

‘MacFlecknoe’- A mock-heroic satire

Ravi K. Sinha
 Department of English
 R.N. College, Hajipur

Satire is a literary work which seeks to arouse an attitude of ridicule, contempt or disgust at vices or follies. It aims at correction of such deviations through both indignation and laughter, with a mixture of criticism and wit. MacFlecknoe is one of the famous satiric poems of Dryden, which treats its subject, Thomas Shadwell, with irony and ridicule. The poem owes its origin to differences of opinion between Dryden and Shadwell. In particular, Dryden disagreed with Shadwell's high estimation of Ben Jonson, and disapproved of his claim to be Jonson's artistic heir. MacFlecknoe is the most celebrated product of this controversy, in which the poet presents Shadwell as an incarnation of dullness. Dryden first celebrates and then denounces the hero of this poem.

The term mock-heroic implies a travesty of literary styles and conventions of an epic in the portrayal of petty or trivial characters; this results in a ridiculous mockery of the characters, social practices or vices which the author disapproves of and seeks to satirize. The mock-heroic technique makes use of disproportionate incongruity. The epic devices associated with nobility and grandeur are used for trivial objects creating a sense of ludicrous incongruity.

Examined from this point of view, John Dryden's MacFlecknoe appears to be an ideal example of a mock-heroic poem. Here, the poet satirizes the literary pretensions of Thomas Shadwell with great poetic skill. By using the mock-heroic technique, he elevates the stature of Shadwell's character and then deflates him to the status of a pigmy. The very opening of the poem contains the serious note of heroic poetry. The context and the actions are characterized by epic exaltation. The poem begins by describing the necessity of selecting the heir to the kingdom and his coronation. The opening lines present the grand theme in elevated diction:

All human things are subject to decay
 And when fate summons, monarchs must obey.

These lines contain philosophical observation on the transient nature of Life- how Fate eventually wins over the former. However, the actual purpose of the poet becomes clear in the sixth line when we learn that the kingdom is one of nonsense and the coronation ceremony concerns 'the prince of Dullness'. Such details become counter-productive and deflate the 'epical' seriousness of the opening lines. It is remarkable that scenes, situations, characters, their intentions and actions are described in similar mock-heroic manner throughout the poem. The entire poem shows the skillful juxtaposition of the grandeur of heroic poetry and the triviality of low comedy. Miltonic language- empire, governed, prince, realms, succession of the State, reign etc- is used for a person of unmatched idiocy. The ridiculous context in which such exalted diction is used reduces the victim to insignificance. In such descriptions, Dryden's assumed politeness becomes the main weapon of satirical attack. Phrases such as "Empress Fame", "the nations meet" and "the renown of Shadwell's coronation" create an

atmosphere of solemnity. At the same time, however, the use of a language of subtle irony unmistakably makes the readers aware of the ludicrous nature of affairs. Flecknoe makes an earnest speech wherein he announces the basis of his carefully made selection of the most suitable heir to the throne:

Shadwell alone, my perfect image bears..

But the very next sentence provides a different description of Shadwell, which is replete with deflating suggestion and the final meaning is that of ridicule:

Mature in dullness from his tender years:

Shadwell stands confirmed in full stupidity .

This ironical tone is devastating in its satiric effect. All other sons of Flecknoe might sometimes digress into sense, but Shadwell “never deviates into sense”; his 'rising fogs' admit of no ray of wit.

Dryden achieves mock-heroic effect also by an ironic juxtaposition of satiric objects with legendary figures. By comparing a small man with great heroes, he makes a pigmy of Shadwell. Shadwell is compared with Arian, the legendary musician, or with Ascanius, the great emperor of Rome, only to highlight the triviality of his personality. He is also compared with Hannibal, the hero of Carthage. But while Hannibal wore eternal hostility to Rome, Shadwell wages perpetual war against wit and intelligence. The Flecknoe- Shadwell relationship is an ironical parody of that between John Baptist and Christ. As John the Baptist came to prepare the way for the greatest advent of Christ, Flecknoe came to prepare the world for his dullest son. Such comparisons serve to highlight the ironical contrast and presents Shadwell in a ridiculous position.

The coronation of Shadwell is also described by using the mock-heroic technique. Pomp and show mark the ceremony. The place is ' Fair Augusta' where an 'ancient fabric rose to inform the sight '. But soon Dryden adds the details:

From its old ruins brothel houses rise,

Scenes of lewd loves and of polluted joys.

Instead of 'Persian carpets ' stock of dull books were spread over the way. The description of the prince also shows the hollowness of the character:

On his sinister hand, instead of ball,

He placed a mighty mug of potent ate.

Dryden thus intermingles serious description with ridiculous elements and thereby achieves the mock-heroic effect. T. S. Eliot observes that it is the art of transforming the ridiculous into heroic poetry that accounts for the success of Dryden as a mock-epic poet. The basic irony is that the character of Shadwell was considered fit to be described in heroic style. A small man is not ridiculous by himself; he becomes ridiculous when dressed in a suit of amour designed for a hero.