

# JUSTICE IN THE BRITISH POETRY OF THE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

- Wanting Power and be King -

Ioana-Virginia SASU BOLBA \*

## Zusammenfassung

*Die Justiz definiert letztlich die Grundsätze und Weise des Denkens und Handels der Gesellschaft zu der sie gehört. Häufig ist sie nicht neutral und objektiv, wie sie sein sollte sondern sie ist ideologisch und politisch beeinflusst. Die vorliegende Arbeit stellt diese Tatsache vor, sowie sie im England des 18. Jahrhunderts dargestellt wird. In diesem Fall ist die Justiz durch die Augen eines der repräsentativsten Dichter jener Zeit, John Dryden gesehen. Der Dichter persifliert die korrupte Welt, die sich korrupte Gesetze geschaffen hat und betont schließlich, dass wo die menschliche Justiz keine Ordnung schafft, eine andere Justiz, die dieser vorgesetzt ist, nämlich die göttliche Gerechtigkeit, wird dann zur Rede kommen.*

**Stichwörter (Schlüsselwörter):** *Justiz, Gesetz, Geschichte, Komplize der Ungerechtigkeit, göttliche Gerechtigkeit*

One of the best known and appreciated poems written by the British poet John Dryden (1631-1700), **Absalom and Achitophel**, 1681, is a *political satire* and can be considered a masterpiece of the genre. The reason of choosing and discussing in this context is due to the fact that most of the great poets of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century were not satisfied only to write poetry, but were always implied in the social and political life of their epoch, taking attitude against all they disagreed with, praising what they liked. John Dryden was such a writer-citizen

And if the „theme” of the poem is a concrete one, the way it was transposed in verse is also worth mentioning. The poet draws a parallel

---

\* Lecturer, PhD, Faculty of Law, Cluj-Napoca, Christian University „Dimitrie Cantemir” Bucharest.

between the revolt of Absalom described in the **Bible** and the political situation in England in about 1680. In this context, justice appears more than once in Dryden's poems. It might be interesting to see how justice is described.

The story of Absalom's revolt is to be found in **2 Samuel, The Old Testament**, chapters 14-18. Absalom stands up against his own father, King David. He, Absalom, was a handsome man, with rich hair, which probably symbolizes his pride (14-26). When David's counsellor, Achitophel, simply gives him up and takes Absalom's part, he advises the latter to pretend he is wrong and consequently will become David's sure victim.

In 1681, Charles II was King of England. Charles was old enough. He'd had a couple of mistresses and a series of illegitimate children. One of them was James Scott, Duke of Monmouth, who was very popular, also because of the fact that he supported Protestantism. Charles had no legitimate followers, and his brother, the future King James II was suspected of being a Roman-Catholic. When Charles fell ill, the Whigs were afraid the country would be governed by a Roman-Catholic. At the same time, Titus Oates, a disowned Catholic and a man without character, had borne testimony about the existence of a Jesuit plot intended to kill the King, set London on fire and tear to pieces the Protestants. This particular moment scared a lot of people, and had many violent effects.

The Count of Shaftesbury supported the law that made it impossible, but, unfortunately, it was hindered by the Tories. In the spring of 1681, Shaftesbury asked Charles to legitimate Monmouth. The latter was discovered to prepare a rebellion, and wanted to get the throne. Shaftesbury was considered to be an accomplice of his. He was caught and accused of high treason. A trial followed, supported by the Whigs, and Shaftesbury was acquitted.

The poem was written before Shaftesbury got out of prison. Dryden hoped to have an impact upon the Court's decision.

Through his characters, Dryden criticized the arbitrary laws of his epoch and strongly believed in the power of monarchy, the importance of a contract existing between the King and the people by means of which people could be helped.

The parallel between the two historical facts is thus achieved:

King David is Charles II

Michal is one of David's wives, also known as the „bare queen”. She stands for Catherine of Braganza, Charles' legal wife.

Absalom, David's illegitimate son, is the Duke of Monmouth.

Achitophel, David's counsellor, who eventually betrayed him and joined Absalom's army is the Count of Shaftesbury.

In order to reach the desired parallel, Dryden combined the heroic and the satiric, a characteristic feature for that time. However, writing such a poem requires talent more than anything else. It is worth mentioning that, in spite of the fact that the poet aims at two well-defined moments, England isn't mentioned in the poem at all. The reader is supposed to guess what the poet meant.

The reader, knowing what England offered, asists to one series of events and thinks of another one. The characters become archetypes, each epoch seeming to have a „Shaftesbury”. He himself becomes the prototype of the corrupt politician, who is able to do anything in order to reach his goal: **power!**

It is also interesting to see how the fight for power is not a one-man fight. In this respect, Achitophel stands for the traitor. He leaves his king and joins somebody else (moving from one political party to the other, depending who is more powerful at a moment). Laws are made so as to suit this tendency and so acts justice. Let's see how Dryden describes the two characters:

Of these the false Achitophel was first; [150]

A name to all succeeding ages curst:

For close designs, and crooked counsels fit;

Sagacious, bold, and turbulent of wit;

Restless, unfixed in principles and place;

In power unpleas'd, impatient of disgrace; [155]

A fiery soul, which, working out its way,

Fretted the pigmy-body to decay,

And o'er-informed the tenement of clay.

A daring pilot in extremity;  
Pleased with the danger, when the waves went high, [160]  
He sought the storms; but, for a calm unfit,  
Would steer too nigh the sands, to boast his wit.  
Great wits are sure to madness near allied,

.....  
So easy still it proves in factious times, [180]  
With public zeal to cancel private crimes.  
How safe is treason, and how sacred ill,  
Where none can sin against the people's will?  
Where crowds can wink, and no offence be known,  
Since in another's guilt they find their own? [185]  
Yet fame deserved no enemy can grudge;  
The statesman we abhor, but praise the judge.

.....  
He fears his brother, though he loves his son,  
For plighted vows too late to be undone. [470]  
If so, by force he wishes to be gained;  
Like woman's lechery to seem constrained.  
Doubt not; but, when he most affects the frown,  
Commit a pleasing rape upon the crown.  
Secure his person to secure your cause; [475]  
They, who possess the prince, possess the laws."

.....  
With Absalom's mild nature suited best;  
Unblamed of life, ambition set aside,

Not stained with cruelty, nor puffed with pride. [480]  
How happy had he been, if destiny  
Had higher placed his birth, or not so high!  
His kingly virtues might have claimed a throne,  
And blest all other countries but his own.

One may wonder what the conclusion of such an attitude might be. It was not what they expected. If justice was power and the prince, there is another kind of justice that acts when necessary: the divine one! It puts an end to the story by killing Absalom, making Achitophel commit suicide and bringing King David back to the throne of England.

