time, who also sought additional liberties and attempted to exclude Charles II's brother, James, from royal succession in favor of Charles's son, the 1st Duke of Monmouth.

The Popish Plot – A conspiracy engineered by Titus Oates between 1678 and 1681 in England, in which he maintained that a Catholic conspiracy to assassinate King Charles II was underway. The Popish Plot was a farce, and no evidence was ever found to support it, but it resulted in the execution of 22 innocent people and led directly to the Exclusion Crisis. Dryden allegorizes the Popish Plot in "Absalom and Achitophel" as the "plot," advanced by **Achitophel** and created by **Corah**, to discredit **David** and his **brother** and place **Absalom** on the throne. Through his poem, Dryden implies that the Popish Plot lacked "common sense," and he implores the people of England to see it for what it is: a sham concocted to drum up anti-Catholic sentiment and unfairly keep James II from ascending the throne.

Sanhedrin – The Jewish high council in Israel during biblical times. In Dryden's poem, the Sanhedrin represent the English Parliament. Many members of the Sanhedrin turn against **David** in "Absalom and Achitophel," just as the Whig party opposed the monarchy in Dryden's own time.

Tory / Anti-Bromingham – The political party formed in England during Dryden's time to oppose the Whigs and the Exclusion Bill. In the "To the Reader" section, the poet refers to Tories as "anti-Brominghams," which means those who are anti-Whig. It was a nickname that became popular for those who opposed the Exclusion Bill.

Tyrus – An ancient city located in present-day Lebanon. Tyrus threatens the Jews' trade in "Absalom and Achitophel," and the city metaphorically represents Holland in Dryden's poem.

Whig – The political party founded by Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1st Earl of Shaftesbury (the real-life inspiration for Dryden's **Achitophel**), during the Exclusion Crisis, which sought to abolish absolute monarchy and institute constitutional monarchism in England.

THEMES

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POLITICS, ALLEGORY, AND SATIRE

On the surface, John Dryden's poem "Absalom and Achitophel" is a rehashing of the story of David, the third king of Israel, and his illegitimate son Absalom, who rebels against his father and tries to usurp his throne. However, this biblical story is merely an allegory, a form of extended metaphor, for the political events that unfolded in Dryden's time. In 1678, an alleged Catholic conspiracy to assassinate King Charles II, known as the Popish Plot, swept across England, creating mass anti-Catholic hysteria and prompting the Exclusion Crisis of 1679. The Exclusion Crisis lasted until 1681 and consisted of three Parliamentary bills which attempted to exclude James, King Charles's brother, from royal succession because he was a Roman Catholic rather

than a Protestant. Dryden's poem is a thinly veiled satirical roast of the political drama that pervaded English society in the late 1670s and early 1680s, and no one is spared his wit. According to Dryden, "the true end of satire is the amendment of vices by correction," and "Absalom and Achitophel" is an attempt to that end. Through the use of satire and allegory in "Absalom and Achitophel," Dryden ultimately argues that the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis were devious ploys to divert the rightful order of succession and prevent James II from ascending the throne.

Through the deceit of Achitophel, a politician who sows dissention among the Jews, Dryden allegorizes the Popish Plot and implies the fabricated plot is merely an attempt to breed strife between David and the government, or, figuratively, between Parliament and Charles II of England. In Israel, metaphorically England, the "Good Old Cause revive[s] a plot" to "raise up commonwealths and ruin kings." The "Good Old Cause" is a reference to the Puritan Rebellions of the English Civil War (1642–1651), which pitted King Charles I, who was supported by the Catholics, against Parliament, which was supported by the Puritans, a form of Protestantism. The war was a victory for Parliament; Charles I was executed and the Commonwealth of England was created. The monarchy was restored in 1660, and Charles II ascended the throne. With this reference, Dryden implies that the Popish Plot is little more than a revival of the Good Old Cause and an attempt to dethrone a king. In the poem, rumor begins to spread that King David's life is "Endangered by a brother and wife. / Thus in a pageant show, a plot is made, / And peace itself is war in masquerade." Titus Oates, a priest of the Church of England and the mastermind of the Popish Plot, accused Charles's brother James and Charles's wife, Queen Catherine, of involvement in the plot against Charles. Dryden suggests that Oates's claims are nonsense—the plot is a "pageant show," a charade—and such claims amount to a "war in masquerade," as the desired outcome, to remove a man who is destined to be king out of royal succession, is similar to that of the English Civil War. Ultimately, the plot fails "for want of common sense," but it has a "deep and dangerous consequence." The Popish Plot, Dryden implies, was destined to fail because it completely lacked wisdom. However, the paranoia and anti-Catholic sentiments the plot churned up led directly to the Exclusion Crisis, which again pitted Parliament against the king. Members of Parliament pushed for James to be removed from royal succession, and Charles adamantly supported his brother.

In the poem, Dryden discusses many of the men who support Achitophel and his plan to strip David of his power. In this way, Dryden also satirizes the politicians who supported the Exclusion Bill, portraying them as despicable men "who think too little and who talk too much." Thus, Dryden implies that their proposed law—to keep Roman Catholics from the throne—is likewise foolish and dangerous. Achitophel, who encourages Absalom to rebel against his father, is a contemptable man who resolves "to ruin or to rule the state." Achitophel is a representation of Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1st Earl of Shaftesbury, a Member of Parliament and founder of the Whig party, who opposed absolute monarchy in favor of a more democratic approach. Cooper was a major proponent of the Exclusion Bill, and Dryden implies Cooper intended to use the bill to either take the government over, or completely take it down. Achitophel has several supporters, "whom kings no titles gave, and God no grace," including the "well-hung Balaam and cold Caleb free." Balaam and Caleb represent Theophilus Hastings and Arthur Capel respectively, both politicians and members of the Whig party who supported the Exclusion Bill. Dryden therefore implies these men are low-level politicians who have little sense and no influence. While Balaam and Caleb may have little sense, "not bull-faced Jonas," Dryden says, "who could statutes draw / To mean rebellion and make treason law." Jonas represents Sir William Jones, a Member of Parliament who supported the Exclusion Bill. As Attorney General, Jones prosecuted several Catholics who were falsely accused and executed during the Popish Plot. In this way, Dryden implies that Jones, especially teamed with Cooper, can do real and lasting damage to the country and to the monarchy.

Achitophel and his supporters begin to stoke "the malcontents of all the Israelites" and sway public opinion, and the Sanhedrins, the Jewish high council, becomes "infected with this public lunacy" as well. The Sanhedrins, of course, are a metaphor for the English Parliament, and the "public lunacy" is the Exclusion Crisis. Through his satirical poem, Dryden had hoped the people of England and Parliament would see the Popish Plot and Exclusion Crisis for what they really were—plots devised to keep James II, a Roman Catholic, out of royal succession.

GOD, RELIGION, AND THE DIVINE RIGHT OF KINGS

At the center of John Dryden's poem "Absalom and Achitophel" is God and religion. The poem is a satirical critique of contemporary politics, but Dryden couches his argument in a biblical story from the Book of Samuel. Instead of the happenings of 17th century England, "Absalom and Achitophel" focuses on David, the third king of Israel, and his illegitimate son Absalom, who, under the direction and influence of Achitophel, attempts to ascend the throne despite his common birth. Nearly all of the characters in Dryden's poem are biblical in origin; however, each of them represents a contemporary figure. Religion is also reflected through multiple references to both Catholicism and Protestantism, and Dryden indeed comments on the anti-Catholic hysteria that consumed England, an overwhelmingly Protestant country, during the 1600s. Much of Dryden's audience, both Catholics and Protestants alike, were highly religious and very familiar with

the biblical story represented in "Absalom and Achitophel," but this isn't the only reason Dryden chose to situate his argument within a religious framework. Through his rehashing of the biblical story of King David and Absalom, Dryden effectively argues that King Charles II, and his successor—his brother and collateral heir to the throne, James—both have a divine right to occupy the throne, bestowed upon them by God, and that right is not to be infringed upon by the people or Parliament.

In keeping with the biblical story, Dryden's David is anointed—a sacred ritual that indicates divine influence and presence by pouring consecrated oil over the head—as the king of Israel after the death of Saul, the first king of Israel. In his poem, Dryden uses David to represent King Charles II of England, suggesting that Charles also has divine influence and presence and is thus worthy of kingship. As Dryden first introduces David, he claims "Israel's monarch" is "godlike" and "after heaven's own heart." Not only does Dryden compare David to God, he claims that they are very much the same. David is "after heaven's," or God's, "own heart," which is to say that David and God are kindred spirits and of the same mind. By extension, Dryden infers that the same applies to Charles, and like David, he, too, is "godlike" and after God's "own heart." After the death of Saul, his son Ishbosheth ruled Israel while David was in exile. Had "fortune" not "called" David back, Dryden writes, "At Gath an exile he might still remain, / A heaven's anointing oil had been in vain." Dryden draws a parallel between David's exile and Charles II's own exile after the execution of his father, Charles I, following the English Civil War. The monarchy was abolished for over 10 years before Charles II finally took the throne in 1660, and, Dryden thus implies, had Charles remained in Brussels in exile, "heaven's anointing oil"—meaning God's divine influence and presence—would have been wasted. Dryden's representation of Charles II as King David implies that Charles has a divine right to be king just as David does. As the king, Charles is influenced by God himself, and this divine role cannot be limited or removed by earthly means.

As Achitophel encourages Absalom to usurp his father, Absalom is initially hesitant to agree. Per "heaven's decree," Absalom says, he has "no pretence to royalty." In this way, Dryden argues that James Scott, 1st Duke of Monmouth, Charles's own illegitimate son who also tried to usurp the throne, has no claim to the crown either. Absalom asks Achitophel what right he has to "take up arms for public liberty," when his "father governs with unquestioned right." As he is of common birth, Absalom doesn't think he has the right to lead the people because David was given that right by God. Thus, Dryden implies that Charles, too, has been given the same right, not the Duke of Monmouth. Absalom even tells Achitophel that David has told him he would make him king if he could, but the crown, the King said with a "sigh," "Is justly destined for a worthier head." Absalom can't be king, according to David, because God has already chosen someone else.

