

Absalom and Achitophel

By John Dryden

In pious times, ere priest-craft did begin,
 Before polygamy was made a sin;
When man, on many, multipli'd his kind,
 Ere one to one was cursedly confin'd:
When Nature prompted, and no Law deni'd
 Promiscuous use of concubine and bride;
Then, Israel's monarch, after Heaven's own heart,
 His vigorous warmth did variously impart
To wives and slaves: and, wide as his command,
 Scatter'd his Maker's image through the land.
Michal, of royal blood, the crown did wear;
 A soil ungrateful to the tiller's care:
Not so the rest; for several mothers bore
 To god-like David, several sons before.
But since like slaves his bed they did ascend,
No true succession could their seed attend.
Of all this numerous progeny was none
 So beautiful, so brave, as Absalom:
Whether, inspir'd by some diviner lust,
 His father got him with a greater gust;
Or that his conscious destiny made way,
 By manly beauty to imperial sway.
Early in foreign fields he won renown,
With kings and states alli'd to Israel's crown:
In peace the thoughts of war he could remove,
 And seem'd as he were only born for love.
Whate'er he did, was done with so much ease,
 In him alone, 'twas natural to please:

His motions all accompani'd with grace;
And Paradise was open'd in his face.
With secret joy, indulgent David view'd
His youthful image in his son renew'd:
To all his wishes nothing he deni'd;
And made the charming Annabel his bride.
What faults he had (for who from faults is free?)
His father could not, or he would not see.
Some warm excesses, which the Law forbore,
Were constru'd youth that purged by boiling o'er:
And Amnon's murther, by a specious name,
Was call'd a just revenge for injur'd fame.
Thus prais'd, and lov'd, the noble youth remain'd,
While David, undisturb'd, in Sion reign'd.
But life can never be sincerely blest:
Heav'n punishes the bad, and proves the best.
The Jews, a headstrong, moody, murm'ring race,
As ever tri'd th'extent and stretch of grace;
God's pamper'd people whom, debauch'd with ease,
No king could govern, nor no God could please;
(Gods they had tri'd of every shape and size,
That god-smiths could produce, or priests devise:)
These Adam-wits, too fortunately free,
Began to dream they wanted liberty:
And when no rule, no precedent, was found
Of men, by laws less circumscrib'd and bound,
They led their wild desires to woods and caves,
And thought that all but savages were slaves.
They who, when Saul was dead, without a blow,
Made foolish Ishbosheth the crown forego;
Who banisht David did from Hebron bring,
And, with a general shout, proclaim'd him king:

Those very Jews, who, at their very best,
Their Humour more than loyalty exprest,
Now, wonder'd why, so long, they had obey'd
An idol-monarch which their hands had made:
Thought they might ruin him they could create;
Or melt him to that golden calf, a state.
But these were random bolts: no form'd design,
Nor interest made the factious crowd to join:
The sober part of Israel, free from stain,
Well knew the value of a peaceful reign:
And, looking backward with a wise afright,
Saw seams of wounds, dishonest to the sight:
In contemplation of whose ugly scars,
They curst the memory of civil wars.
The moderate sort of men, thus qualifi'd,
Inclin'd the balance to the better side:
And, David's mildness manag'd it so well,
The bad found no occasion to rebel.
But, when to sin our bias'd nature leans,
The careful Devil is still at hand with means;
And providently pimps for ill desires:
The good old cause reviv'd, a plot requires.
Plots, true or false, are necessary things,
To raise up common-wealths, and ruin kings.