**John Dryden (1631-1700)**

**Mac Flecknoe  
A Satire upon the True-blue Protestant Poet T.S.**

[1](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#1) All human things are subject to decay,

              2 And, when Fate summons, monarchs must obey:

              3 This Flecknoe found, who, like Augustus, young

              4 Was call'd to empire, and had govern'd long:

              5 In prose and verse, was own'd, without dispute

              6 Through all the realms of Non-sense, absolute.

              7 This aged prince now flourishing in peace,

              8 And blest with issue of a large increase,

              9 Worn out with business, did at length debate

            10 To settle the succession of the State:

            11 And pond'ring which of all his sons was fit

            12 To reign, and wage immortal war with wit;

            13 Cry'd, 'tis resolv'd; for nature pleads that he

            14 Should only rule, who most resembles me:

            15 Shadwell alone my perfect image bears,

            16 Mature in dullness from his tender years.

            17 Shadwell alone, of all my sons, is he

            18 Who stands confirm'd in full stupidity.

            19 The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,

            20 But Shadwell never deviates into sense.

            21 Some beams of wit on other souls may fall,

            22 Strike through and make a lucid interval;

            23 But Shadwell's genuine night admits no ray,

            24 His rising fogs prevail upon the day:

            25 Besides his goodly fabric fills the eye,

            26 And seems design'd for thoughtless majesty:

            27 Thoughtless as monarch oaks, that shade the plain,

            28 And, spread in solemn state, supinely reign.

[29](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#29) Heywood and Shirley were but types of thee,

            30 Thou last great prophet of tautology:

            31 Even I, a dunce of more renown than they,

            32 Was sent before but to prepare thy way;

            33 And coarsely clad in Norwich drugget came

            34 To teach the nations in thy greater name.

            35 My warbling lute, the lute I whilom strung

[36](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#36) When to King John of Portugal I sung,

            37 Was but the prelude to that glorious day,

            38 When thou on silver Thames did'st cut thy way,

            39 With well tim'd oars before the royal barge,

            40 Swell'd with the pride of thy celestial charge;

[41](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#41) And big with hymn, commander of an host,

            42 The like was ne'er in Epsom blankets toss'd.

[43](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#43) Methinks I see the new Arion sail,

            44 The lute still trembling underneath thy nail.

            45 At thy well sharpen'd thumb from shore to shore

            46 The treble squeaks for fear, the basses roar:

            47 Echoes from Pissing-Alley, Shadwell call,

            48 And Shadwell they resound from Aston Hall.

            49 About thy boat the little fishes throng,

            50 As at the morning toast, that floats along.

            51 Sometimes as prince of thy harmonious band

            52 Thou wield'st thy papers in thy threshing hand.

[53](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#53) St. Andre's feet ne'er kept more equal time,

[54](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#54) Not ev'n the feet of thy own Psyche's rhyme:

            55 Though they in number as in sense excel;

            56 So just, so like tautology they fell,

[57](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#57) That, pale with envy, Singleton forswore

            58 The lute and sword which he in triumph bore

            59 And vow'd he ne'er would act Villerius more.

            60 Here stopt the good old sire; and wept for joy

            61 In silent raptures of the hopeful boy.

            62 All arguments, but most his plays, persuade,

            63 That for anointed dullness he was made.

[64](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#64)       Close to the walls which fair Augusta bind,

            65 (The fair Augusta much to fears inclin'd)

            66 An ancient fabric, rais'd t'inform the sight,

[67](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#67) There stood of yore, and Barbican it hight:

            68 A watch tower once; but now, so fate ordains,

            69 Of all the pile an empty name remains.

            70 From its old ruins brothel-houses rise,

            71 Scenes of lewd loves, and of polluted joys.

            72 Where their vast courts, the mother-strumpets keep,

            73 And, undisturb'd by watch, in silence sleep.

[74](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#74) Near these a nursery erects its head,

            75 Where queens are form'd, and future heroes bred;

            76 Where unfledg'd actors learn to laugh and cry,

            77 Where infant punks their tender voices try,

[78](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#78) And little Maximins the gods defy.