Dryden argues the same of the Duke of Monmouth; Monmouth cannot be the king because the divine right belongs to another. When the time comes for David to "rest" "from his toils," Absalom says, the "lawful issue" of the throne will ascend down a "collateral line" that ends with David's brother, who, "though oppressed with vulgar spite," is "dauntless and secure of native right." In other words, the "lawful issue" of the English throne, in the absence of Charles, ascends down an adjacent line to James, who, despite his Catholicism, or "vulgar spite," has still been chosen by God and is determined to claim his "native right."

At the end of the poem, David publicly addresses Israel about Absalom's ambition for the crown. "Had God ordained his fate for empire born," David says, "He would have given his soul another turn." Plainly put, if God had wanted Absalom to be king, he would have made him king. Ultimately, the rebellion of Absalom is quelled, and peace returns to Israel. "Once more the godlike David was restored," Dryden concludes, "And willing nations knew their lawful lord." Dryden suggests that the same argument applies to the Duke of Monmouth and James. Charles is the "lawful lord" until he dies, and then James is rightfully king by order of God. Like Absalom, if God had intended Monmouth to be king, he would have made him one.

POWER AND AMBITION

Power and ambition drive the plot of John Dryden's poem "Absalom and Achitophel." King David of Israel has all the power in theory, but in practice, he has little ambition. According to Achitophel, the King's deceitful counselor, David is lacking "manly force," and he gives in too easily to the people. The King is "mild" and hesitant to draw blood, and Achitophel, in his own ambition for increasing power, sees David as weak. "But when should people strive their bonds to break," Achitophel says to David's son Absalom, "If not when kings are negligent or weak?" The Jews of Israel "well know their pow'r," Achitophel maintains, and it is the perfect time to assert that power and overthrow David's rule. Absalom, too, is ambitious and gains power through war, and, after Achitophel's influence, Absalom has ambition to ascend his father's throne. With the portrayal of power and ambition in "Absalom and Achitophel," Dryden ultimately argues that while some ambition of power is good and even admirable, attempting to take power that rightfully belongs to the King is a deadly sin.

David's mild nature and his willingness to give the people what they want produces men who are greedy for more and more power, like Achitophel. Dryden describes Achitophel as wise and "bold," and notes that he is "restless" and "unfixed" in his current office and ethics. "In power," Achitophel is "unpleased," and "impatient of disgrace." Dryden implies that Achitophel is accomplished and has some power in government, but he wants more, and since he thinks David is a "disgrace," he tries to

obtain more power through unscrupulous means. Of Achitophel, Dryden writes: "In friendship false, implacable in hate, / Resolved to ruin or to rule the state." Achitophel's ambition for power is so strong, he only pretends to respect the King, when in truth he despises David and plans to strip his power by any means necessary. According to Dryden, Achitophel is tired of "lawful fame and lazy happiness" and hates "the golden fruit to gather free," so he gives "the crowd his arm to shake the tree." In other words, Achitophel is no longer interested in the power, or "golden fruit" that is freely available, so he attempts to shake some power loose from higher up the tree. He holds "up the buckler of the people's cause / Against the crown, and skulked behind the laws." Achitophel pushes against the King and advocates for the people, disregarding David's power and amassing his own.

Although Absalom's ambitions of power are reasonable at first, he, too, grows greedy and eventually sets his sights on overstepping the King through dishonest means. When Dryden first introduces Absalom, he notes, "Early in foreign fields he won renown / With kings and states allied to Israel's crown." Initially, Absalom's ambition is appropriate and loyal, and he makes a name for himself fighting in wars. However, despite this power, Absalom begins to desire more; "My soul disclaims the kindred of her earth / And, made for empire, whispers me within: / 'Desire of greatness is a godlike sin.'" Absalom knows the power he desires, that of his father's throne, is not his to have; however, this does not stop him from pursuing it. As Absalom tries to win the favor of the Jews, he employs a brilliant scheme in which he claims he has no power, telling the people that his father has given away all of his power. As he speaks, Absalom wipes a tear from his eye. "'Tis all the aid my present power supplies," he says of his tears. By claiming to be lowly and powerless, Absalom is effectively able to gather more power from the people through their support and love, and they quickly become his devoted followers and forsake David.

King David's waning power, however, is true in appearance only, and he soon grows tired of Achitophel's plotting and Absalom's rebellion. From David's "royal throne, by heav'n inspired, he spoke to the people of Israel "with awful fear." "'Tis time to show I am not good with force," the King says, "Those heaped affronts that haughty subjects bring / Are burdens for a camel, not a king." David's power, David claims, is endowed by God, and thus he cannot be brought down with Absalom and Achitophel's earthly attempts at power. David claims his power is not to be trifled with. "Must I at length the sword of justice draw?" he asks, "To make examples of another kind." Up until now, David's power has been silent and controlled, but he can easily draw his sword and order war. For David, there is power in restraint, but he reminds his subjects that he can just as easily release violence and conflict. David knows that his enemies will one day "fight," and he is prepared. When they are "breathless" and tired, David will "rise upon 'em with redoubled might, / For lawful pow'r is still superior found." David's enemies will expend their power and tire, but David's power cannot be diminished.

As David speaks to the Israelites, thunder rips through the sky. God himself confirms that David's power is absolute, and, Dryden therefore argues, cannot be usurped or threatened by even the most ambitious play to power. As "Absalom and Achitophel" is an allegory for Dryden's own political climate, Dryden thus implies that King Charles II of England's power, while often easy-going and merciful, is absolute as well. Like David, Charles's power is bestowed upon him by God, and it is therefore sinful for Charles's illegitimate son the 1st Duke of Monmouth, or anyone else, to tread on that power.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE CROWN

In "Absalom and Achitophel," the crown is symbolic of David's power as the third king of Israel, but beyond that, it also represents David's divine right, bestowed upon him by God, to reign over the Jews. When Achitophel, David's deceitful counselor, encourages David's son Absalom to seize his father's crown, Absalom initially argues that he has no claim to the crown. After David's death, the crown will move down a "collateral line" to David's brother, who has an equal claim to the power. As Absalom's desire for power grows, he disregards the lawful and divine order of royal succession, and moves to take his father's crown anyway. David is ultimately forced to assert his divine power and possession of the crown in a public speech, and the rebellion of Absalom and Achitophel—and the people's support of their rebellion—is silenced by a roar of thunder, presumably sent by God. With this, the Jews are effectively reminded of David's supreme power and God-given right to the crown.

As "Absalom and Achitophel" is a biblical allegory, the crown also carries another layer of significance. Through the quarrels over David's crown—and, by extension, his God-given right to rule—Dryden attempts to remind his fellow Englishmen of King Charles II's own power and divine right to the crown. As Dryden's poem is an allegory for the political events of his own time, he implies that King Charles and his brother, James, both have an equal and divine right to the crown of England, and that this right does not extend to Charles's illegitimate son, the 1st Duke of Monmouth, who, like Absalom, attempted to seize his father's crown.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Selected Poems* published in 2001.

To the Reader Quotes

"'Tis not my intention to make an apology for my poem: some will think it needs no excuse, and others will receive none. The design, I am sure, is honest; 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, and every man is a knave or an ass to the contrary side. There's a treasury of merits in the fanatic church 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; but the longest chapter in Deuteronomy has not curses enough for an anti-Bromingham.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears before the poem, in the poet's note to the reader. As the poet never identifies him- or herself by name, it's unclear if the poet in "To the Reader" is, in fact, Dryden himself, though the poet does seem to at least be a mouthpiece for Dryden's beliefs. Thus, this passage establishes Dryden as a supporter of Charles II of England. Dryden was often commissioned to write directly for the crown, and here he admits that he "draws his pen for one party," which implies the Royalist party and King Charles. Dryden knows that his poem will anger the Whigs—a political party in England that advocated for Charles's brother James II, a Roman Catholic, to be excluded from royal succession, which implies Dryden supports the Tories, the political party created to oppose the Whigs and the Exclusion Bill.

In claiming that "wit and fool are consequents of Whig and Tory," Dryden implies that all Whigs are foolish and the Tories have no choice but to make a mockery, or write a satirical poem, about how foolish Whigs are. The "fanatic church" is a reference to Puritans, a form of Protestantism, and "the papist" refers to Roman Catholics. Dryden does not choose between the two forms of Christianity, as many of the English did in his time (Dryden was born a Protestant but converted to Catholicism later in life), and here he even claims they both have merit. Thus, Dryden's complaint seems to be with religious fanaticism, like that which seeks to keep James from the throne. Despite his argument that creating division isn't helpful to England, Dryden can't keep silent. To Dryden, an "anti-Bromingham," or Tory, himself, there aren't enough "curses" in the Bible to condemn the Whigs and the Exclusion Bill.

"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 rescindendum*, which I wish not to my very enemies. To conclude all, if the body politic have any analogy to the natural, in my weak judgement, an Act of Oblivion were as necessary in a hot, distempered state as an opiate would be in a raging fever.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

This quote also occurs in the poet's note to the reader, and it is significant because it reflects the intention behind Dryden's satirical poem. Dryden was an ardent supporter of both King Charles II and his brother James II, and he did not agree with Parliament's attempts to exclude James from succession and limit Charles's power. Many of the more politically moderate citizens of England, however, were already falling prey to the anti-Catholic hysteria of the Popish Plot, and they likewise supported the Exclusion Bill. Through satirizing his current political climate, Dryden had hoped to correct the problems he saw within Parliament and society by pointing out to the moderates how utterly ridiculous the Popish Plot and resulting Exclusion Crisis really were.

