

## LITERARY CRITICISM OF JOHN DRYDEN

### **JOHN DRYDEN (1631 – 1700)**

John Dryden is rightly considered to be “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 upholds 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**

The final end of poetry, according to Dryden is delight and transport rather than instruction. To realize it, it does not merely imitate life, but offers its own 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 copy.

#### **Dramatic poetry**

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 height and it can be avoided. He sees nothing wrong in other physical action – battles, duels and the like.

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 time can be increased a little more to allow for a 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, for it determines the location of the scene and the unity of place can be waived. Dryden considers that the unities of Time and Place are 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 us in 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 to 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 follies 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 specialized in 'humour' and what it lacked was 'wit'. As repartee (wit) is 'one of the chiefest 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 'humourous' 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. In the same way, he should extol 'someone precept of moral virtue'. For the manner of the satire, Dryden would prefer 'fine raillery'.

## **Criticism**

According to Dryden, a critic has to understand that a writer writes to his own age and people of which he himself is a product. He advocates a close study of the ancient models not to imitate them blindly as a thorough going neo-classicist would do but to recapture their magic to treat them as a torch to enlighten our own passage. It is the spirit of the classics that matters more than their rules. Yet these rules are not without their value, for without rules, there can be no art. Besides, invention (the disposition of a work), there are two other parts of a work – design (or arrangement) and expression. Dryden mentions the appropriate rules laid down by Aristotle. But it is not the observance of rules that makes a work great but its capacity to delight and transport. It is not the business of criticism to detect petty faults but to discover those great beauties that make it immortal.

## **The Value of his criticism**

Dryden's criticism is partly a restatement of the precepts of Aristotle, partly a plea for French neo-classicism and partly a deviation from both under the influence of Longinus and Saint Evremond. From Aristotle he learnt a respect for rules. French Neo-classicism taught him to prefer the epic to tragedy, to insist on a moral in it and many of the things. And to Longinus and Saint Evremond he owed a respect for his own judgement.

Dryden is a liberal classicist who would adjust the rules of the ancients to the genius of the age, to which a poet writes.

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