

Research Paper

The Role of Achitophel in Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*: A Representation of the Unscrupulous and Ambitious Politicians with Extraordinary Intellect

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It was indisputable to infer the role of Achitophel in Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* as the portray of a certain political practice that emerged from a sort of political thought of the Restoration England. This poem was written in a particular political situation which struck the people of the age. In this poem the relationship between father and son attracted our attention. Achitophel here acted as a catalyst to instigate the rebellion of son against the father. Actually this paper was going to explore the role of Achitophel, the Earl of Shaftesbury, as a cunning politician who represents the politicians of the age of Restoration. A. B. Chambers opines, "the story of *Absalom and Achitophel* found seventeenth-century political application with sufficient frequency to establish a tradition in which Achitophel was a type for the rebellious and wily politician" (592). His cunningness and unscrupulousness regarding the anti-royal movement against King David on the one hand evoked the rebelliousness of some other rebels towards the King and on the other hand prepared Absalom's state of mind to revolt against his God like father. However, in this poem we observed a conflict between Whig and Tory, Catholicism and Protestantism, son and father, royal power and Shaftesbury, Absalom and Achitophel. It reminded us the great theory of Hobbes where everybody is against everybody means war against all. Along with Dryden's own view of politics, one of the most prominent political theorists of his time had been consulted to expose its influence on the political history of the Restoration England.

Keywords: *Absalom and Acidophil*, Hobbes, Cunningness, Unscrupulousness

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INTRODUCTION

Dryden writes *Absalom and Achitophel* by the request of Charles II in order to defend the King and his followers

against the Whigs led by the Earl of Shaftesbury. From the history, we know that Charles had no legitimate son

who could ascend the throne after his death. Therefore, the King was in a problem and nominated his brother James, the Duke of York, as the legal heir of the throne. But in general the people of England were not in favour of James because he was a Catholic. The Catholics wanted James as their King but the Whigs did not want James. The Whigs were vigorously against the Duke of the York. They now want to succeed the throne the Duke of Monmouth an illegitimate son of Charles. Though the king loved his illegitimate son, he opposes this. At this time, Dryden was Poet Laureate and so he was asked to write a poem in support of the King attacking king's opponents. Dryden did this ridiculing the opponents depicting a mirror like poem *Absalom and Achitophel*.

According to Hobbes, in every society there is an absolute monarch and this monarch governs the society. Its power must be neither divided nor limited. And at the same time he imagines a state of nature in which each person is free to decide for himself/herself what s/he needs and where all the members of the community essentially depend on each other. In this poem, Achitophel is a treacherous conspirator whose name was cursed not only by the people of his contemporary age but also by the succeeding generations. Dryden says "Sagacious, Bold, Turbulent of wit;/ Restless, unfixt in Principles and place;/ In Power unpleas'd, impatient of Disgrace./ A fiery Soul, which working out its way, Fretted the Pigmy Body to decay"(153-157). Achitophel here is represented as sagacious, bold, a fiery soul, a great wit blessed with wealth and honour. As every man is free in his will, his mind was always busy for making secret plans and for wicked advice. At the same time he was restless and had a lust for power but when he was in power he wasted of it. Outwardly, he appeared to be prudent and courageous, noted for taking risk, but he was mischievous by nature. Dryden argued that Shaftesbury had a weak and sickly body but he never cared it and he was always busy in planning intrigues against the King and the Crowd and against Absalom for his personal gain.

According to Hobbes, "The Power of man, to take it Universally, is his present means to obtain some future apparent Good" (X, 48). We can connect this with the nature of Shaftesbury. Dryden explains in this passage that why Achitophel wanted to use Absalom in the struggle against the King. "Achitophel still wants a chief, and none/ Was found so fit as Warlike Absalom/ Not that he wished his Greatness to create,/ For Politicians neither love nor hate:/ But, for he knew, his Title not allow'd,/ Would keep him still depending on the Crowd:"(220-225). Achitophel knows that he is unpopular and as such he could not be able to lead the revolt against the King. Moreover, his loyalty was suspected and he was to face the treason. He therefore wanted a suitable person to become the leader and to use him. Here, Dryden also added that politicians neither love nor

hate any one and they are only interested in their own good. Achitophel knew that Absalom had no legal claims to the throne and would have to depend on the support of the people. Regarding this, Achitophel actually would like to use Absalom as a weapon. So, Achitophel thinks in this way, the authority of the king would be undermined and it may pave the way for the rule of the mob.

