

## DRYDEN AS THE FATHER OF ENGLISH CRITICISM

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**ABSTRACT:** *Dryden as the father of English criticism by Dr. Johnson with an emphasis on the author's style and the criticism is the most important concern in this paper. 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.*

**KEYWORDS:** Dryden, criticism, English

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### INTRODUCTION

It seems necessary to write down some lines about the author. John Dryden was born at the vicarage of Aldwinkle, Northampton Shire, on August 9, 1631, son of Erasmus Dryden and Mary Pickering. His family was Parliamentary supporters with Puritan leanings. He attended Westminster School as a king's scholar under Richard Busby and was an avid student of the classics. While at Westminster, Dryden published his first verses, an elegy "Upon the Death of Lord Hastings", in *Lachrymæ Musarum* (1649). He entered Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1650, and took a BA in 1654. Dryden died on April 30, 1700, soon after the publication of the *Fables*, of inflammation caused by gout. He was buried in Westminster Abbey. Dryden was a good playwright and poet, a fine translator, a solid critic, and an excellent satirist whose works are still worthy of much admiration.

### DISCUSSION

Dr. Johnson in the lives of the English poets calls Dryden the father of English criticism. He says, "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 was very correct in giving Dryden this honor because before him there was no consistent critic in England. Sidney and Ben Jonson were, of course, there but they only made occasional observations without producing any consistent critical work or establishing any critical theory. Dryden's principal critic work is his Essay of Dramatic Poesy, though his critical observations are also found in the prefaces

to several of his works, especially in the Preface to the Fables. The *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* establishes him as the first historical critic, first comparative critic, first descriptive critic, and the Independent English critic.

The *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* is developed in the form of dialogues amongst four interlocutors representing four different literatures or literary ages. They are:

1. **CRITES** speaks for the ancient dramatists
2. **LISIDEIUS** speaks for the French.
3. **EUGENIUS** speaks for the English literature of the ‘last age.’
4. **NEANDER** speaks for England and liberty.

In this way he (Dryden) develops historical, comparative, and descriptive forms of criticism, and finally gives his own independent views through the replies of Neander. He respects the ancient Greek and Roman principles but he refuses to adhere to them slavishly, especially in respect of Tragi-comedy and observance of the three Dramatic Unities. Thus Dryden began a great regular era of criticism, and showed the way to his countrymen how to be great as creative authors as well as critical evaluators and what makes great literature. Thus he is indeed the “Father of English Criticism.”

### **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.

### **Historical method of criticism:**

Dryden was also the first critic to make use of the historical method of criticism. He believed that every literary work bears the stamp of the age in which it is produced. A literary work can be best evaluated by placing it in the socio – historical background in which it is produced. Many plays of Shakespeare or Spenser’s faerie queene, or Ben Jonson’s comedies of Humours, or Bacan’s essays cannot be correctly evaluated without placing them in the background of the Elizabethan age.

Chaucer's prologue to the Canterbury tales or Langland's the vision of piers the Plowman cannot be rightly appreciated without placing them in the socio – historical background of medieval England. Dryden was the first critic to apply this historical method of criticism.

### **Dryden's Critical Works:**

Dryden was truly a versatile man of letters. He was a playwright (both tragic and comic), a vigorous and fluent prose writer (justifiably the father of modern English prose), a great poet (one of the best satiric poets of England so far), a verse translator, and, of course, a great literary critic. His literary criticism makes a pretty sizable volume. Much of it, however, is informal, occasional, self-vindicating, and, as F. R. Leavis terms it in his appreciation of Dr. Johnson as a critic in a *Scrutiny* number, "dated". Dryden wrote only one formal critical work—the famous essay *Of Dramatic Poesie*. The rest of his critical work consists of three classical lives (Plutarch, Polybius, and Lucian), as many as twenty-five critical prefaces to his own works, and a few more prefaces to the works of his contemporaries. These critical prefaces are so many bills of fare as well as apologies for the writings to which they are prefixed. In his critical works Dryden deals, as the occasion arises, with most literary questions which were the burning issues of his day, as also some fundamental problems of literary creation, apprehension, and appreciation which are as important today as they were at the very inchoation of literature. He deals, satisfactorily or otherwise, with such issues as the process of literary creation, the permissibility or otherwise of tragi-comedy, the three unities the Daniel-Campion controversy over rhyme versus blank verse, the nature and function of comedy, tragedy, and poetry in general, the function and test of good satire, and many others. Here is, indeed, to steal a phrase from him, "God plenty". No English literary critic before Dryden had been so vast in range or sterling in quality.

### **Dryden's Liberalism, Scepticism, Dynamism, and Probabilism**

As a literary critic, Dryden was certainly influenced by ancient Greek and Roman critics (such as Aristotle, Longinus, and Horace) and later Italian and contemporary French critics (such as Rabin and Boileau). But this influence did not go beyond a limit. The age in which, he lived accepted this influence in all spheres of literature and Dryden was not isolationist enough to escape the spirit of the age. However, his fundamental liberalism, scepticism, dynamism, and probabilism—not to speak of his admirable sanity and common sense—helped him to fight quite a few dogmas and conventions imported from abroad. The French neo-classicists of his age stuck to their Aristotelian guns with tenacity. While paying due respect to Aristotle, Dryden refused to swear by his name. He demolished, for example, the formidable trinity of the so-called "three unities," the prejudice against tragi-comedy, and the rigorous enforcement of the principle of decorum. He was not a hidebound neo-Aristotelian like his contemporary Rhymer who denounced Shakespeare for his refusal to fall in line with the principles of Aristotle. Dryden seems to have had belief, like Longinus and the romantics, in inspiration and the inborn creative power of the poet. He favored the romantic extravagances of Shakespeare and candidly criticised ancient Roman and contemporary French drama which strictly followed all the "rules." Of course, he favored "regularity" and deference to some basic "rules" of composition, but, unlike, say, Rhymer, he refused to worship these rules and to consider them as substitutes for real inspiration and intensity of expression. The bit and the bridle are necessary, but there has to be a horse first. "Now what, I

beseech thee," asks he "is more easy than to write a regular French play, or more difficult than write an irregular English one, like those of Fletcher, or of Shakespeare?"