Here, the poet (who may or may not be Dryden himself) refers to him- or herself as a "physician," and the poem is society's cure for the nonsense pervading it. Dryden's poem may be a bit harsh in satirizing the most foolish offenders, and it may sting the anti-Catholic sentiments of some Puritans, but medicine often tastes bad, and Dryden's poem is no different. If not the poem, or medicine, then English society may need an "*ense rescindendum*," or surgical excision, and Dryden wouldn't wish that on his worst enemy. In this way, the Whigs and the Exclusion Bill are the disease that must be removed from the body politic, and "Absalom and Achitophel" is the "opiate" for England's "raging fever."

Absalom and Achitophel Quotes

The Jews, a headstrong, moody, murmuring 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, 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.
They who, when Saul was dead, without a blow
Made foolish Ishbosheth the crown forgo,
Who banished David did from Hebron bring
And, with a general shout, proclaimed him king.

Related Characters: David, Saul, Ishbosheth

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 115-116

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs in the beginning of "Absalom and Achitophel" when Dryden is describing the Jews in Israel, and it is significant because it sheds light on how David became king and how Dryden views contemporary English citizens. David describes the Jews as a "headstrong" and "moody" bunch who can't be pleased and are easily corrupted. He claims that the Jews frequently appoint new kings and worship new gods, and they are desirous of increasing liberty. Here, Dryden refers to them as "Adam-wits," which implies that like the biblical Adam, the Jews unsatisfied with the freedom God has already given them and will never be satiated. In this way, Dryden implies that the Jews *should* be happy with what they have and stop greedily reaching for more.

This quote also points to Dryden's contemporary England and its citizens who have historically not been happy with their king either. In referencing Saul and his son Ishbosheth, Dryden refers to Oliver Cromwell and his son Richard. After his death, Saul's son Ishbosheth automatically became king of Israel, but the Jews called for David to come out of exile and be their king. In England, Charles I was dethroned and executed, and Oliver Cromwell ruled over the Commonwealth of England. When Cromwell died, his son Richard took over, but, like David, the people called for Charles II to come out of exile and restore the monarchy. Now, however, Charles is again under attack because his successor, James II, is a Roman Catholic rather than a Protestant. Through the depiction of the Jews, Dryden implies that the English are also difficult to please and easily corrupted if it serves their political means, and that they, too, should be happy with the freedom given to them by God.

But when to sin our biased nature leans,
The careful devil is still at hand with means
And providently pimps for ill desires:
The Good Old Cause revived a plot requires.
Plots, true or false, are necessary things
To raise up commonwealths and ruin kings.

Related Characters: Absalom, David, David's Brother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs early in the poem as the poet describes the plot that attempts to raise Absalom to the throne and exclude David's brother from royal succession. This quote directly refers to the political events of Dryden's contemporary England, including the English Civil War and the Popish Plot, which Dryden condemns in his poem. The Good Old Cause is a reference to the Puritan Rebellions during the English Civil War. During the war, the Puritans supported Parliament and opposed King Charles I. Parliament ultimately won, and Charles I was dethroned and executed. In reviving the Good Old Cause, Dryden implies that the Jews, metaphorically the English, again want to raise a Commonwealth as was accomplished after the English Civil War and dethrone Charles II—and, more specifically, exclude his Catholic brother, James II, from succession.

This quote also refers to the Popish Plot, which alleged a Catholic conspiracy to assassinate Charles II. The Popish Plot was complete nonsense, but it spread anti-Catholic hysteria across England and further positioned English Protestants against Catholics and deepened the widespread hate for James II. Dryden, however, implies here that there was *some* truth to the Popish Plot. Likely, there were some Catholics who wished Charles harm, but the idea of an intricate plot to assassinate him that reached

the upper echelons of government is, in Dryden's view, utterly ridiculous, and he implores the people of England to consider the Popish Plot similarly.

> Th' inhabitants of old Jerusalem
> Were Jebusites, the town so called from them,
> 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,
> And, what was harder yet to flesh and blood,
> Their gods disgraced, and burnt like common wood.
> This set the heathen priesthood in a flame,
> For priests of all religions are the same.

Related Characters: David

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116-117

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Dryden describes the Jebusites, the native inhabitants of Jerusalem. Throughout the poem, the Jebusites serve as a metaphor for the Catholics in Dryden's modern England. The Jebusites have a "native right" to the land of Jerusalem and have certainly been there longer than the Jews, but they are still marginalized and discriminated against. As the Jews, or God's "chosen people," grow strong, the Jebusites lose more and more, and David rules with the Jews and their needs in mind, not the Jebusites. As the Jebusites' gods and religion are discredited, this of course sets their priests "in a flame," or deeply angers them, because, as Dryden implies, "all priests of all religions are the same" and deserve equal respect and rights.

Just as the Jebusites are marginalized and discriminated in "Absalom and Achitophel," Dryden implies that the Catholics are likewise treated poorly in contemporary England. Historically, Catholics and Protestants had been warring since the Restoration over a hundred years before, and Protestants seriously outnumbered Catholics in England during Dryden's time. Dryden was born a Protestant, but here he appears more sympathetic toward the Catholics. He speaks of the "native right" of Catholics, as Catholicism was present in England long before Protestantism, and he claims that the "rightful cause," the Protestant cause, "became the wrong." Dryden sides with the Catholics, and he supports the succession of James II to the throne, which is particularly interesting considering Dryden himself converted to Catholicism later in life.

> From hence 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.
> 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.

Related Characters: David, Corah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Dryden is explaining the "plot" that threatens David's quiet reign. With this, Dryden is actually referring to the Popish Plot, a conspiracy in Dryden's own time that caused mass anti-Catholic hysteria across England. Dryden refers to the plot as the "nation's curse," which in England falsely claimed a Catholic conspiracy existed to assassinate King Charles. In Dryden's poem, a man named Corah engineers the plot, suggesting that Corah represents Titus Coates, the mastermind of the Popish Plot in England.

Many members of Parliament bought into Coates's conspiracy because it aligned with their existing anti-Catholic sentiments, and Dryden implies here that those same members of Parliament neglected the oath they made to the country and the crown in order to further their own religious agenda. The English people, too, bought into Coates's conspiracy theory, and Dryden claims they swallowed it "crude and unchewed." "Absalom and Achitophel" is Dryden's attempt to get the English masses to realize their folly in accepting the Popish Plot.

> 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 every hostile humour, which before
> Slept quiet in its channels, bubbles o'er,
> So several factions from this first ferment
> Work up to foam, and threat the government.

Related Characters: David, David's Brother, Corah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Dryden explains how the "plot" fails to bring down David's kingship. This plot refers to the Exclusion Bill, which sought to keep Charles II's brother James II out of royal succession because he was a Roman Catholic. Corah's plot fails in "Absalom and Achitophel," but it leads to more serious problems. It riles up the people of Israel and stokes their individual grievances and struggles, which *does* threaten David's reign, as well as his brother's, in the long run.

As Corah's plot represents the Popish Plot in Dryden's contemporary England, the "deep and dangerous consequence" is thus the Exclusion Crisis and subsequent Exclusion Bill. As the Popish Plot stoked anti-Catholic hysteria, dislike for Charles's brother James grew, and several members of Parliament advanced bills that would exclude James, and all Roman Catholics, from ascending the throne in England. Dryden ultimately argues that both Charles and James have a divine right to the throne, and it is not for Parliament or any other earthly power to deprive them of such right. As the Popish Plot ultimately threatens the crown, Dryden sees it as a "deep and dangerous consequence" that can forever alter the throne and disrupt the very foundation of English society and government.

> In friendship false, implacable in hate,
> Resolved to ruin or to rule the state,
> To compass this the Triple Bond he broke,
> The pillars of the public safety shook,
> And fitted Israel for a foreign yoke.
> Then, seized with fear, yet still affecting fame,
> Usurped a patriot's all-atoning name.

Related Characters: Achitophel, David

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Dryden introduces Achitophel, lending insight into Achitophel's despicable character and his desire to help Absalom ascend the throne. As a member of the Jewish government, Achitophel is expected to act in the nation's best interest, and he further claims to be King David's friend, yet Achitophel deeply detests David and cares little about Israel beyond how it may benefit him. He is jealous of David's power, and if Achitophel himself cannot run the nation, he would rather see it destroyed. He cares nothing about his country or the people, and his desire for power is more important than Israel's safety or future prosperity.

Achitophel represents Anthony Ashley Cooper, the 1st Earl of Shaftesbury, who was a primary supporter of the Exclusion Bill in Parliament during Dryden's own time and pushed for the exclusion of James II, or any other Catholic, from royal succession. The "Triple Bond" was an agreement between England, Holland, and Sweden which protected against French expansion, and here, Achitophel breaks up the Triple Bond and makes Israel vulnerable to a foreign power just because he can. In Dryden's time, a "patriot" was a name for people who opposed Charles II and the ascension of Roman Catholics to the throne, and Dryden implies that Achitophel, and by extension Shaftesbury, is a true "patriot."

> By buzzing emissaries fills the ears
> 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 renews,
> And once in twenty years, their scribes record,
> By natural instinct they change their lord.

Related Characters: Achitophel, David, David's Brother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Dryden explains Achitophel's plan to disrupt the government and ensure that David's brother doesn't ascend the throne, and it is significant because it lends insight into the Exclusion Crisis unfolding in Dryden's contemporary age. Achitophel turns the people against David by fanning the flames of religious fear of Jebusites and other malcontents of the Jews. He claims David is a Jebusite, which Dryden suggests is an "arbitrary," and unimportant, distinction. Achitophel's "argument" that David is a Jebusite is "weak," but since the Jews are afraid of a Jebusite takeover, it fits the current political climate. Plus, Achitophel figures it is time to crown a new king anyway. The Jews are difficult to please and have a history of dethroning kings to replace them with another.