Hobbes says, "So that in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, Competition; Secondly, Diffidence; Thirdly, Glory. The first maketh men invade for Gain, the second for Safety; and the third for Reputation"(XIII, 70). And then in these lines "He stood at bold Defiance with his Prince/ .../ Against the Crown: and sculk'd behind the Laws" (205-207) we get an impression that the crimes which Achitophel had planned now became obvious and he openly defied the authority of the King. He further tried to protect himself by supporting the rights of the people against the King and tried to take shelter behind the laws of England. He found some evidence in support of the plot of the Catholics against the King but added to it, evidence fabricated by him to strengthen the case. In this case, he used agents who went round whispering into the ears of the common people. And additionally he is trying to convince the common people that how the King is becoming arbitrary. In such a way Achitophel is trying to prove the King as a Jebusite or Roman Catholic. He says, "Of listening Crowds, with jealousies and Fears/ Of Arbitrary Counsels brought to light,/ And proves the King himself a Jebusite"(A&A, 212-214). So, according to Hobbes the desire for power happened between Absalom and King David created in the mind of Absalom by Achitophel is a kind of competition which exists all the time and in all the society among all.

According to Hobbes, "And therefore, any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their End, ... , endeavour to destroy or subdue one another" (XIII, 69). So, here Dryden reveals the cunning and intriguing nature of Achitophel through some expression in this poem from lines "If not when the King are negligent or Weak?/ Let him give on till he can give no more,/ The Thrifty Sanhendrin shall keep him poor:/ And every sheckle which he can receive,/ Shall cost a limb of his Prerogative./ To ply him with new Plots, shall be my care,/ Or plunge him deep in some Expensive War;/ Which when his Treasure can no more Supply,/ He must, with the Remains of Kingship, buy./ His faithful Friends, our Jealousies and Fears Call Jebusites; and Pharaoh's Pentioners:/ Whom when our Fury from his Aid has torn,/ He shall be Naked left to publick Scorn"(388-400). One of the arguments stated by Absalom is that the King is becoming generous to his subjects and is in turn loved by them. Achitophel meets this argument very cleverly in his second speech. He thinks that he will devise some ways by which the King will become unpopular and will lose the

affection of his subject. Achitophel assures Absalom that it will be his business to create trouble for the King by starting conspiracies against him. Such plots will involve the King in some expensive war for which he will not be able to pay for long. If he wants money for the war from the public treasury he will have to come to Parliament for it and naturally he will have to bargain with his authority for a grant of money from Parliament and from the public fund. On account of the jealousies and fear of the king, the anti-royalist group will call his supporters as Roman Catholics and as the agents of the will of France. This will create a conflict between the King and his supporters because he will not be able to give his patronage to them for want of money. So, in such a position his followers will leave him and he will be left alone to face the hatred of the people. So, we can here points out that Achitophel has an inventive brain and he is being able to create a gulf between the King and his supporters. Thereby, the king will become unpopular and his supporters will join to revolt against him. This will ultimately lead to his own unpopularity which will indirectly help the struggle of Absalom against the King. So, Achitophel is instigating the crowd against the King because of taking Absalom's side and to make conflict between the King and Absalom for desiring the same thing, "power".

