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Topic: John Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*

John Dryden was born in 1631 and died in 1700. Dr Samuel Johnson has called him 'the father of English criticism.' Dryden is also known as the critics' critic as he has set a certain standard for the literary critics to venture into the world of literary criticism. Dryden was influenced by the classical writers and he has implemented this classical tendency in his writings. His reputation as a critic is primarily based upon *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), although he has written many other pieces of literary criticism. He has written this work in the form of a debate where four characters discuss the merits and demerits of European dramatic poetry. The four characters are Crites, who represents Dryden's brother-in-law Sir Robert Howard, Lisideius, who represents Sir Charles Sedley, Eugenius, who represents Lord Buchhurst and Neander, who represents Dryden himself. The purpose of writing this work, as mentioned in the introductory note *To The Reader*, is "to vindicate the honour of our English writers from the censure of those who unjustly prefer the French before them". Among these four characters, Crites supports ancient drama, Lisideius prefers French drama, Eugenius, like Neander, supports Elizabethan English drama and Neander defends English drama in general and defends the contemporary use of rhyme. Before starting the debate they come to a mutual agreement that they will restrict their discussion to dramatic poetry only and ignore other forms of literature.

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Crites, representing the ancients, begins the case of the ancients by saying that drama had seen early maturity in the hands of the ancients. That is why the ancients are regarded with high esteem even today unlike the artists of the other generations. Other writers are mere imitators of the ancients and the imitation is “monstrous and disfigured.” He further says that all the rules of dramatic poetry are provided by the ancient writers Aristotle and Horace in *Poetics* and *Art of Poetry* respectively, but the modern writers have added nothing of their own. He discusses in length the benefits of following the rules of the three unities of time, place and action. Crites is against the use of rhyme in all forms of play because it looks very absurd since “no man, without premeditation, speaks in rhyme, neither ought he do it on the stage”. Finally, he says that the ancient dramatists had an excellent power of expression which is a great lacuna in the dramatists of the later years.

Eugenius, representing the modern dramatists, begins his argument by saying that the modern dramatists have improved the rules of the ancients. The best improvement is the superior construction of the plot by dividing it into five acts. He also says that the ancient tragedies, most of the time, were based upon the common story of either Thebes or Troy. The audience already knew the story before they came to see the enactment. So far as the ancient comedies are concerned, the characters were types not individuals. He goes on to put charges against the ancients that they themselves did not follow all the three unities. Again, according to him, except the unity of action, the other two unities were actually French in origin not Aristotelian. Being strict followers of rules, the ancients had never written with variety. They wrote either tragedy or comedy. There is no love scene in their dramas which made the dramas, unlike the modern, very boring. The next charge that Eugenius puts against the ancients is that there is no poetic justice

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in the ancient plays. It is often seen in their dramas that villains are rewarded and the virtuous characters are punished. After listening to the arguments made by Eugenius, Crites here interferes and says that the modern dramatists have written according to the taste of their own generation. If the ancient writers were present now they would have made several changes in their dramas.

Lisideius, representing the case of the French dramatists, accepts the fact the English dramatists have excelled the French previously. But, with the arrival of writers like Richelieu, Corneille et al, the French drama has become unparalleled in the whole Europe in the last forty years. The French dramatists have scrupulously followed the three unities. They have restricted their plot to one place and have never crossed thirty hours in their plays. So far as the unity of action is concerned, they have never introduced any sub plot in a drama. The English practice of tragicomedy is a very absurd thing in a play for the French. Lisideius says “There is no theatre in the world has anything so absurd as the English tragicomedy”. He then says that, unlike the ancients, the French dramatists have modified the familiar history before presenting it on the stage. Instead of taking a long historical story into account, which William Shakespeare did in his plays, the French dramatists have depicted only the interesting parts of history by following the unity of time. To deal with historical stories, they had to present the battle scenes which required an army. Hence, the French dramatists invented the technique of narration. Battle scenes were narrated instead of being presented on the stage. But the English dramatists have represented a battle scene with a trumpet and five men behind it, which, according to Lisideius, creates a feeling of amusement instead of seriousness among spectators. The next point that he makes is that the ending of French plays are logical unlike the English plays where sudden reversal takes place, for example, a villain changes into an honest person all of a sudden without

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any logic behind it. Finally, he supports the use of rhyme and prefers blank verse in tragedies.

Neander, advocating for the whole English drama, now puts his arguments. Firstly, he acknowledges the regularity and decorum that the French dramatists have maintained in their dramas. But, they lack the touch of real life by scrupulously following the rules. The French plays “are indeed the beauties of statue, but not of man, because not animated with soul of poesy, which is imitation of humour and passions”. He then defends the use of tragicomedy and violation of the rules of three unities in the English plays. According to him, dramas are representation of life. In real life it is quite possible for us to come across a tragic and a comic scene in a matter of few seconds. Therefore, by writing tragicomedies the English writers add more lifelikeness in the plays. By violating the three unities the English dramatists could provide pleasing variety. Some of the English dramatists also followed the three unities, but the effectiveness of these dramas is limited in comparison to those who did not follow the unities. For example, Ben Jonson’s *The silent Woman* followed all the unities but its audience is limited. Neander, however, appreciates the French technique of narrating the battle scenes in order to achieve more lifelikeness. But he adds that the English audience is habituated with such small battle scenes and they are delighted to see battle scenes on the stage. He then goes on appreciating the great English dramatists such as Shakespeare, Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher. Finally, Neander gives his views on rhyme by saying that it should be limited to serious plays only.

Thus, in his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, Dryden gives a historical analysis of the dramatic form by comparing the ancients, the French and the English dramatists. He has a great regard for the ancients and acknowledged the contribution of the French dramatists, but he is against blind imitation of form. End

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is important for him instead of means as he says: “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”.

Please visit the following links for further study:

1. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69377/an-essay-of-dramatic-poesy>
2. <https://augustinestenza.wordpress.com/2019/08/01/an-essay-on-dramatic-poesy-summary/>
3. <https://www.bachelorandmaster.com/criticaltheories/essay-on-dramatic-poesy.html>
4. <https://englishsummary.com/essay-dramatic-poesy-dryden-summary/>

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