

Important Events and Terms in the poem/ Short Notes

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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.

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.”

The Jebusites- Roman Catholics in England

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 English People

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 easily 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.

Sanhedrin -The English Parliament

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- Opponent of Whig Party

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-Bromingtons," which means those who are anti-Whig. It was a nickname that became popular for those who opposed the Exclusion Bill.

Whig-The political party founded by Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1st Earl of Shaftesbury

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.

The Crown- Charles II's Divine Right to Rule over England as King

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.