[79](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#79) Great Fletcher never treads in buskins here,

            80 Nor greater Jonson dares in socks appear;

[81](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#81) But gentle Simkin just reception finds

            82 Amidst this monument of vanish'd minds:

[83](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#83) Pure clinches, the suburbian muse affords;

[84](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#84) And Panton waging harmless war with words.

            85 Here Flecknoe, as a place to fame well known,

            86 Ambitiously design'd his Shadwell's throne.

[87](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#87) For ancient Decker prophesi'd long since,

            88 That in this pile should reign a mighty prince,

            89 Born for a scourge of wit, and flail of sense:

[90](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#90) To whom true dullness should some Psyches owe,

            91 But worlds of Misers from his pen should flow;

            92 Humorists and hypocrites it should produce,

            93 Whole Raymond families, and tribes of Bruce.

            94       Now Empress Fame had publisht the renown,

            95 Of Shadwell's coronation through the town.

            96 Rous'd by report of fame, the nations meet,

            97 From near Bun-Hill, and distant Watling-street.

            98 No Persian carpets spread th'imperial way,

            99 But scatter'd limbs of mangled poets lay:

          100 From dusty shops neglected authors come,

          101 Martyrs of pies, and reliques of the bum.

[102](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#102) Much Heywood, Shirley, Ogleby there lay,

          103 But loads of Shadwell almost chok'd the way.

          104 Bilk'd stationers for yeoman stood prepar'd,

[105](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#105) And Herringman was Captain of the Guard.

          106 The hoary prince in majesty appear'd,

          107 High on a throne of his own labours rear'd.

[108](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#108) At his right hand our young Ascanius sat

          109 Rome's other hope, and pillar of the state.

          110 His brows thick fogs, instead of glories, grace,

          111 And lambent dullness play'd around his face.

[112](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#112) As Hannibal did to the altars come,

          113 Sworn by his sire a mortal foe to Rome;

          114 So Shadwell swore, nor should his vow be vain,

          115 That he till death true dullness would maintain;

          116 And in his father's right, and realm's defence,

          117 Ne'er to have peace with wit, nor truce with sense.

          118 The king himself the sacred unction made,

          119 As king by office, and as priest by trade:

          120 In his sinister hand, instead of ball,

          121 He plac'd a mighty mug of potent ale;

[122](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#122) Love's kingdom to his right he did convey,

          123 At once his sceptre and his rule of sway;

          124 Whose righteous lore the prince had practis'd young,

          125 And from whose loins recorded Psyche sprung,

          126 His temples last with poppies were o'er spread,

          127 That nodding seem'd to consecrate his head:

          128 Just at that point of time, if fame not lie,

          129 On his left hand twelve reverend owls did fly.

          130 So Romulus, 'tis sung, by Tiber's brook,

          131 Presage of sway from twice six vultures took.

          132 Th'admiring throng loud acclamations make,

          133 And omens of his future empire take.

          134 The sire then shook the honours of his head,

          135 And from his brows damps of oblivion shed

          136 Full on the filial dullness: long he stood,

          137 Repelling from his breast the raging god;

          138 At length burst out in this prophetic mood:

          139  Heavens bless my son, from Ireland let him reign

          140 To far Barbadoes on the Western main;

          141 Of his dominion may no end be known,

          142 And greater than his father's be his throne.

          143 Beyond love's kingdom let him stretch his pen;

          144 He paus'd, and all the people cry'd Amen.

          145 Then thus, continu'd he, my son advance

          146 Still in new impudence, new ignorance.

          147 Success let other teach, learn thou from me

          148 Pangs without birth, and fruitless industry.

          149 Let Virtuosos in five years be writ;

          150 Yet not one thought accuse thy toil of wit.

[151](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#151) Let gentle George in triumph tread the stage,

          152 Make Dorimant betray, and Loveit rage;

          153 Let Cully, Cockwood, Fopling, charm the pit,

          154 And in their folly show the writer's wit.

          155 Yet still thy fools shall stand in thy defence,

          156 And justify their author's want of sense.

          157 Let 'em be all by thy own model made

          158 Of dullness, and desire no foreign aid:

          159 That they to future ages may be known,

          160 Not copies drawn, but issue of thy own.

          161 Nay let thy men of wit too be the same,

          162 All full of thee, and differing but in name;

[163](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#163) But let no alien Sedley interpose

          164 To lard with wit thy hungry Epsom prose.

          165 And when false flowers of rhetoric thou would'st cull,

          166 Trust Nature, do not labour to be dull;

          167 But write thy best, and top; and in each line,

[168](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#168) Sir Formal's oratory will be thine.