However, Achitophel actually tried to manipulate the crowd and, at the same time, Absalom also. Hobbes says, "Also Riches joined with liberty, is Power: because it procureth friends and servants: Without liberality, not so; because in this case they defend not; but expose men to Envy, as a Prey. Reputation of power is power; because it draweth with it the adherence of those that need protection" (X, 48). In the following lines Achitophel addresses Absalom, "Auspicious Prince! At whose Nativity/ Some Royal planet rul'd the Southern sky;/ Thy longing Countries Darling and Desire:/ Their cloudy Pillar, and their guardian Fire:/ Their second Moses, whose extended Wand/ Divides the Seas and shews the promis'd Land:" (230-235) as a lucky prince, a star in the southern sky, and a Saviour in such a way so that he might turn him into his prey. He then further added, the people look upon you as a second Moses and you are result of the prayers of the general people. By saying this he is evoking the embodiment and the hidden ambition of the young Prince. Then Achitophel says, "Believe me, Royal Youth Thy Fruit must be/ Or gathered Ripe or rot upon the Tree"(250-251). Here actually Achitophel is precipitating or forcing the will of Absalom by persuading his thought for taking arms against the King.

Moreover, Dryden portrays the struggle in the mind of Absalom after he had heard the speech of Achitophel in these lines, "Th' Ambitious Youth, too Covetous of Fame,/ Too full of Angels Metal in his Frame;/ Unwarily was led from Vertues ways;/ Made Drunk with Honour, and Debauch'd with Praise./ Half loath, and half

consenting to the Ill, For Loyal Blood within him struggled still/He thus reply'd – And what Pretence have I/To take up Arms for Publick Liberty?"(309-316) . Achitophel has given solid arguments for advising the prince to revolt against the father though sometimes he feels that his arguments are weak. The seeds of ambition struck root in the fertile brain of Absalom and he began to think seriously about the proposal made by Achitophel. Actually Absalom was undoubtedly an ambitious young man who had a great desire for winning fame. He had an angelic temperament also. But he was led astray unknowingly just as the angels in heaven were led astray by Satan. There is an implied comparison between Satan's temptation and the sweet words of Achitophel. Unknowingly, Monmouth drifted from the right path on account of his being intoxicated with the prospect of winning, and the corruption of excessive words of praise used by Achitophel. There was a great hesitation in his mind. So, here we can compare the mental state of Absalom as a pendulum half unwilling and half willing to respond to the proposal of Achitophel. His feeling of loyalty rose uppermost within him. So, in the sense of Hobbes this is a conflict in the state of mind of Absalom against his father and against his own will and we can consider this as desires the same thing the son and the father. Dryden shows here Achitophel's power as a psychologist.

In addition, in these lines, "In Friendship False, Implacable in Hate:/ Resolv'd to Ruine or to Rule the State./ To Compass this the Triple Bond he broke"(A&A,173-175) Dryden portrays Achitophel as a false friend and a revengeful enemy and he thinks in a way that either to rule a state or to ruin the country. To achieve his end, he broke the Triple Alliance between England, Sweden and Holland by instigating war against Holland. Therefore, he dealt a blow to the security of peace and paved the way for bringing England under the rule of a foreign power. Overcoming the fear of the consequence of his action, he assumed the name of a patriot and posed as a champion of the people's cause. In the time of political trouble, it is easy to hide one's wicked action by pretending a concern for public welfare. Crimes against the state and evil deeds can be excused if they are done under the cover of fulfilling the wishes of the public. In such a period people shut their eyes to treason and wickedness because they themselves are wicked, corrupt and vicious. So, Achitophel's showing goodness to Absalom is actually a kind of false friendship. It's not from the core of his mind. He can do anything for his own sake. This is a kind of pretension also for achieving his goal.

And in the same manner, Achitophel was portrayed as a bold leader in the time of danger in these lines, " Pleas'd with the Danger, when the Waves went high/ He sought the Storm but for a Calm unfit" (A&A, 160-161). In fact, he welcomed crisis when the political atmosphere

became stormy. Undoubtedly it can be argued that he liked to catch fish in troubled water and was unfit for the time of peace because then his actions were too reckless in his attempt to show his wisdom. He thinks his mind was confused and was born as an unnatural, shapeless lump of flesh like an embodiment of anarchy. Achitophel actually would like to take advantage when the situation is bad. Hobbes says regarding this, "For that were to erect two Sovereigns, and every man have his person represented by two actors, that by opposing one another, must need divide that power, which... is indivisible; and thereby reduce the Multitude into the condition of War,... instituted" (XIX, 103).