As Achitophel represents Shaftesbury in Dryden's modern time, Dryden accuses Shaftesbury of inciting religious hysteria, too. Shaftesbury famously hated Catholics, and he planted similar rumors that Charles was a Catholic as well in his attempt to keep James II, and any other future Catholic, from ascending the throne. Here, Dryden implies Shaftesbury's attempt to stir up ant-Catholic sentiments was a feeble and despicable attempt to usurp the king's power. What's more, Dryden criticizes the English citizens as well who are so foolishly willing to substitute their rightful king for another. In this way, Dryden implies that the "giddy" English should be happy with their king as God intended and stop trying to manipulate the throne.

> What cannot praise effect in mighty minds
> When flattery soothes and when ambition blinds!
> Desire of power, 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 metal in his frame,
> Unwarily was led from virtue's ways,
> Made drunk with honour, and debauched with praise.

Related Characters: Absalom, Achitophel, David, David's Brother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Achitophel tries to convince Absalom to usurp David's throne. This passage lends insight into Dryden's argument concerning ambition and power, but it also reflects Dryden's opinion that David, and by extension Charles II, has a divine right to the throne. Dryden implies that Absalom is not really a malicious or cruel man who wants to usurp his father's power, he is simply blinded by his ambition for power and Achitophel's encouragement and bad influence. Achitophel's flattery has made Absalom "drunk with honour, and debauched with praise," and it has him thinking that he can seize his father's throne.

Dryden's claim that power from earth is a "vicious weed," but power from "high," or heaven, is a "celestial seed" implies that David's divine power as king, power given to him by God, is a beautiful and virtuous thing. Absalom's earthy power, on the other hand, is a "vicious weed." In this way, Dryden implies that David's power is moral, whereas Absalom's is not, and Dryden further suggests that to take the "celestial" power destined for someone else is a direct affront to God. Dryden was a staunch supporter of Charles II in his own time, and he did not support Charles's illegitimate son Monmouth's attempts to overtake the thrown. Dryden's support of Charles's divine role is reflected in the respect he gives David's role as king of Israel.

> Half loath and half consenting to the ill
> (For royal blood within him struggled still),
> He thus replied, 'And what pretence 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.

Related Characters: Absalom (speaker), Achitophel, David

Related Themes:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Achitophel tries to convince Absalom to rebel against his father, King David, and it reflects Dryden's argument that kings are endowed with divine power from God. Here, Absalom is initially hesitant to usurp his father's power. Absalom is, after all, half-royal and respects the notion of "royal blood," and he believes his father's blood gives him a right to the throne. However, Absalom doesn't have the "pretence" or right to the same claim as David, or David's brother for that matter, because

Absalom's mother is a commoner.

Absalom says that his father rules "with unquestioned right," and David is a good king. Absalom might be able to understand usurping him if David was a bad king who oppressed and abused his people, but David is kind and merciful. Absalom can think of no good reason, other than his selfish desire for power, to overthrow David. In this vein, Dryden implies that Charles II, too, has divine power and the right to reign over England, as does his brother James II, and Charles's own illegitimate son, the Duke of Monmouth, has no right to usurp that throne either.

> 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 blest,
> His lawful issue shall the throne ascend,
> Or the collateral line where that shall end.
> 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.

Related Characters: Absalom (speaker), Achitophel, David, David's Brother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Absalom is not yet convinced that he should rebel against his father. Absalom's hesitance reflects Dryden's central argument that the king's power is endowed by God and further implies that James II is the rightful heir to the English throne after Charles II. Absalom doesn't think that he can rebel against his father because David has made the order of succession perfectly clear. David deeply loves Absalom, and he would give him the crown if the law—or God—allowed it. As David's brother is endowed with divine right just as David is, the crown is thus destined for his "worthy" head, not Absalom's.

This quote also implies that David and his brother have a "collateral," or equal, claim to the crown, and as Dryden's poem is largely allegorical, he implies that James II has the same "collateral" right to the English throne. David's brother does not forfeit his right simply because of his "vulgar spite," and James does not forfeit his because he is Catholic, which is considered "vulgar" by many Protestants. Dryden suggests that James has a "native right" to the throne, which implies that his Catholicism makes him *more* eligible for the throne since Catholicism predates Protestantism. Regardless, Dryden claims that those who are "virtuous" still consider James the heir to the throne, and Dryden thus implies that he is indeed virtuous and supports the succession of James II.

> Why should I then repine at heaven's decree,
> Which gives me no pretence 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 mould.
> Why am I scanted by a niggard birth?
> My soul disclaims the kindred of her earth
> And, made for empire, whispers me within:
> "Desire of greatness is a godlike sin."

Related Characters: Absalom (speaker), Achitophel, David

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 123-124

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Absalom laments his illegitimate birth and wishes he had a lawful claim to the crown. This passage underscores Dryden's central argument that to seize power justly held by another is a sin. Absalom asks Achitophel why he should question the holy law that gives him no claim to his father's crown. As Absalom is David's illegitimate son, he is not technically of royal birth, thus Absalom is not endowed with God's divine power to rule over Israel, and nothing can give him this power. Absalom wishes that fate had made him royal, or too simple to know the difference, but Absalom knows he has no right to this father's crown.

Absalom suspects that David despises the part of Absalom that is of lowly social status, but this is never confirmed. David treats his son exceedingly well and even offers to

forgive Absalom later after he rebels, but he can't give him the crown. In this way, Dryden implies that Charles II can't give the Duke of Monmouth his crown, either. Unlike Monmouth, Absalom seems to understand that usurping David's throne and seizing his power is a deadly sin—Absalom knows God rightfully allotted power to David, and to usurp that power would be a direct action against God. Dryden suggests that Monmouth's desire for Charles II's crown and his insatiable desire for greatness that has not been promised to him is likewise a sin.

> 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 shall keep him poor,
> 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.

Related Characters: Achitophel (speaker), Absalom, David, David's Brother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which occurs as Achitophel explains his plan to Absalom, illustrates how Achitophel intends to overthrow David and ensure David's brother doesn't ascend the throne. Absalom is hesitant to rebel against David, but Achitophel assures Absalom that David is "negligent" and "weak," and that it is the perfect time to strike. Achitophel implies that David's generosity means he is already running of money, and when he does run out, David will have to petition the Sanhedrin for money, which will cost David his political "prerogative." Here, Dryden implies that it will cost David's support of his brother. Thus, it will cost him a "limb" from his political "prerogative" and his family tree.

Furthermore, when David needs help and must ask his friends, they are all Jebusites, which will make him look even worse to the Jews. Achitophel's plan to ruin David represents the Earl of Shaftesbury's plan to ruin King Charles II during Dryden's own time. Like Achitophel, Shaftesbury hoped to taint Charles's reign and keep his brother James II from ascending the throne by stoking anti-Catholic sentiments, and his plan entailed much the same as Achitophel's. Through Achitophel, Dryden implies that Shaftesbury is just as deceitful and treasonous, and he implores the people of England to see him for what he really is: a dishonest man motivated by hate and self-interest.

> 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;
> His long chin proved his wit; his saintlike grace
> A church vermilion, and a Moses' face;
> 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:
> 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.

Related Characters: Achitophel, Corah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Dryden introduces Corah, Achitophel's most important supporter. This passage lends insight into the Popish Plot, which occurred during Dryden's own time and serves as the main inspiration for "Absalom and Achitophel." Corah engineers the plot that helps to discredit David and sow anti-Jebusite hysteria throughout Israel, and because he is a "Levite," or a High Priest, he is given more credit than perhaps he deserves. Corah wears the "church vermilion," the bright scarlet gown of a priest, but he is anything but holy. His plot is full of lies, but because Corah is so respected, no one questions him.

Dryden's Corah is an allegory for Titus Coates, the Englishman who concocted the Popish Plot and sowed increased anti-Catholic sentiment throughout England. Like Corah, Coates's memory was impeccable, and no matter

how many times he recounted the intricate Popish Plot, his story never varied, which lent increased credibility to his unbelievable claims. Coates, too, was a Puritan preacher, although Dryden implies here that Coates's rabbinical degree is dubious. According to the Bible, Corah is a prophet, but in "Absalom and Achitophel" he is somewhat of a false prophet in that he spreads lies and malicious deceit, which Dryden implies is the case with Titus Coates as well.

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.
Thus, in a pageant show, a plot is made,
And peace itself is war in masquerade.
O foolish Israel! never warned by ill,
Still the same bait and circumvented still!

Related Characters: Absalom, Achitophel, David, David's Brother, Michal / David's Wife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Achitophel continues to plant deceitful stories about David and encourages the propagation of Corah's plot. Presumably, Corah has accused David's brother and David's wife of being involved in a sinister plot to assassinate the king. This conspiracy theory and Achitophel's lies are spread across Israel with Absalom's procession, which Dryden implies is "war in masquerade." Absalom and Achitophel want to usurp David and overtake the government, but their procession is disguised as an innocent tour of the land.

The implication that David's brother and wife are involved in the plot to assassinate David is a reference to Titus Oates's claim that James II and Queen Catherine of England were involved in the Popish Plot. Of course, they were *not* in cahoots to kill the king, and Dryden suggests here that the implication is ridiculous, but the English people still believed it, and it added to their dislike of James II. Dryden calls the English people "foolish" for buying into Coates's claims so completely, and he hopes that his poem will help to make his fellow Englishmen see that Coates's Popish Plot was nothing more than an attempt to discredit James II and exclude him from ascending the throne.

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?
Nor is the people's judgement 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.

Related Characters: Absalom, Achitophel, David

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134-135

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Dryden condemns Achitophel's attempts to ruin David, and it underscores the danger involved in usurping a king. As Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel" is a biblical allegory for Dryden's contemporary political climate, this passage effectively serves as a warning for the English to stop their efforts to dethrone Charles. Parliament wants to place Charles's illegitimate son, the Duke of Monmouth, on the throne, thereby excluding James II, a Roman Catholic, from royal succession. Here, Dryden reminds the English of the profound power inherent in the crown, and then he further reminds them that they wish to "dissolve" that power "by might."

