

Identify the Political Personages in the poem “Absalom and Achitophel.”

Writer: John Dryden | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Identify the political personages in the poem “Absalom and Achitophel.”

John Dryden's (1631-1700) “Absalom and Achitophel” (1681) is a political satire. It uses Bible names to show real people from English politics. The poet writes about the fight between King Charles II and the people who wanted to take away his crown. Dryden hides their real names but gives hints to help readers understand who they are.

David as Charles II: King David in the poem stands for King Charles II of England. Like David, Charles had many mistresses and children. He loved Absalom, just like Charles loved his son Monmouth. David is shown as a kind and wise ruler, but he is too soft when it comes to punishing wrongdoers. It is evident here:

“Beware the fury of a patient man.”

Absalom as Monmouth:

Absalom is the beloved son of David. He represents James, the Duke of Monmouth, Charles II's real son. Like Absalom, Monmouth was brave, handsome, and popular. He tried to take the crown from his father, which made him a traitor. Dryden shows Absalom's ambition in the following line:

“Desire of greatness is a god-like sin.”

Achitophel as Shaftesbury:

Achitophel is David's adviser who turns against him. He stands for Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Earl of Shaftesbury. He was clever but greedy for power. He wanted to make Monmouth the king. The poet writes that Achitophel is:

“Resolv'd to ruin or to rule the state.”

Other Characters:

Zimri stands for the Duke of Buckingham. Corah is Titus Oates, who lied about Catholics. Shimei is Slingsby Bethel. Barzillai is the Duke of Ormonde. He is a true supporter of Charles. Zadok, Sagan, and Amiel also stand for real people who stayed loyal.

In conclusion, Dryden's poem is full of real politicians in fake names. He praises good ones and attacks bad ones. He wants to support the king and show how evil people tried to break the country.