Thus Achitophel plans to rebel against the royal power with multitude. "To farther this Achitophel Unites/ The malecontents of all the Israelites;/ Whose differing Parties he could wisely Joyn,/ For several ends, to serve the same design"(491-494)in these lines we see to achieve this object, Achitophel united the discontented people of Israel (England) into a single party which had been working separately, now began to work together to achieve one and the same goal. The best people among them included persons of royal blood who were of the view that the king was exercising too much power. Some of the men were really patriotic but they were misguided. They were not evil minded but they were won over by unholy tricks and intrigues. These people made extraordinary claims on the basis of their property and the result was that the government could not stand this pressure and broke down. According to Hobbes, "A Multitude of men, are made one Person, when they are by one man, or one Person, Represented ; so that it be done with the consent of everyone of that Multitude in particular. For it is the Unity of the Representer, not the Unity of the Represented, that maketh the Person One. And it is the Representer that beareth the Person, and but one Person: And Unity, cannot otherwise be understood in Multitude"(XVI, 90).

According to Hobbes, "Competition of Riches, Honour, Command, or other power, enclineth to Contention, Enmity, and War: Because the way of one Competitor, to the attaining of his desire, is to kill, subdue, supplant, or repel the other (XI, 56). In these lines we see that competition leads men to do something worse. The group of people was motivated by self interest and sometimes by Achitophel and it wanted to involve the country in a civil war. In these lines we see, "To sell their Duty at a dearer rate;/And make their Jewish Markets to the throne,/ Pretending publick Good, to serve their own"(503-505), these persons desire to sell their services at a price and they wanted to have profit by exploiting the difficulties of the King. Outwardly they posed as well wishers of the public but in fact they wanted to serve their own ends. There was another section of people which firmly believed that kings were useless and heavy burden on the state because they cost too much and did

practically nothing. In these lines, "These were for laying Honest David by,/ On principles of pure good Husbandry"(507-508) these people intended to remove David (Charles) from Kingship on the ground of healthy economy. They were joined by the mob orators who thought that they could gain some position through their speeches. Next to them were those who were even more dangerous because they not only hated King David but the very institution of Monarchy according to Hobbes. The London crowd was well acquainted with religious strife and disaffection for the King. They had trembled and shuddered with fear at the sword of a Conqueror like Cromwell, but they were contemptuous of David who had been legally brought to the throne.

According to Hobbes, "And Covenants without the Sword, are but Words, and of no strength to secure a man at all. Therefore notwithstanding the Laws of Nature ... if there be no Power erected, or not great enough for our security; every man will, and may lawfully rely on his own strength and art, for caution against all other men(XVII, 85). So in these lines we see that the covenant can do something against the monarchy without sword. In connection of this argument it can be said that the general people treated the Popish plot with contempt and hated to be out done by the Jebusites. These people were lead by hot headed priests. These priests were deprived of their positions by the Act of Uniformity passed in 1662 during the Commonwealth and now they reasserted their false notions with great enthusiasm in order to reestablish the theocratic State established by Cromwell. They wanted to regain the power of the Commonwealth under which the parliament and the priests governed the people and justified their misrule by claiming that their actions were inspired by God. Who could be better qualified to rule the country than the race of priests, if spiritual grace was regarded as a basis of political authority. The Presbyterian priests led the crowd. They were not sure of their goal; they spoke vehemently against the government. They used all their strength to destroy discipline and peace. They did not wish to build anything, but they were out of destroying everything.