According to Dryden, if the king's power can be so easily dissolved, that means that nothing is safe. No one's private property can really be their own if the government can simply dissolve it. No law or act can be considered permanent or absolute if it can be changed on a whim. And no king really has any power if the people and government can take that power away whenever they see fit. Furthermore, people are often wrong, and what if they are indeed wrong now, Dryden asks. To permanently displace the king is thus an unwise thing to do. What's more, David, and therefore Charles II, is a good man who, according to Dryden, has been falsely labeled a tyrant. Dryden begs English citizens to come to their senses and stop their abuse of David, and he hopes that his poem will make them see reason.

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 tampering world is subject to this curse,
To physic their disease into a worse.

Related Characters: Absalom, Achitophel, David

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs near the end of "Absalom and Achitophel," after Dryden introduces the men who seek to ruin David. This passage underscores Dryden's personal belief in the sacredness of the throne and its importance in society. Dryden refers to the monarchy as the "foundation," or the very basis of society, and to disrupt this foundation threatens the fabric of society. Dryden implies that only "rebels" with "base ends," that is those who are up to no good, would even try to disrupt the crown, which suggests that Absalom and Achitophel, and by extension Monmouth and Shaftesbury, are both very foolish.

Absalom and Achitophel, metaphorically Monmouth and Shaftesbury, falsely believe that they can fix the nation by dethroning the king, but Dryden argues usurping the king will actually "ruin" the entire nation. "Tempering," or meddling where one doesn't belong, is a "curse," which will only make their country even more divided than it already is. Charles II is king by God's divine right, and to deny that right is a sin against God himself. Furthermore, Dryden repeatedly refers to diseases and infections throughout the poem, and he refers to himself as a physician with a cure for society's ailment. Here, Dryden again plays like a doctor and prognoses the nation. The disease of Israel, by proxy England, which is rooted in their division, will only worsen if the king's power is usurped.

> 'Tis time to show 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,
> Born to sustain and prop the nation's weight.
> If my young Samson 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!

Related Characters: David (speaker), Absalom, Achitophel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears at the end of "Absalom and Achitophel" as David addresses Israel. This passage is significant because it illustrates David's absolute power, but it also underscores David's mercy and forgiveness. Absalom and Achitophel mistake David's kindness and mercy for weakness, and here David shows them just how powerful he truly is. Absalom and Achitophel force David to exert his power more directly, and this in particular angers him. David finds power in restraint and silence, but Absalom and Achitophel only appreciate clear and overt power—so David gives it to them.

Achitophel and Absalom don't have enough power to bring David down, and he tells them as much here. They can shake the kingdom, but David will hold it up. Here, David refers to Absalom as his "young Samson," a biblical figure who brings down a pagan temple with his God-given strength, but David warns Absalom that he will fall if he continues to shake David's house, and that God is not on Absalom's side. Still, David wants Absalom to repent so that he can forgive him, and in this way Dryden implies that Charles II is likewise merciful and forgiving. Dryden suggests that if Monmouth apologizes to Charles he will be forgiven as well, and Dryden even mentions in the preface that there is plenty of time to make amends. However, according to history, Monmouth never did repent, and after Charles II died, Monmouth made another play for the throne against James II. Monmouth was subsequently charged with treason and executed just months after Charles's death.

> Then let 'em take an unresisted course,
> 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 driven 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 godlike David was restored,
> And willing nations knew their lawful lord.

Related Characters: David (speaker), Absalom, Achitophel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

This is the closing passage of "Absalom and Achitophel," and it underscores David's absolute power. This quote also implies that David's power is given to him by God, and it therefore cannot be taken or diminished by any earthly play to power. Here, David explains how he will quell the rebellion that Achitophel and Absalom have stirred up. First, David will stand back and wait for the rebellion to expend its energy, and when they are "breathless" and exhausted, David will "rise upon 'em with redoubled might" and strike them down. With this, Dryden implies that David's power is superior and God-given, and it will always win out.

The crack of thunder as David gives his final words appears as if it comes directly from God, and it serves as evidence of David's divine and absolute power. Dryden reinforces this by again describing David as "godlike" and Israel's "lawful lord" and therefore implies that God won't allow David to be usurped. As David is a metaphor for Charles II, Dryden implies that Charles's reign is divine and absolute as well, and Dryden further implies that Charles is likewise the "godlike" and "lawful" king of England. Charles has the same power to hold up the house as Monmouth and Shaftesbury shake it, and he has the power to strike their rebellion down as well.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

TO THE READER

The poem begins with the epigraph, "*Si Propiùs stes / Te Capiet Magis.*"

The epigraph, which translates to "Stand closer, it will charm you more," comes from Horace's poem "Ars Poetica," in which Horace forms the following famous analogy: "As is painting, so it poetry: some pieces will strike you more if you stand near, and some, if you are at a greater distance." With his epigraph, Dryden hones in specifically on the value of examining some poems more closely, suggesting that his is one that requires such attention from the reader. As will soon become clear, this is indeed the case—as a biblical allegory and political satire, Dryden's poem has two layers of meaning.

The poet claims that they will not make apologies for the following poem. Undoubtedly, some people will not need an apology; however, those who believe they do will not receive one. The poem has been written on behalf of one party; thus, the poet expects to make enemies of the other. There is much good to be found in both Protestantism and Catholicism, the poet says, but little worth in dividing a nation. Still, there are not enough curses in Deuteronomy for an "anti-Bromingham."

An "anti-Bromingham" is another word for a Tory. The Tory party is a political party formed in England to oppose the Exclusion Bill (which sought to exclude James II from royal succession), and Dryden implies here that he has written directly on behalf of Tories. Although Dryden was a Protestant when he wrote the poem, he converted to Catholicism later in life. His support for Catholicism is seen here and throughout the poem.

If a poem is any good, the poet claims, it will make its own mark on the world. Good poetry pleases even if it is a little painful, and no one can hold a grudge against one who entertains them. It is usually the poet's highest aim to convince the opposition. But, in this case, the poet aims to please those in the middle. Those who are politically moderate and the least troubled are not likely to be corrupt. The poet admits that he or she has been less aggressive in satirizing certain people, and opponents will likely criticize this, but it is just as difficult to flatter as it is to condemn.

Dryden later claims that the Popish Plot was propagated by extremists and was complete nonsense, but the average English citizen bought into it and swallowed it "crude and unchewed." In this passage, Dryden makes clear his hopes that his poem would entertain and inform those who did not have strong anti-Catholic or royalist sentiments, but who were nevertheless being persuaded by radical Protestants.

The poet asks that the reader does not fault them for not including their name on the poem. If the reader does not like the poem, however, that is likely more a reflection of the reader's morals than the writing itself, the poet claims. The poet is not the creator of the story told in the poem and is merely recording history. Had the poet invented the story, they claim, it would have included reconciliation between Absalom and David. But the story is not yet over, and there is plenty of time for wisdom and mercy.

Given the time in which Dryden is writing, along with his reference to the Tories, readers can infer that Absalom and David represent Charles II of England and his own son, the Duke of Monmouth, respectively. Here, Dryden inadvertently encourages them to make amends, though this never ended up happening. Monmouth never gave up his desire for the crown, and after Charles II's death in 1685, Monmouth tried to usurp James II. Monmouth was executed for treason just days later.

The purpose of satire, the poet says, is to correct what is wrong in society. Many will not like what they are about to read, but they mustn't blame the poet. It is best to view the poet as one would view a doctor; their remedies may be unpleasant but are nevertheless needed for recovery. In that respect, this poem is as crucial to the body politic as medication to disease.

Dryden revisits the analogy of his poem as medication for a diseased body politic throughout "Absalom and Achitophel." The Popish Plot and resulting Exclusion Crisis divided England and worsened ant-Catholic sentiments across the nation. Dryden hoped to cure England of this senseless hate and division with his poem.

ABSALOM AND ACHITOPHEL

"In pious times," the poet begins, before religion determined polygamy sinful, one man was not limited to one woman. David, Israel's king, spread his "Maker's image" throughout his kingdom. He is married to Michal, and she serves as Israel's queen, but several women have given birth to "godlike David's" sons. These sons, however, cannot ascend the throne, as their mothers are not of royal blood.

Like King David, King Charles II was notoriously promiscuous and had several mistresses and illegitimate children. Opponents of the monarchy often cited Charles II's sexual history as a reason to condemn him, but here Dryden implies through David's exploits that promiscuity was completely accepted in holy, or "pious," times, and that the modern association between sex and sin is a fabricated product of religious fanaticism. By referring to David as "godlike" and mentioning his "Maker's image," Dryden implies that David, and by extension Charles II, are touched by God and, as divine kings, represent God's image on earth.

Of all David's illegitimate sons, Absalom is the most loved, both by the people and by his father, and David is secretly proud of his famous and very popular son. Absalom has proven himself a hero at war, and he is courageous, handsome, and graceful. Many women love and admire Absalom, but he has chosen Annabel as his wife. Nothing could jeopardize David's love for Absalom, not even the death of Amnon, which was "just revenge for injured fame."

In the Bible, Absalom murders his half-brother Amnon after he rapes Absalom's sister. David forgives Absalom because he considers the murder "just" and Amnon's actions despicable, but with this reference Dryden also implies David's merciful nature.

David rules quietly, but the Jews are a willful and temperamental bunch and are easily corrupted. Despite already being free, the "Adam-wits" of Israel want more liberty, and they will go to great lengths to get it. After the death of Saul, for example, Ishbosheth was king. But it wasn't long before the people brought David back from exile in Hebron and made him their king. Now, some of the Jews consider David a false king, and they look for ways to destroy him. The disgruntled Jews, however, are few and far between, and David's reign is mostly peaceful. Even in this relative peace, the Devil continues to work, and the "Good Old Cause" is brought back "to raise up commonwealths and ruin kings."

