

## Summary and Analysis of

### John Dryden's poem *Absalom and Acidophil*

#### M.A. English Sem II by Mr. Amol Mendhe

"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. Ormond'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/Shaftebury. 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.

## **Important Characters in the poem**

### **Absalom -Charles II's illegitimate son James Scott, the 1st Duke of Monmouth**

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- Anthony Ashley Cooper, the 1st Earl of Shaftesbury**, a Member of Parliament during Dryden's time and the main supporter of the Exclusion Bill.

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 -Charles II ,The King of England**

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 England ,Oliver Cromwell**

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- James II the brother of King Charles II and the next heir to the throne of England.**

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.

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