
ENGLISH

ESSAY OF DRAMATIC POESY

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Neoclassical Criticism: John Dryden

Introduction: John Dryden as the father of English literary criticism:

"The father of English criticism" is the title conferred on John Dryden by Dr Johnson who said, "Dryden may be properly considered as the father of English Criticism, as the writer who first taught us to determine upon principles the merit of composition."

-Dr Johnson’s verdict has been supported by critic after critic. Even a modern critic like T. S. Eliot supports this view.

"He established the English fashion of criticising, as Shakespeare did the English fashion of dramatising—the fashion of aiming at delight, at truth, at justice, at nature, at poetry, and letting the rules take care of themselves."

JOHN DRYDEN:

John Dryden (9 August 1631 – 1 May 1700) was a prominent English poet, critic, translator, and playwright who dominated the literary life of the Restoration Age; therefore, the age is also known as the Age of Dryden.

He was both a writer and a critic and he had rather a dogmatic bent.
Most of his critical interpretations are found in the prefaces to his own works.

Dryden’s mature thoughts of literary criticism on ancient, modern and English Literature, especially on Drama, are presented in dialogue forms in An Essay on Dramatic Poesy.

He gives an account of the Neo-classical theory.

He defends the classical drama saying that it is an imitation of life, and reflects human nature clearly.

He also discusses the three unities, rules that require a play to take place in one place, during one day, and that it develops one single action or plot.

First Original Criticism

Before Dryden English criticism was just a blind imitation of the ancients.

It was he who liberated it from classicism and rightly therefore, "it is in virtue of his 'liberal classicism' and sturdy independence of spirit that Jonson deserves the title of being the first English critic. " Not that there was no criticism in England before Dryden.

There had been critics like Sir Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson. But they were critics merely by chance; their critical works are merely occasional utterances on the critical art.

Sidney's Apology arose out of the need to defend poetry against Puritan attack, and the learned Ben’s critical utterances are in the nature of jottings on just a few things that interested him.

While Jonson is ruthless, Dryden is tolerant; while Jonson is limited, Dryden is urbane in his critical range.

Jonson’s criticism is sketchy and relatively small in output: "Dryden with a diverse literacy tradition behind him and a much greater critical output remains the true father of English practical criticism.”

His Liberal Classicism

✓ The earlier criticism was 'magisterial' or dogmatic.

✓ Dryden, on the other hand, is never magisterial; he is sceptical.

✓ He does not lay down the rule; he rather sets out to discover the rules for his guidance in writing plays, as well as in judging of those written by others.
He rather derides those who are dogmatic or too sure in knowing the correct thing.

The sceptical tone of his criticism is but a reflection of his personality—gentle, modest, unassuming, intelligent, free from dogmatism and vanity of every kind.

Dryden agrees in general terms with Aristotle’s definition of poetry as a process of imitation though he has to add some qualifiers to it. The generally accepted view of poetry in Dryden’s day was that it had to be a close imitation of facts past or present. While Dryden has no problem with the prevalent neo-classical bias in favour of likeness to reality, he also allowed more liberties and flexibilities for poetry.

In The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy he makes out a case for double-legged imitation. While the poet is free to imitate “things as they are said or thought to be”, he also gives spirited defence of a poet’s right to imitate what could be, might be or ought to be. He cites in this context the case of Shakespeare who so deftly exploited elements of the supernatural and elements of popular beliefs and superstitions. Dryden would also regard such exercises as ‘imitation’ since it is drawing on “other men’s fancies”.

Scott-James has aptly remarked, "he clears the ground for himself by brushing away all the arbitrary bans upon freedom of composition and freedom of thought.

He refuses to be cowed by the French playwrights and critics.

He sees no reason why tragic-comedy should be forbidden because it mingles mirth with serious plot, nor will he join blaming the variety and copiousness of the English plays, with their under-plots or by-concernments, because they do not conform to the French ideal of singleness of plot.

Even to Aristotle he refuses to render slavish homage. "It is not enough that Aristotle has said so, for Aristotle drew his models of tragedy from Sophocles and Euripides: and, if he had seen ours, might have changed his mind."

**His Contribution to Descriptive Criticism**

"The first Englishman to attempt any extended descriptive criticism," says George Watson, "was John Dryden." The earlier English criticism was either theoretical or legislative.

The critics were merely content to lay down the rules.

It is Dryden who inaugurates the era of descriptive criticism; he was qualified for the function by his wide reading and learning.
He had, "not only read and digested Sophocles, Euripides, Theocritus and Virgil, but also Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Fletcher, and a host of other writers, both ancient and modern.

It is in his criticism that literary analysis, the dominant concern of the modern critic, emerges for the first time.

There is no surviving Elizabethan analysis of an Elizabethan play, and no contemporary analysis of a Metaphysical poem.

