



The Politics Of Allegory: A Study Of Satirical In John Dryden's Absalom And Achitophel

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Abstract: This paper investigates John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) as a work of political satire that fuses biblical allegory with Restoration political conflicts. While critics have long recognized Dryden's skill as a satirist, relatively fewer studies emphasize how allegorical representation functions as a political weapon to consolidate monarchical power. Through a close reading of the text and engagement with critical scholarship, this study analyzes Dryden's satirical strategies in portraying the Earl of Shaftesbury (*Achitophel*) and the Duke of Monmouth (*Absalom*). The paper employs a New Historicist framework to situate the poem within its political and cultural context, demonstrating that Dryden's satire reflects not only personal wit but also institutional ideology. Ultimately, the study argues that *Absalom and Achitophel* exemplifies satire's dual role as a literary art form and as a persuasive tool of political propaganda in Restoration England.

Keywords: Restoration Literature, John Dryden, Satire, Allegory, Political Poetry

I. INTRODUCTION

II. John Dryden (1631–1700), often hailed as the father of modern English criticism and one of the foremost poets of the Restoration, mastered the art of satire as a literary and political tool. Among his numerous works, *Absalom and Achitophel* stands as a landmark in English political poetry. Written during the turbulent period of the Exclusion Crisis, the poem uses biblical allegory to dramatize the conflict over the succession of Charles II.

III. The central narrative reimagines biblical figures—*Absalom*, *Achitophel*, and *David*—as political counterparts: the Duke of Monmouth, the Earl of Shaftesbury, and King Charles II. Through this allegorical substitution, Dryden blends scriptural resonance with contemporary controversy, creating a poem that is both timeless in its moral scope and immediate in its political relevance.

IV. Although the poem has been widely studied for its artistry, satire, and political alignment, many critics have treated it either as a historical artefact or as a purely literary achievement. This creates a research gap: the dual function of satire as both aesthetic expression and political persuasion remains underexplored.

V. Thesis: This paper argues that *Absalom and Achitophel* transforms biblical allegory into a weapon of political satire, legitimizing monarchy while undermining republican ideals, thereby demonstrating satire's role as both literature and propaganda in Restoration society.

2. Review of Literature

Scholarship on Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* may be divided into three broad categories: Historical-Political Readings – Critics such as Steven Zwicker emphasize Dryden's role as a poet-laureate defending royalist authority. Zwicker argues that Dryden's political poetry represents a conscious effort to align literature with the Stuart monarchy's ideological needs.

Allegorical and Literary Interpretations –

James Winn and others highlight the sophistication of Dryden's allegory and his use of biblical parallels to elevate contemporary figures into a larger moral and spiritual framework. These studies recognize Dryden's rhetorical brilliance but often underplay the poem's propagandistic function.

Stylistic and Satirical Analyses – A third group of critics, such as Howard Erskine-Hill, focus on Dryden's satirical techniques irony, wit, and mock-heroic language—without always fully connecting these to the political stakes of the poem.

While these contributions are valuable, they leave a gap. Few studies integrate allegory, satire, and political persuasion within a single framework. Therefore, this study re-examines *Absalom and Achitophel* through a New Historicist lens, connecting literary strategies to the socio-political context of the Exclusion Crisis.

3. Methodology / Theoretical Framework

This study adopts New Historicism as its guiding framework. New Historicism emphasizes the interaction between literary texts and their historical contexts, treating literature as part of the circulation of power and ideology. This approach is especially appropriate for *Absalom and Achitophel*, which is inseparable from the politics of 1681. The primary text under analysis is Dryden's poem itself, while secondary materials include critical works by Zwicker, Winn, and others, alongside political documents from the period. The methodology involves close textual reading—focusing on language, imagery, and rhetoric—supplemented by contextual analysis of Restoration politics. This combined method allows us to see Dryden not merely as a poet but as a cultural agent whose work mediated between monarchy, religion, and public opinion.

4. Analysis & Discussion

4.1 Historical and Political Context

The Exclusion Crisis (1679–1681) threatened to destabilize the monarchy by attempting to bar the Catholic Duke of York (later James II) from succession. Dryden, as Poet Laureate, was positioned to defend Charles II's interests. The poem was thus not an independent literary venture but a contribution to political discourse.

4.2 Allegory and Character Representation

Dryden maps biblical figures onto contemporary ones: Charles II as David, Monmouth as Absalom, and Shaftesbury as Achitophel. This allegory elevates the political conflict into sacred history, portraying rebellion as not only treason but also sin. By aligning Charles II with David, Dryden invokes divine legitimacy for the king.

4.3 Satirical Strategies

Dryden's satire employs irony, wit, and mock-heroic tone. Achitophel (Shaftesbury) is depicted with rhetorical brilliance yet moral corruption. Absalom (Monmouth) is sympathetically drawn but ultimately misguided, serving as a warning against rebellion. The poem uses heroic couplets with polished balance, making the satire both biting and elegant.

4.4 The Role of Satire in Shaping Public Opinion

By embedding satire within biblical allegory, Dryden made political issues accessible to a wide audience. The poem was not neutral art; it was propaganda designed to rally support for monarchy. Satire thus functioned as a cultural tool reinforcing royal authority while discrediting opposition.

5. Findings / Results

The analysis reveals three key findings:

Allegory as Legitimization – By linking Charles II to David, Dryden reinforces divine right monarchy.

Satire as Propaganda – The poem's humor and wit mask its political seriousness, making propaganda more palatable.

Cultural Impact – Dryden demonstrates how literature can shape public opinion during political crises, showing satire's dual role as art and ideology. Thus, *Absalom and Achitophel* is not just a poetic masterpiece but a political intervention.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* transforms satire into a political instrument through the use of biblical allegory. Positioned within the Exclusion Crisis, the poem exemplifies how literature participates in the ideological struggles of its age. Dryden's artistry lies not only in his poetic skill but also in his ability to persuade, manipulate, and influence public discourse. In doing so, he demonstrates the power of satire to transcend entertainment and operate as political propaganda.

Future research may extend this study by comparing Dryden's strategies with those of Pope and Swift, or by exploring how satire continues to function as political weaponry in modern contexts.

7. Works Cited / References

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