          169 Sir Formal, though unsought, attends thy quill,

[170](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#170) And does thy Northern Dedications fill.

          171 Nor let false friends seduce thy mind to fame,

[172](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#172) By arrogating Jonson's hostile name.

          173 Let Father Flecknoe fire thy mind with praise,

          174 And Uncle Ogleby thy envy raise.

          175 Thou art my blood, where Jonson has no part;

          176 What share have we in Nature or in Art?

          177 Where did his wit on learning fix a brand,

          178 And rail at arts he did not understand?

[179](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#179) Where made he love in Prince Nicander's vein,

          180 Or swept the dust in Psyche's humble strain?

[181](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#181) Where sold he bargains, whip-stitch, kiss my arse,

          182 Promis'd a play and dwindled to a farce?

          183 When did his muse from Fletcher scenes purloin,

          184 As thou whole Eth'ridge dost transfuse to thine?

          185 But so transfus'd as oil on waters flow,

          186 His always floats above, thine sinks below.

          187 This is thy province, this thy wondrous way,

[188](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#188) New humours to invent for each new play:

          189 This is that boasted bias of thy mind,

          190 By which one way, to dullness, 'tis inclin'd,

          191 Which makes thy writings lean on one side still,

          192 And in all changes that way bends thy will.

          193 Nor let thy mountain belly make pretence

          194 Of likeness; thine's a tympany of sense.

          195 A tun of man in thy large bulk is writ,

          196 But sure thou 'rt but a kilderkin of wit.

          197 Like mine thy gentle numbers feebly creep,

          198 Thy Tragic Muse gives smiles, thy Comic sleep.

          199 With whate'er gall thou sett'st thy self to write,

          200 Thy inoffensive satires never bite.

          201 In thy felonious heart, though venom lies,

          202 It does but touch thy Irish pen, and dies.

          203 Thy genius calls thee not to purchase fame

          204 In keen iambics, but mild anagram:

          205 Leave writing plays, and choose for thy command

          206 Some peaceful province in acrostic land.

[207](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#207) There thou may'st wings display and altars raise,

          208 And torture one poor word ten thousand ways.

          209 Or if thou would'st thy diff'rent talents suit,

          210 Set thy own songs, and sing them to thy lute.

          211 He said, but his last words were scarcely heard,

[212](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#212) For Bruce and Longvil had a trap prepar'd,

          213 And down they sent the yet declaiming bard.

[214](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/745.html#214) Sinking he left his drugget robe behind,

          215 Born upwards by a subterranean wind.

          216 The mantle fell to the young prophet's part,

          217 With double portion of his father's art.

**Notes**

1] The first edition of *Mac Flecknoe* appeared in 1682 but the badness of the text makes it unlikely that it was authorized by Dryden. Consequently, the present text follows that of the "authorized edition" first published in *Miscellany Poems*, 1684.  
The sub-title, "A Satire upon the True-blue Protestant Poet T.S.", refers to Thomas Shadwell. In Dryden's text, the name of Shadwell is indicated throughout by Sh.., and although it is tempting to see a scatological reference in this abbreviation Dryden's metre gives the name the value of two syllables. The Shaftesbury plotters made much of being the "true-blue Protestant party," and armed their bullies with "Protestant flails." Dryden's satire on Thomas Shadwell (1642-1692) would appear to have been written as early as 1678, when the two dramatists were, on the surface at least, on fairly friendly terms. The particular occasion of their quarrel is unknown but it was probably brought about by personal dislike and jealousy aggravated by the political fever of the years following the Popish Plot. Shadwell was a staunch adherent of the Earl of Shaftesbury, and Dryden's dislike of his Whiggish opinions is sufficiently indicated in the title-page to this poem. Shadwell answered Dryden's attack on Shaftesbury in *The Medall* with an abusive satire entitled *The Medal of John Bayes*, published in May, 1682; *Mac Flecknoe* appeared in about October of the same year. Dryden also pilloried Shadwell in the second part of *Absalom and Achitophel*.