It is in Dryden's examen of The Silent Woman that we get the first elaborate critical analysis of a literary work in English. Both Saintsbury and George Watson agree that the "Examen is something quite new" in the history of English literary criticism.

Equally unique are his enthusiastic and loving appreciations of Shakespeare, Fletcher and Beaumont, and Ben Jonson.

Nothing like this had previously been seen in English, while to this day his character of Shakespeare is 'one of the pieces of universal criticism.' Dryden thus affirms at the right moment, "the native element," in literature.

Pioneer in the field of historical criticism

Dryden is also a pioneer in the field of historical criticism. He recognizes that the genius and temperament differ from age to age, and hence literature in different periods of history is bound to be different.

He traces the decay of literature in the Pre-Restoration era to historical causes and its revival, "to the restoration of our happiness." Thus he recognizes that the Elizabethan Drama and the Restoration Drama are governed by different literary conventions.

His Contribution to Comparative Criticism

Dryden has added a new dimension to criticism by his method of comparative analysis.

His comparative studies of Greek, Roman, French and English writers show not only the wide range of his knowledge but also the catholicity of his taste and sensitiveness to literary values in whatever literature they may be found. In this connection, as David Daiches observes, "We must remember, too, that Dryden's method shifts according to the work he is discussing; he was intelligent and sensitive enough as a critic to realize that different kinds of works require different critical approaches.

He would never have analysed Shakespeare the way he analysed Jonson, for he knew that they were doing different sorts of thing."This makes Dryden's criticism highly individualised and free from the rigidity of a system.
His Contribution to Theoretical Criticism

- In the field of theoretical criticism, Dryden's best contribution lies in the modification of the ancient doctrines rather than in the creation of new theories.

- He tested every accepted critical canon of the ancients in the light of 'modernity' and exploded some of their outmoded concepts.

- He recognised the fundamental truth that 'the climate, the age, the disposition of the people, to which a poet writes, may be so different, that what pleased the Greeks would not satisfy an English audience."

The affirmation of the Native Element

- "The great work of Dryden in criticism," observes T. S. Eliot, "is that at the right moment he became conscious of the necessity of affirming the native element in literature."

- His vindication of the English dramatist of the preceding age is regarded as a glorious example of 'national self-appreciation'. "In an age of transition and much confusion, he set criticism on new and fruitful lines, pointing to other standards and methods than those commanded by the French neo-classical school" (Atkins).

His Faults

- His criticism suffers from well-marked faults.

- He is often prejudiced in favour of his country, and his own age, often his criticism is in the nature of special pleading, sometimes he commits errors of fact or conveniently ignores awkward facts.

- He is guilty of many inconsistencies and is often vague and desultory.

- But despite these faults it must be acknowledge that "he established the English fashion of dramatizing,.....the fashion of aiming at delight, at truth, at justice, at nature, at poetry, and letting the rules take care of themselves" (Saintsbury).

John Dryden’s Contributions

- John Dryden is rightly considered as “the father of English Criticism”.

- He was the first to teach the English people to determine the merit of composition upon principles.
With Dryden, a new era of criticism began. Before, Dryden, there were only occasional utterances on the critical art. (e.g. Ben Jonson and Philip Sidney) Though Dryden’s criticism was of scattered nature; he paid attention to almost all literary forms and expressed his views on them.

Except An Essay of Dramatic Poesy, Dryden wrote no formal treatise on criticism.

His critical views are found mostly in the prefaces to his poetical works or to those of others.

**Nature of poetry**

- Dryden agrees with Aristotle’s definition of poetry as a process of imitation.
- It imitates facts past or present, popular beliefs, superstitions and things in their ideal form. Dryden defends Shakespeare’s use of the supernatural founded on popular beliefs.
- For, it is still an imitation though of other men’s fancies.
- According to him, poetry and painting are not only true imitations of nature but of the best nature, i.e., a much greater criticism.

**Function of poetry**

- While, Plato wanted poetry to instruct the reader and Aristotle to delight, Dryden incorporated both views.
- The final end of poetry, according to Dryden is delight and transport rather than instruction.
- To realise it, it does not merely imitate life, but offers its own version of it – ‘a beautiful resemblance of the whole’.
- The poet is neither a teacher nor a bare imitator – a photographer – but a creator.
- He is one who, with life or nature as his raw material, produces a new thing altogether, resembling the original in its basis but different from it in the super structure
  - a work of art rather than a y.
  According to Dryden, poetry is a work of art rather than mere imitation.

**Dramatic poesy**

Drama claimed most of Dryden’s attention. On the introduction of unpalatable or incredible scenes such as battles and deaths on the stage, he says that death can never be imitated to a just
Dryden does not subscribe to the accepted interpretation of the three Unities; that the plot should be single, the time of action twenty four hours, and the place the same everywhere (where scene leads to scene in unbroken chain).

