

An Essay of Dramatic Poesy

John Dryden

An Overview

An Essay of Dramatic Poesy gives an explicit account of neo-classical theory of art in general. Dryden is a neoclassic critic, and as such he deals in his criticism with issues of form and morality in drama. However, he is not a rule bound critic, tied down to the classical unities or to notions of what constitutes a "proper" character for the stage. He relies heavily on Corneille - and through him on Horace - which places him in a pragmatic tradition.

Dryden wrote this essay as a dramatic dialogue with four characters **Eugenius**, **Crites**, **Lisideius** and **Neander** representing four critical positions. These four critical positions deal with five issues. **Eugenius** (whose name may mean "well born") **favors the moderns over the ancients**, arguing that the moderns exceed the ancients because of having learned and profited from their example. **Crites argues in favor of the ancients:** they established the unities; dramatic rules were spelled out by Aristotle which the current-and esteemed-French playwrights follow; and Ben Jonson-the greatest English playwright, according to Crites-followed the ancients' example by adhering to the unities.

Lisideius argues that French drama is superior to English drama, basing this opinion of the French writer's close adherence to the classical separation of comedy and tragedy. For Lisideius "no theater in the world has anything so absurd as the English tragicomedy; in two hours and a half, we run through all the fits of Bedlam." **Neander favors the moderns, but does not disparage the ancients. He also favors English drama-and has some critical - things to say of French drama:** "those beauties of the French poesy are such as will raise perfection higher where it is, but are not sufficient to give it where it is not: they are indeed the beauties of a statue, but not of a man." **Neander goes on to defend tragicomedy:** "contraries, when placed near, set off each other. A continued gravity keeps the spirit too much bent; we must refresh it sometimes." Tragicomedy increases the effectiveness of both tragic and comic elements by 'way of contrast. Neander asserts that "we have invented, increased, -and perfected a more pleasant way of writing for the stage . . . tragicomedy."

Neander criticizes French drama essentially for its smallness: its pursuit of only one plot without subplots; its tendency to show too little action; its "servile observations of the unities...dearth of plot, and narrowness of imagination" are all qualities which render it inferior to English drama. **Neander extends his criticism of French drama - into his reasoning for his preference for Shakespeare over Ben Jonson. Shakespeare "had the largest and most comprehensive soul," while Jonson was "the most learned and judicious writer which any theater ever had."** Ultimately, Neander prefers Shakespeare for his greater scope, his greater faithfulness to life, as compared to Jonson's relatively small scope and French/Classical tendency to deal in "the beauties of a statue, but not of a Man."

Crites objects to rhyme in plays: "since no man without premeditation speaks in rhyme, neither ought he to do it on the stage." He cites Aristotle as saying that it is, **"best to write tragedy in that kind of verse . . . which is nearest prose"** as a justification for **banishing rhyme, from drama in favor of blank verse** (unrhymed iambic pentameter). Even though blank verse lines are no more spontaneous than are rhymed lines, they are still to be preferred because they are "nearest nature": "Rhyme is incapable of expressing the greatest thought naturally, and the lowest it cannot with any grace: for what is more unbecoming the majesty of verse, than to call a servant, or bid a door be shut in rhyme?"

Neander respond to the objections against rhyme by admitting that **"verse so tedious" is inappropriate to drama** (and to anything else). **"Natural" rhymed verse is, however, just as appropriate to dramatic as to non-dramatic poetry:** the test of the "naturalness" of rhyme is how well-chosen the rhymes are. Is the sense of the verses tied down to, and limited by, the rhymes, or are the rhymes in service to, and an enhancement of, the sense of the verses?

The main point of Dryden's essay seems to be a valuation of becoming (the striving, nature-imitating, large scope of tragicomedies and Shakespeare) over being (the static perfection of the ideal-imitating Classical/French/Jonsonian drama).

Dryden prescriptive in nature, defines dramatic art as an imitation with the aim to delight and to teach, and is considered a just and lively image of human nature representing its passions and humors for the delight and instruction of mankind. Dryden emphasizes the idea of decorum in the work of art.