The "Good Old Cause" refers to the Puritan Rebellions of the English Civil War. The war ultimately dethroned Charles I (Charles II's father), and he was later executed. Parliament then took over governing England, and through this reference Dryden suggests that Parliament is again trying to overthrow the king. Saul, who was the first king of Israel, represents Oliver Cromwell, who ruled over England as a Commonwealth after Charles I's execution. After Cromwell's own death, his son Richard ruled for a time before Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660. Here, Ishbosheth stands in for Richard. David had been in exile during Ishbosheth's rule (just as Charles II was in exile during Cromwell's reign), but the Jews called him back to be king. As David is not the son of Saul, some Jews consider him a false king and want the freedom to choose their own king. Dryden calls these Jews "Adam-wits," which refers to someone who isn't happy with the freedom given to them by God and selfishly want more.

The Jebusites are native to Israel, but as the "chosen people" grow stronger, they begin to lose their rights. The Jebusites can do very little about this injustice, and they are forced to follow David's rule. Their taxes are increased, and their land is seized. Their gods and their religion are discredited, which sets "the heathen priesthood in a flame, / For priests of all religions are the same."

The Jebusites represent Roman Catholics, who were unfairly discriminated against in Dryden's time. The "chosen people," or the Protestants of England, overpower and marginalize the Jebusites, but Dryden is sympathetic to their plight. The Jebusite priests are upset because there is really no fundamental difference between their religion and that of the Jews, and Dryden likewise implies there is no fundamental difference between a Catholic priest and a Puritan priest and thus implies that England's discrimination of Catholics is ridiculous and unfounded.

Then begins the "plot, the nation's curse, / Bad in itself but represented worse." The plot is started and espoused by radicals, yet the people of Israel swallow it, "unchewed and crude." There is likely some measure of truth behind the plot, but it is also rife with lies to please "fools" and confuse the "wise." The Jebusites worship the same gods as Egypt, but with odds of "ten to one" in Israel, the Jebusites get little support from the Jews.

Egypt represents France in Dryden's poem, and France was Catholic. The ratio of Catholics to Protestants in England during Dryden's time was 10 to 1, just as the ratio between Jews and Jebusites is in the poem. Here, Dryden refers to the Popish Plot, which alleged a Catholic conspiracy to assassinate Charles II. The conspiracy was a farce that was intended only to drum up anti-Catholic sentiments in England, and Dryden indirectly tells England, metaphorically the Jews, to wake up. English citizens bought into the plot ("fools" who hated Catholics ate it up and "wise" people without bigoted views were duped). Dryden doesn't deny the strife between the Catholics and Protestants, thus there is some truth to the plot, but Charles II's life was never in danger.

So the Jebusites begin to use deception. They mix and socialize with the Jews, looking for converts, in the government and even in brothels. The plot fails, because it lacks "common sense," but it has "a deep and dangerous consequence." The plot causes enough strife in Israel to make major waves in the government, and many people begin to oppose King David, especially since they cannot rise to the same power. Some of those who oppose David are high up in the government, and some have even benefited from his mercy and kindness.

Dryden again refers to the Popish Plot, and the "dangerous consequence" he speaks of here is the Exclusion Crisis. Anti-Catholic hysteria (anti-Jebusite hysteria in the poem) leads England and Parliament to try to exclude Charles II's brother James II (David's brother in the poem) from the crown because he is Catholic. Dryden claims the plot is nonsense, but it still has enough steam to seriously threaten the monarchy.

Of the government officials who oppose David, Achitophel is most influential. Achitophel is smart, motivated, and of questionable morals, and he is very hungry for power. However, "great wits are sure to madness near allied," the poet points out. "And thin partitions do their bounds divide." Achitophel pretends to be David's friend but really despises him, and he vows to either "rule" Israel or "ruin" it. Before long, Achitophel has "Usurped a patriot's all-atoning name."

Achitophel represents Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1st Earl of Shaftesbury, the founder of the Whig party and main advocate of the Exclusion Bill. Through Achitophel, Dryden implies that Shaftesbury is mad and is trying to bring down Charles II to satisfy his end goal of keeping James II, who is Catholic, off the throne. During Dryden's time, a "patriot" referred to someone who supported the abolishment of the monarchy.

There has never been a smarter or more capable member of the Abbethdin, or high court, than Achitophel, but he doesn't serve David like he should. "Wild ambition loves to slide, not stand," and Achitophel is very ambitious. The plot has produced the perfect environment for Achitophel to "shake the tree" of the body politic and turn the people against David, and he quietly stokes "jealousies and fears" and tells anyone who will listen that David is a Jebusite. Achitophel knows that his argument is "weak," but it is believed by many in the divided nation.

Achitophel again serves as a metaphor for Shaftesbury; Achitophel is a member of the high court, and Shaftesbury was a Member of Parliament. Shaftesbury, too, was ambitious, and he spearheaded many bills presented to Parliament that sought to exclude James II and other Catholics from the throne. By stoking anti-Catholic sentiments and accusing Charles II of being a Catholic like his brother, Shaftesbury riled up England with the very same "weak" argument.

Plus, the Jews seem to elect themselves a new king every 20 years or so, and Achitophel decides it is time to do just that. He knows that *he* can never be the king; however, if he must have one, he wants it to be Absalom. So, Achitophel begins to flatter and praise Absalom every chance he gets.

With the reference to the Jews picking a new king every so often, Dryden again refers to the execution of Charles I and the reign of Oliver Cromwell. Achitophel wants Absalom to be king because he is not a Jebusite. In Dryden's time, the Duke of Monmouth was a Protestant, so Shaftesbury supported him for king, not James II.

Achitophel begins to publicly hail Absalom as "auspicious" and "royal," calling him the "second Moses." Absalom is the answer to their prayers, Achitophel tells the Jews, and he will be their "savior." Absalom's popularity begins to soar, and even babies are taught to say his name. One day, Achitophel asks Absalom how long he plans to deny the Jews of his "reign." After all, his glory and popularity cannot last forever, and there is no time like the present.

Throughout the poem, Dryden claims that King David is divine and godlike (thus Charles II is as well), and Achitophel uses the same rhetoric here. Achitophel claims that Absalom (who is illegitimate) is a royal with a bright future, and when he refers to him as the "second Moses," he makes Absalom appear nearly divine. Achitophel wants Absalom to "reign" as king, and convincing Absalom he has a blood right to the divine role is his first step.

Achitophel reminds Absalom that had David not responded to the call to be king of Israel, he would still be in exile in Gath, and "heaven's anointing oil" would have been wasted. Be like David was when he was young, Achitophel begs Absalom, not like David is now in his old age. David isn't the same man he once was, Achitophel maintains, and the Jews deserve better. David has few friends, except for Egypt's Pharaoh, and the assistance of a foreign power will only make David less popular among the Jews. What's more, Achitophel claims, Egypt won't support David if it comes to a war, nor will the Jews support the Pharaoh to help the Jebusites.

Here, Dryden again refers to Charles II through David. David was in exile in Gath (an ancient city near present-day Palestine) after the death of Saul, but the people called him back to be king. Charles II was in exile after the execution of his father, Charles I, during Cromwell's rule of England but took the throne back during the Restoration. Achitophel tells Absalom to be like David when he was young because David took the throne from Saul's son Ishbosheth, and Achitophel wants Absalom to take it from David, or more importantly, from David's brother. Egypt once again represents France in Dryden's own time, which was a Catholic country and an ally of Charles II's. Additionally, Dryden refers to David, and therefore Charles II, as being "anointed" by God, which implies a divine right to the crown.

Achitophel has sown so much dissention amongst the Jews that they begin to cry "Religion, Commonwealth, and Liberty." If Absalom joins their cries with his "royal blood," Achitophel believes, the Jews will surely choose him as Israel's rightful king and not adhere to the line succession, which is very "long and dark, / Drawn from the mouldy rolls of Noah's ark."

Achitophel makes the royal line of succession appear antiquated, as he refers to it as "mouldy" and coming from ancient times. Absalom's father is royal, therefore so is Absalom, Achitophel figures. Absalom, however, represents a modern twist to royalty—he is just royal enough to fit the bill while also allowing the people to feel as if they have power and liberty and picked the king themselves. This also downplays the importance of David and his brother's divine right to the throne, as Achitophel clearly believes this opinion to be outdated.

Absalom is flattered by Achitophel's compliments and encouragement, and Absalom's own ambition and desire for power begins to grow. Still, Absalom doesn't think he has any claim to the throne. After all, David rules with "unquestioned right," and he is a good king. David is merciful and just, and instead of making his enemies suffer and drawing blood, he pardons them. David's only crime, Absalom says, "is God's beloved attribute."

Absalom claims that David's only crime is being like God—merciful and good. Through this reference, Dryden also implies the same about King Charles II, who, like David, has an "unquestioned right" to the crown by way of his royal birth and divine right. Neither Absalom nor Monmouth, whom Absalom represents, can claim this right, Dryden argues.

If the Jews are unhappy with David, Absalom asks Achitophel, why should Absalom encourage them? David is not a tyrant, and he doesn't abuse the Jews or favor the Jebusites. If he was a tyrant, it would be easier for Absalom to go against him, but, as it stands, Absalom has no reason to challenge his father. Furthermore, David gives Absalom everything he wants, except the crown, and he has already told Absalom he would give him that, too, if he could. The crown, David has said, "Is justly destined for a worthier head."

Dryden implies that the crown isn't Absalom's to have, regardless of how badly Absalom wants it or how badly David wants to give it to him. With this, Dryden implies the same of the Duke of Monmouth, King Charles II's son. Monmouth was heavily encouraged to usurp the throne in Dryden's time, and through his poem Dryden implies that the crown is "justly" meant for James II, a "worthier head" because of his legitimate royal birth.

After David's death, Absalom says to Achitophel, the crown will be passed down a "collateral line" to David's brother. David's brother may be "oppressed with vulgar spite," Absalom says, but the crown is still rightfully his, and he will be determined to take it. Thus, Absalom claims, he has no right to ascend the throne—although he does wish he could. He wishes that fate had either "raised [his] birth" or "debased [his] mind." Absalom would love to be king, he tells Achitophel, but a voice within him whispers, "Desire of greatness is a godlike sin."