**The idea of *Mac Flecknoe* was suggested by the death of the Irish priest and poet Richard Flecknoe (d. 1678). Dryden imagined Flecknoe, the monarch of the "Realms of Non-sense," immediately before death, appointing Shadwell as his worthy successor.**

29] Thomas Heywood (d. 1650?) and James Shirley (1596-1666) were both voluminous dramatists but hardly deserving of this disparagement.  
36] Flecknoe had lived in Lisbon for some years and been patronized by King John.  
41] Shadwell published his play of *Epsom Wells* in 1673 but the phrase to which Dryden refers--"Such a fellow as he deserves to be tossed in a blanket"--occurs in another of Shadwell's plays, *The Sullen Lovers.*43] In Greek legend the poet and lyrist Arion was borne across the sea on the backs of dolphins.  
53] St. André: a popular dancing master.  
54] Shadwell's verse opera of *Psyche* was elaborately produced in 1676.  
57] Singleton, a singer, played the part of Villerius in Sir William D'Avenant's opera of *The Siege of Rhodes*.  
64] Augusta: London.  
67] The Barbican stood in Aldersgate Street, north of St. Paul's.  
74] The Nursery, a theatrical school for training boys and girls for the stage, was established in 1662.  
78] The hero of Dryden's *Tyrannic Love* is Maximin.  
79-80] Buskins and socks are symbols respectively of tragedy and comedy, associated here with the Elizabethan playwrights John Fletcher and Ben Jonson.  
81] Simkin: a character of a cobbler in an interlude.  
83] Clinches (sometimes *clenches*): puns.  
84] Panton: a celebrated punster.87] Thomas Dekker (1570?-1632), dramatist and miscellaneous writer.  
90] *Psyche*, *The Miser*, *The Humourists*: titles of Shadwell's plays. Raymond is a character in *The Humourists*, and Bruce a character in another of Shadwell's plays, *The Virtuoso*.  
102] John Ogilby (1600-1676), the translator of Virgil.  
105] Henry Herringman had been Dryden's publisher. Dryden gives in his text only the initial H....  
108] Our young Ascanius: Shadwell. Ascanius was the son of Aeneas, the mythical founder of Rome.  
112] Hannibal, the great Carthaginian leader, was solemnly sworn by his father, Hasdrubal, to eternal enmity towards Rome.  
122] Flecknoe's pastoral tragi-comedy of *Love's Kingdom* was published in 1664.  
151] Gentle Gorge: Sir George Etherege (1634?-1691), the admirable comic dramatist. The names in the two following lines are characters in his comedies.  
163] Sir Charles Sedley (1639?-1701), dramatist, wit, and profligate, was supposed to have helped Shadwell in the composition of *Epsom Wells*. Dryden slightly disguises his name in the text as S--dl--y.  
168] Sir Formal Trifle, an oratorical character in Shadwell's comedy of *The Virtuoso*.  
170] A reference to Shadwell's dedications addressed to the Duke of Newcastle (1592-1676), himself a dramatist.  
172] Shadwell was an eulogist of Ben Jonson, whose theory of drama, particularly his conception of "humours," he copied, and wished to be compared with him in ability and style.  
179] Prince Nicander: a character in Shadwell's *Psyche*.  
181] Cant catch-phrases used by Shadwell characters, the last by a character in *The Virtuoso*.  
188] Shadwell sees himself as continuing Jonson's tradition of the "Comedy of Humours."  
207] It was a fashion during the earlier years of the seventeenth century to write verses in such a variety of metres that their shapes on the printed page resembled, among other objects, wings and altars.  
212] Bruce and Longeville, in Shadwell's *The Virtuoso*, dismiss Sir Formal Trifle by opening a trap-door while he is delivering a speech.  
214] Drugget: a coarse cloth.