

AN ESSAY ON DRAMATIC POESY: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

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Dryden's *An Essay on Dramatic Poesy* is a critique of the neoclassical theory of art in general and dramatic art in particular from the perspective of an English critic. The Essay dramatizes an objective and critical debate, in a form reminiscent of Platonic dialogue, between four Restoration gentlemen while floating down the Thames on a barge to catch the sound of "distant Thunder" as the English and the Dutch "disputed the command of the greater half of the Globe." The four characters are usually identified with contemporary figures. The three "persons of Wit and Quality" are Sir Robert Howard (Crites), Charles Sackville, Lord Buckhurst (Eugenius), and Sir Charles Sedley (Lisideius), while the fourth character, Neander, has been identified as Dryden himself.

These four characters, who represent four critical positions contend the relative merits of Ancient and Modern drama, of English and French theatrical practice. What Dryden intends to achieve through this polemic is, as T. S. Eliot suggested in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, "the necessity of affirming the native element in literature." In fact, the Essay remains speculative in its presentation of antithetical ideas, and is best characterized by Dryden's own explanation in his *Defence of An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1688), "My whole discourse was sceptical... You see it is a dialogue sustained by persons of several opinions, all of them left doubtful, to be determined by the readers in general."

In the beginning, Lisideius proposes quite a general definition for a play- "A just and lively Image of Human Nature"- which everyone accepts. Then they all provide examples of what they consider to be the best dramatic representation. Crites begins the debate with his advocacy of the Ancients: the radically classical viewpoint. It is true that he shows his preference for the plays of "the last age" (Elizabethan and Jacobean) over the present; he clearly affirms that in classical drama we find the eternal verities, which have never received more powerful expression. The current age has found its own genius in scientific progress, but in the theater it must conform to the rules provided by its predecessors. The application of the pseudo-Aristotelian "Unities" is an example of how far short of the classical model the Moderns have fallen. Eugenius, in response, attempts to turn Crites' points against him. He says that progress in science has been equally matched by progress in arts. The Moderns have improved upon the older dramatists' hackneyed exploitation of myth. They are more precise observers of the "Unities," which are mostly the product of continental criticism. Moreover, the modern theater has corrected the moral laxity of the Ancients, whose plays too often ignored a "Prosperous Wickedness, and an Unhappy Piety."

Lisideius introduces the second topic of the debate. He accepts the success of the earlier English stage, but relocates modern classicism in France. The French are strict observers of the "Unities". They have rejected that peculiar English hybrid, the tragicomedy. They have modernized and simplified their plots to give them a familiar credibility and have engaged in a more searching exploration of human passion. Narration has, to an extent, replaced action with the result that death scenes and acts of violence do not distract the performances. This has helped in securing a new verisimilitude.

Neander offers the concluding reply and summarizes the discussion on Dryden's behalf. He acknowledges the superior "decorum" of French drama, but qualifies his approval by saying that French plays enjoy only the lifeless beauty of a statue. With regard to 'Unity of Place', he apparently ridicules the scenery moving around two motionless characters as they continuously orate. The English stage, on the other hand, is more vital and more exciting. Subplots and tragicomedy provide variety and contrast; dramatic dialogue is better suited to passion, and even violent action is justified on the ground that it appeals to popular taste. Thus, Neander attempts a more realistic definition of a play by shifting the focus from "just" to "lively," from an exact but mechanical verisimilitude to a more dynamic likeness to life.

Despite Dryden's claim that the Essay is a skeptical discourse, Neander's conclusion point to Dryden's actual intention of vindicating English drama. English drama is one which adequately conform to the rules, but which also tends to be inclusive enough to accommodate the wilder genius of a Shakespeare who "when he describes any thing, you more than see it, you feel it too." Thus, An Essay on Dramatic Poesy, in a dialogical form, examines different critical arguments of his contemporary England regarding dramatic poetry. The justification of English theatre by Dryden through Neander marks a new phase in the British history when writing poetry was as significant as defining culture and new idioms of art.

It is, thus, clear that An Essay on Dramatic Poesy is an account of neo-classical theory of art in general. It is important to note that the concept of imitation was central to the neoclassical literary theory and practice. Mimesis was understood as the imitation of nature as objects or phenomena. Neoclassicists believed that writers should strive to achieve excellence by imitating the great writers of the past. Dryden was himself a neoclassic critic, and as such he dealt with issues of form and morality in drama. However, he was not dogmatic, imitating mechanically the classical unities or the notions of what constitutes a "proper" character for the stage. He relied heavily on Corneille, and through him on Horace, which placed him in the great tradition of true English critic. He was sensitive enough to realize that the essence of art lies in reinvention and rediscovery. For him, the complex notion of nature, which closely related to the notion of imitation, also implied aspects of the real world and human behaviour, what was central, timeless, and universal in human experience. From this point of view, it was natural on his part to defend Subplots and tragicomedy which provide variety and achieve 'verisimilitude' to nature as one experiences in real life.

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The four speakers: Crites, Eugenius, Lasideius and Neander.

The critical positions held by the four characters:

Crites- Ancients

Eugenius- Moderns

Lasideius- The French

Neander- The English