David and his brother (metaphorically Charles II and James II) have a "collateral" or equal right to the crown. David is older, thus when his reign is over, the crown goes to his brother. Absalom knows this is the legal and just succession, but his ambition for power clouds his judgement. He wishes his mother was not a commoner, or that he was feeble minded so he wouldn't be aware of his inability to be king. It boils down to this: to take power rightfully held by David or his brother, even though he is "oppressed with vulgar spite" (i.e., James II is Catholic) "is a godlike sin."

Achitophel can see that Absalom is not yet convinced that he should assert his royal blood and claim the crown, so Achitophel steps up his flattery. God has endowed Absalom with great virtue, Achitophel says, which is further proof he deserves the crown. Achitophel explains that he doesn't dislike David—it's just that David lacks "manly force," and the people only follow him because he gives them what they want. It is best to try and secure the throne now, Achitophel tells Absalom, because David is "negligent and weak."

Achitophel mistakes David's mercy, good nature, and lack of "manly force" for weakness, which is later confirmed not to be the case. David is powerful, but he is also kind, and Dryden therefore says the same of Charles II. Charles was also mistaken for weak because of his mild temperament, but through David Dryden reminds the English of Charles II's innate power.

Achitophel's plan to ruin David is simple, and he explains it to Absalom. Achitophel will stand back as David continues to give all he has to the people. Once all the money is gone, the Sanhedrin will make sure that David remains poor, and any bit of money he wants will "cost a limb of his prerogative." Achitophel will continue to plant dissent and hate for David, or he will find a way to occupy the king with political diversions and foreign wars. Either way, Achitophel says, David will run out of money. He will have to turn to his friends for help, and his friends are all Jebusites and "Pharaoh's pensioners."

Achitophel is banking on David going broke and having to appeal to the government to provide for the people, and when he does, David will be forced to sacrifice his own political agenda in exchange for money. Dryden's language that it will cost David a "limb of his prerogative" connotes the limb of a tree, in this case David's family tree, as Achitophel ultimately wants to force David to sign a law (the Exclusion Bill in Dryden's time) that excludes David's brother from royal succession.

Achitophel confesses that he hates David's brother, and the strife and dissention Achitophel has planted among the Jews has made them hate him as well. Many of their elders already consider David's brother an enemy, and it is unlikely they will ever let him come to power. In which case, Achitophel says, David will be forced to declare Absalom's blood royal by law. "If not," Achitophel says to Absalom, "the people have the right supreme / To make their kings, for kings are made for them."

Contrary to what Achitophel thinks, Dryden suggests that the people do not *have a right to choose their king. Kings are endowed with divine power from God, Dryden argues, and that divine power is ignored when a true king is dethroned to make room for another. This does, however, throw David's own power into question, as he is not Saul's son and thus didn't follow the usual protocol to assume the throne. David was anointed by the sacred oil, and Dryden implies David's holiness and power is drawn from this consecration.*

It is better for the Jews if David's brother does not ascend the throne, Achitophel tells Absalom, and the Jews know how powerful they are. After all, they did choose Saul as their king and oust God. Achitophel urges Absalom to seize his blood right and answer the call of the people. God has endowed David with the power to be king, Achitophel says, so it stands to reason that David can bestow the same power onto his son. Absalom should not stand back and watch David give his brother everything and willingly accept nothing, Achitophel argues.

As Saul was the first king of Israel, Achitophel claims that the Jews chose Saul over God, which means the Jews should have no problem choosing Absalom over David. Dryden draws a parallel between the power of the Jews to choose Saul as their king and the power of the English people to choose their own king, which they had done in the past when they chose Oliver Cromwell to rule and ousted Charles I.

David's brother already looks at Absalom with jealousy, Achitophel warns, and he will try to turn the people against Absalom. David's brother says very little, but he is already plotting his revenge, and he will strike when Absalom least expects it. There is no time to waste, Achitophel says. If Absalom waits until after David's brother ascends the throne, his "rebellion may be thought a crime." No, Achitophel insists, Absalom must secure the crown while David still lives.

Ironically, when Monmouth (symbolically Absalom in the poem)) rebelled against James II after King Charles II's death in 1685, the rebellion was considered a crime, and Monmouth was subsequently executed for treason. Dryden had no way of knowing this in 1681 when he wrote the poem, but he does appreciate the danger, and as it turns out, that danger was not unfounded.

Absalom should not tell David of his ambition for the crown just yet, Achitophel recommends, but he should offer to take up arms in his father's defense against his "secret foes." David loves Absalom, and Absalom should appear to return the emotion. Then, Achitophel says, they will "Commit a pleasing rape upon the crown."

Of course, David's "secret foes" don't really exist; they are fabricated by Achitophel and the "plot." Achitophel's comment that they will "commit a pleasing rape upon the crown" underscores what a disgrace and complete affront their plan is to the crown, and Dryden implies that the Exclusion Bill is likewise a "rape upon the crown" of England.

Achitophel's words are hard for Absalom to hear. Absalom may desire David's crown, but Absalom is neither cruel nor boastful. He only wishes he had not been born a commoner. Had Absalom been born a royal, he is certain his father would pass him the crown, so Absalom decides there can be nothing wrong with removing David's brother from the line of succession and winning the love of the people.

In the preface, the poet admits he didn't satirize each figure equally in his poem, and Dryden indeed was criticized for going easy on Monmouth in his representation of Absalom. Dryden's Absalom isn't a malicious man, he is simply blinded by his ambition and taken advantage of by Achitophel. Many in Dryden's contemporary England didn't think Monmouth was so innocent.

To ensure that David's brother is removed from the line of succession, Achitophel begins to join all the disgruntled Jews to that very end. Some Jews believe that David has too much power, and while they pretend to have Israel's best interest at heart, they are really only concerned with their own. Other Jews don't even think that they need a king, Achitophel says, and will not be difficult to rile up.

Dryden paints the Jews, symbolically the English, as largely unhappy. They each have a different grievance, but each argument ultimately ends with the government. This adds to the social division of Israel and makes it easier for Achitophel to stir up trouble, which Dryden implies is the problem in England as well.

This "Solymæan rout" is "in treason bold," and as they watch the plot unfold, they are not afraid to raise up Absalom as a "lawful prince" and condemn the Jebusites. The most vocal are the "hot Levites," who want their "belov'd theocracy" back. Others join them, and they grow increasingly vocal against the government, especially David, and try to weaken its power. This discontented group hate the Jebusites and believe their own cause to be right above all others. These men are Achitophel's "tools" and there is "a whole Hydra more."

The "Solymæan rout" is a reference to the mobs of London, and Dryden directly accuses them of treason in their attempts to exclude James II from the throne. Many English people in Dryden's time preferred Monmouth to James because of James's Catholicism, but Dryden implies that neither Absalom nor Monmouth are "lawful princes." "Hot Levites" refers to the Puritan preachers who punished after the Act of Uniformity of 1662. The law forced all public prayers and rites to follow the Book of Common Prayer, *a prayer book used by Anglican Christians. Two thousand Puritan preachers refused to conform and were ejected from the Church of England. These preachers, represented in Achitophel's men, want* their *form of religion back. Dryden refers to these men as Achitophel's "Hydra," one monster with many heads working toward a common cause.*

Of Achitophel's men, there is Zimri, who has many ideas but is never right. Zimri has had many professions, and once over the course of a month, he was a "chemist, fiddler, statesman, and buffoon." He is particularly good at wasting money and was even disgraced from court. There is also Balaam, Caleb, and Nadab, who make "new porridge for the Paschal Lamb." These men have no titles and no grace, but Jonas is very powerful and can manipulate laws.

Each of the men who help Achitophel advance his plan to place Absalom on the throne represent someone from Dryden's contemporary England, and he implies these men are fools and "buffoons." In Dryden's time, the word "porridge" was used to describe the Book of Common Prayer *by those who refused to conform to the Act of Uniformity, which implies that Achitophel and his men are nonconformists and working against the government instead of for it.*

Even more powerful than Jonas is Shimei, and he deeply hates David and all of the government. Shimei cheats the Jews out of money every chance he gets, so the people make him their magistrate. While Shimei is in office treason is not a crime, and all the crooks in Israel have a great time. He loves wickedness and curses David whenever he can, and he places "dissenting Jews" on juries to penalize those who support David and defend his enemies. In Shimei's free time, he writes persuasive essays about the uselessness of kings.

Shimei stands for Slingsby Bethel, the sheriff of London during Dryden's time, and Dryden here implies that both Shimei and Bethel are crooked. Shimei is interested in only money and power, and he manipulates justice to hurt David and protect his enemies. In this passage, Dryden paints the Jews (by extension the English), as foolish for placing Shimei (and Bethel) in an elected position after proving himself so dishonest.

The rest of Achitophel's men are easy to forget, except for Corah. Corah is of common birth but has risen through society's ranks, as "prodigious actions may as well be done / By weaver's issue as by prince's son." But it is Corah's "one deed" that makes him useful to Achitophel. Corah is a "Levite," with deep eyes and a mean voice, and he commands respect and authority.

Corah represents Titus Oates, the Englishman who devised the Popish Plot in Dryden's time. Like Corah, Oates was a Puritan priest, or "Levite," and was highly respected. Oates's father was a weaver, and Dryden's reference to Corah as a "weaver's" son squarely identifies him as Oates.


Corah's memory is impeccable, and he can easily recall his complex plot. Thus, many fail to see his deceit. Undoubtedly, there is some truth to Corah's plot but very little, like his "rabbinical degree / Unknown to foreign university." His perfect memory fits well with "the temper of the times," and the Jews fail to "judge his writ apocryphal."

Oates, too, was known for his impeccable memory. His story of the Popish Plot never once changed, which was one of the reasons why people believed it. Oates claimed a rabbinical degree that could never be confirmed, and Dryden here implies that it is a lie. "The temper of the times" is to hate Jebusites/Catholics, and since Oates's/Corah's plot condemns Catholics/Jebusites, the people fail to see it as "apocryphal," or a complete farce.


