

Absalom and Achitophel Summary

Writer: John Dryden | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

David's Peaceful Rule and His Illegitimate Son Absalom: At the beginning, King David (symbolizing Charles II) rules Israel peacefully. He has many wives and concubines. Michal is his royal wife, but his most loved son, Absalom, is born to another woman. So, Absalom is illegitimate and cannot legally become king. Still, David loves Absalom dearly. He is young, handsome, brave, and has won fame in foreign wars. David sees his own image in Absalom. He gives him everything he desires. He even allows him to marry a noble woman named Annabel.

Absalom becomes very popular among the Jews. He is loved by all for his good looks, charm, and royal blood. But despite David's peaceful rule, the Jews began to demand more freedom. This restlessness becomes the seed of rebellion.

The Popish Plot and Public Fear: The Jews became more rebellious after the Popish Plot. This plot was a false story spread to create fear. It said that Catholics (represented as Jebusites in the poem) were planning to kill King David and take over the government. Though the plot was foolish and lacked "common sense," it created great public panic.

This fear allowed enemies of David to rise up. Some of the native people, especially the Jebusites, were angry because their religion was being attacked, their land was taken, and they were heavily taxed. Their priests became furious. Slowly, they began spreading lies and converting people, even from royal courts and low places like brothels. This part is both a political and a religious allusion. It also reflects real-life anti-Catholic feelings in England during the Exclusion Crisis.

Achitophel: The Real Villain Behind the Plot: Among David's enemies, Achitophel (Earl of Shaftesbury) is the most dangerous. He is clever, restless, and full of ambition. He once held high power but was never satisfied. Achitophel wants either to rule the state or destroy it. He has no true loyalty and pretends to serve David while secretly planning against him.

Dryden gives a deep and detailed picture of Achitophel. He calls him a false friend, crooked planner, and powerful speaker. Achitophel uses religion and patriotism as excuses for his evil desires. He spreads fear that David is a Jebusite (Catholic). He also convinces the people that the king is against their religion.

Dryden's art of characterization shines here. Achitophel is not just a politician. He is a symbol of deceit, pride, and political danger. Dryden also uses sharp satire to expose how such leaders fool the public with false promises.

Achitophel Flatters and Manipulates Absalom: Achitophel recognizes that he requires a popular leader to execute his plan. He chooses Absalom, not out of love, but because Absalom has royal blood and is loved by the people. Achitophel flatters Absalom with sweet words, calling him the "savior" of Israel and the people's chosen one. He reminds Absalom that David, too, once claimed the throne when he was in exile.

He says that the time is perfect. The people are already crying for a new king, and if Absalom joins their cause, they will accept him. He adds that David is old and weak, and even David's brother (Amnon, the legal heir) is hated by the people. If they wait until after David dies, it may be too late.

Achitophel's speech is full of manipulation, flattery, and false logic. Dryden illustrates how wicked leaders incite innocent people into rebellion by exploiting ambition and praise.

Absalom's Inner Struggle and Downfall: At first, Absalom is not convinced. He says that David is a just and merciful king. He governs well, keeps peace, and has never denied Absalom anything. Absalom knows he is not the legal heir and admits that David's brother has the right to rule. He does not want to rebel and risk hurting his father.

But soon, ambition begins to take over. Absalom starts thinking that his soul is too great for his birth. He says the desire to be great is a "godlike sin." He wishes he had been born royal so he could claim the throne. Achitophel quickly uses this weak moment to tempt him again.

Dryden presents Absalom as a tragic figure. He is not evil by nature, but led to wrong by pride and others' influence. His fall shows how even good people can be destroyed by ambition.

The Uniting of the Malcontents: Achitophel now begins gathering all the "malcontents" (people unhappy with David's rule). He unites different types of rebels:

- Idealists who hate kings,
- Greedy people who want power or money,
- Fools who talk too much but think too little,
- Religious fanatics who want church control,
- Hypocrites pretending to be holy.

Among them are:

- **Zimri:** He is a foolish nobleman, skilled in nothing but trying everything. He represents the Duke of Buckingham.
- **Shimei:** He is a dishonest man who cheated and hated the king. He became a magistrate and helped criminals escape punishment. He reflects Slingsby Bethel.
- **Corah:** He is a false priest with a good memory who lied in court. He stands for Titus Oates, who helped create the Popish Plot.

Dryden ridicules these people using satire. He shows how the rebellion is not made of noble heroes, but of greedy and foolish men.

Absalom Gains Popular Support: As Absalom travels across Israel with Achitophel and his followers, he becomes more and more popular. He speaks to the people with emotional and soft words. He claims he cares for them deeply. He even cries and says he wishes he could suffer for their pain.

Absalom says he loves his father, but David is old and blind to the people's suffering. He accuses David of giving in to foreign influences and losing his care for justice. The people are fooled by his words and charm. They begin to see him as their true king.

Dryden calls this "war in masquerade." On the surface, it looks like love and peace, but it is actually a dangerous plan for rebellion.

Dryden's Allegory, Allusions, and Satire: This poem is a perfect example of political allegory. Dryden uses biblical characters to represent real English leaders:

David = Charles II

Absalom = Duke of Monmouth

Achitophel = Earl of Shaftesbury

Zimri = Duke of Buckingham

Shimei = Slingsby Bethel

Corah = Titus Oates

Dryden uses biblical and political allusions side by side. He brings in the Popish Plot, Exclusion Crisis, and religious conflicts of his time. At the same time, he shows the universal truth: how rebellion destroys nations and how public opinion is often foolish.

His satirical tone attacks rebels, false leaders, and ordinary people who blindly follow them. He also warns that too much freedom without law brings chaos.

David's Final Speech: After hearing everything from his loyal supporters (Barzillai, Zadok, Sagan, and Amiel), King David speaks to the people. He says he has always been patient and forgiving. As a father, he loved Absalom too much and ignored his dangerous actions. But now, as a king, he must act.

David says that if Absalom wants to challenge him, he must be ready to fall. David is no longer holding back. He warns the rebels: "Beware the fury of a patient man." He says that if people believe they can make and break kings, there will be no law, no safety, no justice.

David's speech is strong, wise, and full of emotion. He reminds people that true kingship comes from God, not from the crowd. If necessary, he will fight to defend the kingdom.

God's Support and the End of Rebellion: As David finishes speaking, thunder shakes the sky. This shows God's approval of his rule. Peace begins to return, and David is restored as the rightful king. The people understand their mistake. The rebellion slowly dies out.

Dryden ends the poem with the moral lesson that rebellion, no matter how attractive, leads to destruction. Lawful government, justice, and loyalty must be protected. Leaders like Absalom may seem noble, but they are tools in the hands of clever men like Achitophel.

In the end, Dryden proves that truth, justice, and divine support always win over pride and ambition.