He favours the weaving of a sub plot into the main plot.

He feels that the plot time can be increased a little more to allow for greater maturity of the plot.

In the same way, the unity of place cannot be maintained as the time taken by the events of the play determines the location of the scene and the unity of place can be waived.

Dryden considers the unities of Time and Place too rigorous and they leave little scope for the development of plot and character.

**Tragedy**

- Dryden’s definition of tragedy is the same as Aristotle’s: ‘an imitation of one, entire, great and probable action; not told but represented, which by moving in us fear and pity is conducive to the purging of those two emotions in our minds’.
- Dryden merely follows Aristotle and Horace in his remarks on the tragic hero and other characters in Tragedy. Dryden has no use for the group of characters called ‘chorus’ in the Greek Tragedy.

**Comedy**

Dryden has not much of his own to say on comedy. Following Aristotle, he calls it ‘a representation of human life in inferior persons and low subjects. To the question whether comedy delights or instructs, Dryden says that the first end of comedy is delight and instruction only the second.

The persons in comedy are of a lower quality, the action is little and the faults and vices are but the sallies of youth and frailties of human nature; they are not premeditated crimes.

Dryden wanted English comedy to be more refined than it was. According to him, Ben Jonson had only specialised in ‘humour’ and what it lacked was ‘wit’.

As repartee is ‘one of the chiepest graces of comedy’, the greatest pleasure of the audience is ‘a chance exchange of wit, kept up on both sides, and swiftly managed’.
Beaumont and Fletcher were adept in the art.

What Dryden wanted in comedy was ‘refined laughter’ rather than the coarse one arising out of the display of ‘humours’ or eccentric traits in individuals.

While in a comedy of ‘humours’ the spectators laughed at the ‘humorous’ character, in a comedy of wit (or comedy of manners as it grew) they laughed with the witty one.

**Epic**

- Dryden is with the French critics in considering the epic superior to the tragedy.
- He asks, ‘what virtue is there in a tragedy which is not contained in an epic poem.
- He stresses that the epic is certainly the greatest work of human nature, Aristotle had preferred the tragedy to the epic.
- Regarding the visual appeal of the tragedy, Dryden urges three points: that it is the actor’s work as much as the poet’s and so the poet alone cannot deserve credit for it that the stage is handicapped to show many things – big armies, for instance – in words; and that while we have leisure to digest what we read in the epic, we miss many beauties of a play in the performance. Dryden disagrees with Aristotle again in insisting on a moral in the epic.

**Satire**

- In the first instance, the satire must have unity of design, confining itself for that purpose to one subject or principally one. In other words, the satirist should choose one vice or folly for his target, as the epic poet chooses one character for his special praise and make all others subservient to it as the epic poet does the other characters.
- In the same way, he should extol ‘someone precept of moral virtue’. For the manner of the satire, Dryden would prefer ‘fine raillery’.

**An Essay on Dramatic Poesy: An Introduction**

In An Essay on ‘Dramatic Poesy’ there are four speakers. Each one argues strongly as to which one is better, “Ancient or Modern, and French or English?”

The Essay is written in the form of a dialogue involving four gentlemen:

Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius and Neander. Neander seems to speak for Dryden himself. Eugenius takes the side of the modern English dramatists by criticising the faults of the classical
playwrights who did not themselves observe the unity of place. But Crites defends the ancient and pointed out that they invited the principles of dramatic art enunciated by Aristotle and Horace.

Crites opposes rhyme in plays and argues that though the moderns excel in science; the ancient age was the true age of poetry. Lesideius defends the French playwrights and attacks the English tendency to mix genres. He defines a play as a just and lively image of human and the change of fortune to which it is subject for the delight and instruction of mankind. The dialogue will be discussed in detail later in this unit.

- Neander favours the Moderns, respects the Ancients, critical to rigid rules of dramas and he favours rhyme if it is in proper place like in grand subject matter.
- Neander a spokesperson of Dryden argues that tragic comedy is the best form for a play; because it is the closest to life in which emotions are heightened by both mirth and sadness.
- He also finds subplots as an integral part to enrich a play. He finds the French drama, with its single action.
- Neander favours the violation of the unities because it leads to the variety in the English plays.
- The unities have a narrowing and crumpling effect on the French plays, which are often betrayed into absurdities from which the English plays are free.
- The violation of unities helps the English playwright to present a mere, just and lively image of human nature.
- In his comparison of French and English drama, Neander characterises the best proofs of the Elizabethan playwrights.
- He praises Shakespeare, ancients and moderns. Neander comes to the end for the superiority of the Elizabethans with a close examination of a play by Jonson which Neander believes a perfect demonstration that the English were capable of following the classical rules. In this way, Dryden’s commitment to the neoclassical tradition is displayed.
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