

What is the Purpose of Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel"?

Writer: John Dryden | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

What is the purpose of Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel"?

"Absalom and Achitophel" by John Dryden (1631-1700) is a famous political poem. Written in 1681, it uses a story from the Bible to discuss actual events in England at the time. This allegorical poem aims to support King Charles II, criticize his enemies, and teach lessons about loyalty, power, and politics.

Support for King Charles II: Dryden portrays King Charles II as a wise and kind ruler, much like King David. This comparison is intended to arouse readers' sympathy and support for Charles II. This shows that any rebellion against him is both unjust and harmful to the nation. He has no legitimate male heir. He faces rebellion from within his kingdom but remains steadfast and just. Dryden says about his situation,

How fatal 'tis to be too good a king!

Criticism of the King's Enemies:

Dryden harshly criticizes those who oppose King Charles II. He uses the character of Achitophel. He represents the Earl of Shaftesbury. Achitophel's persuasive skills and deceitfulness are highlighted to show the danger and dishonesty of those who conspire against the king. This serves to undermine the morality of the opposition. Dryden paints them as villains who threaten the peace and order of the realm.

Loyalty and Betrayal: The poem's theme of loyalty and betrayal runs deep. Absalom, who represents the Duke of Monmouth, is shown as a beloved but misguided son of the king. He is David's favourite illegitimate son. He is handsome and ambitious. He is persuaded to rebel against his father but struggles with the moral implications. Dryden says about him,

*Absalom, ambitious of the crown,
Was made the lure to draw the people down.*

"Absalom and Achitophel" by John Dryden is a powerful poem with many lessons. It supports King Charles II, criticizes his enemies, and warns against rebellion and ambition. By using a biblical story, Dryden teaches about loyalty, the dangers of flattery, and the importance of stable leadership.

LxNotes