Surrounded by men like Achitophel's, Absalom turns his back on court. He has "high hopes" for the crown, and he is urged on by his popularity. Hiding his happiness, Absalom moves among the Jews. He knows each of their names and makes a point to stop and visit with everyone, sympathizing with each of their individual plights and worries. Then, Absalom addresses the Jews as one, with words slower and sweeter "than Hybla drops."

Dryden's language here reflects Absalom's ambition; he wants to ascend the throne, thus he has "high hopes." Absalom is secretly happy that the people are embracing him and see him as the change they need, but he hides his happiness so that he can convince the people that he is upset about their individual plights. Absalom only cares about realizing his dream of absolute power and cares very little about the people's struggles. "Hybla" is an old word for honey; Absalom's voice is sweet and syrupy as he lies to the people.

Absalom tells the Jews that he, too, grieves the loss of their land and wishes that he could suffer on their behalf. Their freedom is at stake, he says. Egypt and Tyrus are threatening their trade, and the Jebusites are threatening their religion. Absalom claims to still respect David, but as David befriends his enemies, his people suffer. David has all the power, Absalom reminds the people, but he gives away Absalom's "right" and "betrays" them. Absalom begins to cry and wipes his eyes. "Take then my tears," he says to the crowd. "'Tis all the aid my present power supplies."

Absalom's claim that he wishes he could suffer on behalf of the Jews makes him appear Christlike, just as Dryden describes David as godlike. Absalom stokes their current fears, which reflect the contemporary fears of Dryden's time. France (here, Egypt) and Holland (here, Tyrus) were major foreign powers and often seen as a threat, and like the Jews, the English Protestants feared a Catholic takeover if James II, David's brother in the poem, ascended the throne. Achitophel convinces Absalom that Absalom also has a divine right to the crown, and for David to deny him is to betray that right. Absalom's rhetoric and tears make him appear as an underdog and a champion of the people, and it effectively wins them over.

Absalom's charm wins over the Jews, and they are united by their "common interests." The people raise their hands to worship "their young messiah," and Absalom leaves in a procession along with Achitophel and his men, moving in the direction of the sun. Everywhere Absalom's "moving court" goes, he is received with delight and respect, like a "guardian god." While the procession may seem like only show, Achitophel has a greater plan. He identifies their supporters as well as their enemies as they travel, and his reconnaissance is covered up by "specious love and duty to their prince." Soon, rumors begin to spread that David's life has been threatened by his brother and Michal.

Dryden's language throughout this passage refers to Absalom as both holy and royal. To the people, he is a "messiah," a "god," a "prince," and their caravan is a "moving court." Absalom is of common birth, but he wants to appear as a divine king like David. The threat to David's life, supposedly by his brother and wife, is another reference to the Popish Plot. During the Plot, Titus Oates accused both Charles II's brother James II and Charles's wife, Queen Catherine, of plotting to kill Charles.

"O foolish Israel!" the poet cries. Absalom's procession is a charade; in it, "a plot is made, / And peace itself is war in masquerade." Who can be safe when "sovereign sway may be dissolved by might," the poet questions? Plus, one's decisions aren't always right and many mistakes abound, and a "faultless king" may well be ruined. Where are our ethics, the poet further asks, if the masses and Sanhedrin alike are "infected with this public lunacy" and look "to murder monarchs for imagined crimes"?

Here, Dryden talks directly to contemporary England and calls them fools for buying into the Popish Plot and supporting the Exclusion Bill. Dryden implies the crisis is a threat to the country and the crown. If the king's power can be "dissolved" with an act of Parliament, then no one is safe. Dryden was an adamant supporter of Charles II and James II, which is reflected in the word "faultless." Dryden refers to the plot and crisis as a type of infection, which he again implies his poem is the treatment for.

No sensible man would disturb the throne, the poet maintains, since to do so is sure to make their troubles much worse. "To change foundations, cast the frame anew, / Is work for rebels who base ends pursue," the poet claims, and warns the Jews that if they don't begin to respect David, they are sure "to physic their disease into a worse."

The description of the throne as a "foundation" suggests its importance in society, which Dryden implies is the case in England as well. He again refers to the rebellion of the Jews (English) as a disease, which is only worsened by their continued dissent.

There is very little that David can do about the plot, as he has few friends, but those friends he has are loyal. First is Barzillai, who is honorable and old. He was in exile with David and traveled back with him to Israel. Barzillai is very rich and very kind, and Barzillai's eldest son—"snatched in manhood's prime"—will forever be grieved by the poet.

Each of David's friends represent the supporters of Charles II in Dryden's time. Barzillai is likely a stand-in for James Butler, 1st Duke of Ormond, who was in exile with Charles II during the rule of Cromwell. Ormand's eldest son, Thomas Butler, died in 1680. Dryden dedicated his book of poems, Fables, *to Thomas Butler.*

There Sagan of Jerusalem and "Zadock the priest," who will always follow David, who looks over the "western dome" and leads the "prophets' sons." Adriel is a member of the Sanhedrins, but he is true to David. There is also Jotham and Hushai, whose allegiance to David is unwavering. Then there is Amiel, who is honorable even without his title. He has long since governed the Sanhedrin, directed them, and subdued their anger in David's defense.

In the Bible, Zadock is David's friend who helps him carry the Ark of the Covenant. Here, Zadock likely represents William Sancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury. Sancroft was the dean of students at Westminster School in London (he leads the "prophets' sons"), which is represented here in the "western dome." Amiel is likely Edward Seymour, who was speaker of the House of Commons in Parliament.

These are the loyal men by David's side, and they look on with sadness as the rebels try to take down the "lawful government." The Sanhedrins try to strip David of his "regal rights" and attempt to disrupt the "true succession" of the crown by entertaining "the plot." David's men soon inform him of Absalom's plan to secure the crown and of "false Achitophel's pernicious hate," and the men tell him of Achitophel's plan to destroy the church and the government. Finally out of patience, the "godlike David" is "heav'n inspired" to address the people of Israel.

Dryden's language again makes David, and by extension Charles II, the "lawful" and "true" king, and he implies "the plot," the Popish Plot in Dryden's time, is merely a ploy to disrupt royal succession. By describing Achitophel as a "false" man who propagates "pernicious hate," Dryden therefore says the same of Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Englishman on whom Achitophel is based, and a major supporter of the Exclusion Bill.


Up until now, David says to the Jews, he has allowed his role as a father to cloud his judgement and inform his actions. However, David's mercy has left him, and he will now demonstrate that he is "not good by force." The troubles brought to David by Absalom and Achitophel may weigh down "a camel, not a king." For kings are the rocks of society, and they can bear any load put onto them. "If my young Samson will pretend a call / To shake the column, let him share the fall," David proclaims.

In the Bible, Samson brought down a pagan temple by shaking it after praying to God for strength. And while Absalom may be trying to take down David's reign like Samson did to the temple, Absalom is not *backed by God. Here, David is strong and fierce; he has been lenient, but Absalom and Achitophel have forced him to respond more strongly. Achitophel and Absalom's plans can't hurt David (he is a king not a camel), and he warns Absalom that if he continues to rebel, he will be struck down.*


Still, David says, if Absalom should seek forgiveness, he will be happy to give it to him. However, Absalom must accept that if God had intended him to be king, he would have made him king. David doesn't believe that Absalom is really a "patriot" but more of a "fool." As for the Sanhedrins, David reminds them that he is still part of the government. The Sanhedrins need David to approve their choice of Absalom for king before it can come to pass, and he will not do that.

Again, a "patriot" during Dryden's time was someone who opposed the monarchy. Here, Dryden implies that Absalom/Monmouth is not truly against the crown; he has merely been manipulated by Achitophel/Shaftesbury. As David reminds the Sanhedrins of his power, Dryden effectively reminds Parliament of Charles II's power as well.


With their "plots and treason," David's people have tried to take his power away, but God will not allow that to happen. All that will remain is jealousy, as David will still rule with his "peaceful sway, / And the same law teach rebels to obey." The masses do not have adequate power to remove him from the throne, David says, but "gods, and godlike kings," serve and defend their people even when they don't deserve it.

Here, Dryden again implies that the Exclusionists of his own time and their propagation of the Popish Plot represents treason. David, and therefore Charles II, is a peaceful king, but he can handle rebels and lay down the law. Dryden's comparison of David to God implies that Charles II is also "godlike," and the English people surely don't deserve him.

"Must I at length the sword of justice draw?" asks David. "O curst effects of necessary law!" He warns the Jews to "beware the fury of a patient man," and he implies it will be better for everyone if they do not continue to rebel and push him. If the agitators want to "tempt terror," David says, they should be prepared to die. "Their Belial with their Beelzebub will fight," and when they are "breathless," David will strike them down. As he speaks, thunder shakes Israel, and "godlike David" is again "restored, / And willing nations knew their lawful lord.

Belial and Beelzebub are devil figures in Christianity, and here Dryden implies that opponents to the throne are likewise evil. David, metaphorically Charles II, isn't really weak, only kind and "patient," but he isn't afraid to face the rebels and fight. Since David's power is divine and therefore superior, he can't be defeated, and he will ultimately destroy the rebels when they stop to rest. The thunder that strikes as David speaks appears as if God himself is backing up David's power and authority, and Dryden argues that Charles II's power and authority is equally strong and endowed in God.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Rosewall, Kim. "*Absalom and Achitophel*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 12 Sep 2019. Web. 18 Oct 2019.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Rosewall, Kim. "*Absalom and Achitophel*." LitCharts LLC, September 12, 2019. Retrieved October 18, 2019. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/absalom-and-achitophel.

To cite any of the quotes from *Absalom and Achitophel* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Dryden, John. Absalom and Achitophel. Penguin. 2001.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Dryden, John. Absalom and Achitophel. London: Penguin. 2001.