Dryden's intellectual scepticism, which Louis I. Bredvold stresses in *The Intellectual Milieu of John Dryden*, was greatly responsible for his liberal and unorthodox outlook. His probabilism as a literary critic is both his strength and weakness. While discussing an issue, he argues, very often, from both the sides and leaves the conclusion hanging in the air. In the essay *Of Dramatic Poesie*, for instance, he compares ancient and modern drama, Elizabethan playwrights of his country and French play wrights of his own age, and rhyme and blank verse; but these issues are discussed by four interlocutors, and Dryden (though very easily recognisable in Neander) is, apparently at least, non-committal. His somersault on the question of the relative merit of rhyme and blank verse may be variously quoted as a time-serving trick or as an example of his dynamism, but the undeniable fact remains that as a literary critic he is flexible enough to keep the issue open. Watson remarks : "Dryden's whole career as a critic is permeated by what we might tactfully call his sense of occasion: Pyrrhonism, or philosophical scepticism, liberated him from the tyranny of truth." And further : "Dryden is remarkable as a critic not only for the casual ease with which he contradicts himself, but for the care he takes in advance to ensure that there will not be much in future to contradict.

### **Dryden-the Father of English Descriptive Criticism**

Out of this "God's plenty" of Dryden's critical works perhaps the most valuable passages are those which constitute descriptive criticism. George Watson in his excellent work *The Literary Critics* divides literary criticism into three broad categories listed below:

- "Legislative criticism, including books-of rhetoric." Such criticism claims to teach the poet how to write, or write better. Thus it is meant for the writer and not the reader of poetry. Such criticism flourished before Dryden who broke new ground.
- "Theoretical criticism or literary aesthetics." Such criticism had also become almost a defunct force. Today it has come back with a vengeance in the shape of various literary theories.
- "Descriptive criticism or the analysis of existing literary works." "This", says Watson "is the youngest of the three forms, by far the most voluminous and the only one which today possesses any life and vigour of its own."

Whether or not Dryden is "the father of English criticism" it is fair enough to agree with Watson that "he is clearly the founder of descriptive criticism in English." All English literary critics before him—such as Gascoigne, Puttenham, Sidney, and Ben Jonson—were critics of the legislative or theoretical kind. None of them concerned him with given literary works for interpretation and appreciation. Of course, now and then, Dryden's predecessors did say good or bad things about this or that writer, or this or that literary composition; for instance, Sidney praised Shakespeare and commented on his contemporaries. However, such stray comments were not grounded on any carefully formulated principles of appreciation. "Audiences", says Dr. Johnson, "applauded by instinct, and poets perhaps often pleased by chance." Dryden was to repeat Dr. Johnson's words, "the writer who first taught us to determine upon principles the merit of composition." Dryden "practised" what he "taught." He was the first in England "to attempt extended descriptive

criticism." Thus he established a new tradition and did a signal service to literary criticism. Watson says: "The modern preoccupation with literary analysis emerges, patchily but unmistakably, in his prejudiced and partisan interest in his own plays and poems."

It is to be noted that every one of Dryden's prefaces to his own works is of the nature of an apologia meant to defend in advance the poet's reputation by attempting to answer the possible objection likely to be raised. Such self-justification leads him often to the analysis of his creative works and the discussion of principles to determine "the merit of composition."

### **Dryden-the Father of Comparative Criticism:**

Commenting upon Dryden's "examen" of *The Silent Woman* in the essay *Of Dramatic Poesie*, Watson says: "The chief triumph of the examen lies in its attempt at comparative criticism, in its balancing of the qualities of the English drama against those of the French. It is undeniably the first example of such criticism in English, and among the very earliest in any modern language. "Dryden says Scott-James "opens a new field of comparative criticism." In the course of his critical works, Dryden critically compares Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, Chaucer and Ovid, Chaucer and Boccaccio, Horace and Juvenal, ancient and modern drama, contemporary French and English drama, Elizabethan and Restoration drama, rhyme and blank verse as vehicles of drama, and so on. This method of comparative criticism is very rewarding and illuminating and a favorite instrument of modern critics.

### **CONCLUSION**

In general, English literary criticism before Dryden was patchy, ill-organized, cursory, perfunctory, ill-digested, and heavily leaning on ancient Greek and Roman, and more recent Italian and French, criticism. It had no identity or even life of its own. Moreover, an overwhelming proportion of it was criticism of the legislative, and little of it that of the descriptive, kind. Dryden evolved and articulated an impressive body of critical principles for practical literary appreciation and offered good examples of descriptive criticism himself. It was said of Augustus that he found Rome brick and left it marble. Saints bury avers that Dryden's contribution to English poetry was the same as Augustus' contribution to Rome. With still more justice we could say that Dryden found English literary criticism "brick" and left it "marble."

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