In these lines,"But far more numerous was the herd of such,/ Who think too little, and who talked too much./ These out of meer instinct, they knew not why, ador'd their father's God and Property;/And by the same blind benefit of Fate,/ The Devil and the Jebusite did hate:"(533-538) the largest crowd consisted of those who talked too much and thought too little. They, out of sheer instinct, worshipped the God of their ancestors and they respected property. On account of the blind instinct, they equally hated the Devil and the Jebusites means Roman Catholics. They believed that they were born to be saved though they did nothing to save themselves. They opined that their instinct led to right belief. These were the types of people which played into the hands of Achitophel (Earl of Shaftesbury). Besides, there were numerous others

beyond any count who seemed to appear from nowhere, like Hydra, the monster with innumerable heads.

Some of the rebel leaders belonged to the aristocracy. The most important among them was Zimri who is the Duke of Buckingham. In these lines, "In the first Rank of these did Zimri stand:/ A man so various, that he seemed to be/ Not one, but all Mankinds Epitome./ Stiff in Opinions, always in the wrong;/ Was everything by starts, and nothing long:/ But in the course of one revolving Moon,/ Was Chymist, Fidler, States- Man, and Buffon:" (544-550) Zimri is depicted. He had so many qualities that he seemed to be a symbol of all mankind. He was rigid and inflexible in his opinions but unfortunately he held the wrong opinions. He tried his hand at everything but did not stick to any activity for any length of time. Within a month, he would perform the duties of a chemist, fiddler, statesman and a verses and drinking. Besides this, he had numerous other fancies and ideas which he had never put into practice. He was indeed a happy madman who, every hour, was either wishing or enjoying something new. He was either praising people or condemning them. In expressing judgments he always held extreme opinions. He was either over critical or over polite. In his opinion every man was either God or the Devil. According to Hobbes, " whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth Good: And the object of his Hate, and aversion, Evil; And of his Contempt, ...nor any common Rule of Good and Evil, to be taken from the nature of the objects of themselves (VI, 32). So, he possesses the two qualities good and evil. His great skill lay in wasting money. He rewarded all, excepting those who were meritorious. He was looted by foolish persons or flatterers but he found this out too late. He ridiculed the people and had his fun while they cheated him of his money and property. He was expelled from the Royal Court on account of his folly. He tried to form parties but could not be the leader of any one of them. Despite this effort to gain leadership the burden of the plot fell on wise Achitophel and Absalom. He was wicked only in his intensions, because he had no resources to put his ideas into practice. He did not leave the party but it was the party that ignored him and chose other leaders. Dryden wishes to show that the anti-royalist party contained people of such characteristics that their success in the revolt would really be doubtful.

There were many other leaders of small status, and it will be very boring to give their names and titles. It would be below the dignity of the poet to take notice of such people. The best of them would fall under the categories of wits, warriors, and champions of the commonwealth. The rest could be described as kind husband and members of the nobility. In the lines 372 to 382 Dryden talks about the following persons. In order to avoid boring the reader, the poet omits the wicked Balaam, Earl of Huntingdon, and cold Caleb, Lord Grey, and hypocritical

Nadab (Lord Howard). Such persons may be remembered as a group of anti-royalist feelings. Some of them will be remembered for their worthlessness while others for their hatred. There is no place in this verse for the rascally crowd who had neither royal title nor the grace of God. So, ill tempered Jonas or Sir William Jones prepared statutes or Acts in favour of the revolt against the King and to make treason lawful.

Although Sir William Jones was bad enough, there was one worse than he namely Shimei (Singsby Bethel), a rascal who had the courage to curse the divinely ordained King David. Dryden gives us an ironical portrait of Shimei or Slingsby Bethel who was the Republican Sheriff of London. In these lines, "Shimei, whose youth did early Promise bring/ Of Zeal to God, and Hatred to his King;/ Did wisely from Expensive Sins refrain,/ And never broke the Sabbath, but for gain:/ Nor ever was he known an Oath to vent,/ Of Curse unless against the Government." (585-590). Dryden says in his youth, he showed signs of devotion to God and great hatred against monarchy. He was wise enough to keep away from sins which cost money. He would only indulge in those sins which cost nothing. On Sunday, he would not do any secular act unless it brought him some money. However, during the tenure of his office, crimes against the state and the King were left unnoticed by him because he himself was against the King. Whenever some persons gathered together to shout against King Charles, Shimei was always seen in their midst. Hobbes says regarding this, "Contempt, or little sense of the calamity of others, is that which men call Cruelty; proceeding from Security of their own fortune. For, that any man should take pleasure in other men's great harms, without other end of his own (VI, 35). Though it was his duty to arrest the persons denouncing the King, he would not do. So he is doing wrong and it is a kind of cruelty according to Hobbes. He was quite mild with his tongue, but he would use up his entire strength if he had to utter any oath or curse against the government. Shimei is one of the contemptible members of the anti-royalist party.

