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القسم او الفرع : اللغة الانكليزية

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اسم المحاضرة الخامسة باللغة الإنجليزية : John Dryden's Satirical Poetry

John Dryden's Mac Flecknoe [1682] offers an exhaustive study of his engagement with the genre of satire. To demonstrate Dryden's role in influencing satire, the mock epic poem needs to be situated in the larger context of literary and political changes in 17th century England. Dryden's own understanding of satire, expressed chiefly in his Discourse, also informs the evaluation of his satiric skill and influence on satire.

The impact of political changes in the Restoration period on literature is paramount, but it does not overshadow the influence of movements within the literary sphere like neoclassicism and prefiguring of Augustanism. The revival of the classical poets Horace, Juvenal, and Persius helped evolve satire into a well defined genre. The events of the 17th century only propelled the need for using the arts as criticism on society. As this century enjoyed the benefits of the thriving printing press, literature had a wide reach. There was competition between writers who were interpreting the Classics and aiming to influence history and write their names in its annals.ⁱ This competition between writers was essentially of interpretation and representation- of who understood the Classics and could best imitate them. One of the main concerns that Dryden addresses in Mac Flecknoe is the bad imitation of canonised authors like Johnson and good writers' work lying "mangled" in the streets. The 17th century stress on order and harmony united with the translation of classics, to codify the necessary features of satire. Dryden in his Discourse traces etymology and compares the three classical poets, but also develops an argument about what is a good satire and what is the duty of a satirist. Dryden is responding to a significant feature of the literary demands of his time, which is to take a position on issues and address the readers in hope of shaping public opinion. As Earl Miner notes, the "Restoration mode"ⁱⁱ that became the chosen style of poets from Milton to Dryden, was the public mode. Public poetry required the writers to address important issues and placed a great deal of importance in the literature being read by the masses. The need to insist on a particular "type" of satire writing reflects anxiety about the possible effects of 'misuse' of the public mode. The power of the poet to influence opinions and shape people's literary and political tastes required certain poets to be tagged as 'good' or 'bad'. The method to accomplish this was to comment on other poets and their work. This method led to development of the genre of satire.

Dryden outlines the shape of satire in his Discourse in terms of what the poet should address and how he should structure his argument with a variety of themes. In a strong Neo-Classical strain, he derives an understanding of satire from the three “Ancients” and identifies the merits and shortcomings of each. He also foregrounds his position as a modernist by outlining how a modern satire is to be written, even though the foundation of his discourse rests on the Classical poets. While discussing wit and style, Dryden compares Horace and Juvenal but he credits Persius with possessing the “secret” to writing a “modern satire”, which is of being “principally confin’d” to one theme. Dryden regards this fixity of topic as the duty of the satirist by which he would concentrate on a particular vice that is to be corrected. This guides the structure of the verse and hence dictates its shape. Dryden the playwright compares the main vice and sub-vices to a tragicomedy where there is “one main Design” and an “underplot”. Recalling the etymological roots of satire as a dish serving a variety of food, Dryden allows for a variety of themes but emphasises the role of these sub-themes as helping the main theme. The profusion of themes present in Mac Flecknoe reflects this view penned down by Dryden much later in the Discourse. The many levels that subjects under art, monarchy, and religion add to the poem perform the function which Dryden regards as imperative to shaping a satire. Even though the main theme will execute the task of identifying and criticising the vice, other themes will connect the poet’s argument to wider issues. This variety in thematic structure strengthened the poet’s viewpoint by freeing it from the confined focus on a particular issue that ran the risk of making it a lampoon. One of the key questions that Mac Flecknoe raises is about its classification as a satire in the first place. While attacking Thomas Shadwell’s work is definitely an intent driving the main theme, but the sub-themes that shape Dryden’s poem carry his comments on a wide scale of issues. His concerns about authorship, plagiarism, and quality of literature impacting people’s tastes also figure into the poem. These features make this famous poem of the 17th century a satire reflecting the anxieties of its time.

The lines of the poem that savour strongly of personal censure are metaphorically linked to public concerns of quality of literature being produced. Dryden, therefore, executes a commixing of his disapproval of Shadwell’s writings with wider issues that present the “true blue Protestant poet” as a “Publick nuisance”ⁱⁱⁱ. Shadwell’s works, which according to Dryden are “nonsense”, become a grave concern for society because they compete in

the same literary space with ‘higher’ literature for control over the tastes of the reading public. The distaste for a rival also reveals an underlying anxiety about the public preference deviating from the norm considered superior by a particular literary group. This balancing of private and public concerns in Mac Flecknoe is accomplished by a complex design of metaphor and allusion. The metaphors of theatre, monarchy, and religion create a world where Flecknoe/Shadwell “supinely reign” and the grandiose allusions undercut the ironic superior status granted to them. This undercutting is not only present at the level of metaphor and allusion, but Dryden also undercuts the panegyric tone in which he writes. As the poem is a mock-epic, the subject of praise is satirised. This shows Dryden’s experiment with genres as panegyric and satire, two contrary genres, are used together. The mock epic uses elevated themes for Shadwell which satirise him for not possessing greatness, and also for aspiring towards such high standards. This lack of greatness is what Dryden uses to dismiss Shadwell’s claims to being a good writer. The mock heroic style serves to magnify all that Shadwell lacks, and at the same time infuses several themes in the poem.