However a mention of the remaining enemies of the King would be boring even for a person who had been an eye witness to the conspiracy against the King. It is better to forget the other conspirators. However there is one, namely Corah (Titus Oates) who will not be forgotten. In these lines, "Yet, Corah, thou shalt from Oblivion pass;/ Erect thy self thou Monumental Brass;/ High as the Serpent of thy mettall made,/ While Nations stand secure beneath thy shade./ What tho his Birth were base, yet Comet's rise/ From Earthly Vapoursere they shine in Skies" (632-637) Corah is described. Dryden has drawn a dark portrait of Corah who belonged to the anti-royalist group. Moses had saved his followers from snake-bite by asking them to stand under the brass serpent. Similarly Corah had tried to show that he would save the Jews or

the Protestants from the evil designs of Jebusites or the Roman Catholics. Corah was obviously a man of low birth from a weaver's family and yet the appearance of comets is due to earthly vapours which go up to the sky and then take the form of comets. There is an irony in his being compared to a comet. Important deeds may be done by the son of a weaver as by the son of a prince. This man witnessed the Popish Plot, declaring that he had done so for the good of the people, ennobled himself by this one great action. Whoever bothered about the high or noble blood of a witness on the strength of which St, Stephen was sentenced to death. Titus Oates was a priest and as such his profession was respected and he, like other priests, was regarded as a respectable child of God. He had sunken eyes and his voice was rough and loud and surely these things indicate ironically that he was neither ill-tempered nor arrogant. His long chin indicated that he was a man of wit; his shining red complexion like that of a parson was like the face of Moses, symbolic of his piety and grace. He had a very strong and great memory; he could relate the details of anti-royalist plots which could hardly be believed by his listeners. These could not be called false plots because they could not have been invented by him on intelligence. His saying included some forecast of the future. When he could not prove such predictions, he claimed that he was speaking as a Prophet. According to Hobbes, "And seeing every man is presumed to do all things in order to his own benefit, no man is a fit Arbitrator in his own cause : and if he were never so fit; yet Equity allowing to each party equal benefit, if one be admitted to be Judge, the other is to be admitted also; & so the controversies, that is, the cause of War, remains, against the Law of Nature(XV,86). Some of his speeches seem to be flights of imagination and it appeared that he spoke like one divinely inspired. His judgment was even more remarkable than his memory because it enabled him to link evidence in a persuasive manner.

In fine, we can say that the combination of exceptional intellectual caliber and stupendous moral bankruptcy is too rare which we see in Achitophel. It is true that it is not to be found in the character of every politician. Such men as Achitophel, pursuing their ambitious and selfish political goal with extraordinary brilliance through devious means, do exist. There may be few persons of such brilliant intellect who put their intelligence to such devious schemes, but they certainly linger in all lands and in all times. It is true to some extent that, the Earl of Shaftesbury cannot be removed from the context in which Dryden puts him, for we cannot have the same political situation as existed in England at that time. But most of the features presented in Achitophel are to be found universally among politicians – hypocrisy, lack of integrity, ambition, etc. When an acutely intelligent man turns his mind to a lust for power, he makes use of his intellectual ability to gain his ends unscrupulously. Such men are to be found in increasing numbers in the modern world of power politics. It proves the universality of Dryden's portraiture of the Earl of Shaftesbury.

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