

AN ESSAY OF DRAMATIC POESY

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MAIN ARGUMENTS

Crites's Arguments in favour of the Ancients:

Crites develops the main points in defending the ancients and raises objections to modern plays. The Moderns are still imitating the Ancients and using their forms and subjects, relying on Aristotle and Horace, adding nothing new and yet not following their good advice closely either, especially with respect to the Unities of time, place and action. While the unity of time suggests that all the action should be portrayed within a single day, the English plays attempt to use long periods of time, sometimes years. In terms of place, the setting should be the same from beginning to end with the scenes marked by the entrances and exits of the persons having business within each. The English, on the other hand, try to have all kinds of places, even far off countries, shown within a single play. The third unity, that of action, requires that the play "aim at one great and complete action", but the English have all kinds of sub-plots which destroy the unity of the action.

In anticipating the objection that the Ancients' language is not as vital as the Moderns's, Crites says that we have to remember that we are probably missing a lot of subtleties because the languages are dead and the customs are far removed from this time.

Crites uses Ben Jonson as the example of the best in English drama, saying that he followed the Ancients "in all things" and offered nothing really new in terms of "serious thoughts".

Crites Favours the Ancients:

(i) The superiority of the Ancients is established by the very fact that the Moderns simply imitate them, and build on the foundations laid by them. The Ancients are the acknowledged models of the Moderns.

(ii) The Ancients had a special genius for drama, and in their particular branch of poetry they could reach perfection. Just as they excel them in drama.

(iii) Thirdly, in ancient Greece and Rome poetry was more honoured than any other branch of knowledge. Poets were encouraged to excel in this field through frequent competitions, judges were appointed and the dramatists were rewarded according to their merits. But in modern times there is no such spirit of healthy rivalry and competition. Poets are neither suitably honoured nor are they rewarded.

(iv) The Ancient drama is superior because the Ancients closely observed Nature and faithfully represented her in their work. The Moderns do not observe and study Nature carefully and so they distort and disfigure her in their plays.

(v) The rules of Dramatic Composition which the Moderns now follow have come down to them from the Ancients.

(vi) Crites makes special mention of the Unities, of Time, Place, and Action. The Ancients followed these rules and the effect is satisfying and pleasing. But in Modern plays the Unity of Time is violated and often of the Action of a play covers whole ages.

(vii) The Ancients could organize their plays well. We are unable to appreciate the art and beauty of their language, only because many of their customs, stories, etc, are not known to us. There is much that is highly proper and elegant in their language but we fail to appreciate it because their language is dead, and remains only in books.

From line no. 230 begins Crites' speech on behalf of the ancients. So the whole passage becomes important. He then talks about Aristotle's Poetics and then about Horace's Art of Poetry from line no. 301 to next 100 lines or so, he explains the unities.

Eugenius' Case for the Moderns:

Eugenius then replies to Crites and speaks in favour of the Moderns.

In the very beginning, he acknowledges that the Moderns have learnt much from the Ancients. But he adds that by their own labour the Moderns have added to what they have gained from them, with the result that they now excel them in many ways. The Moderns have not blindly imitated them. Had they done so, they would have lost the old perfection, and would not achieve any new excellences. Eugenius proceeds to bring out some defects of the Ancients, and some excellences of the Moderns.

(i) The Moderns have perfected the division of plays and divided their plays not only into Acts but also into scenes. The Spaniards and the Italians have some excellent plays to their credit, and they divided them into three Acts and not into five. They wrote without any definite plan and when they could write a good play their success was more a matter of chance and good fortune than of ability. In the characterization they no doubt, imitate nature, but their imitation is only narrow and partial – as if they imitated only an eye or a hand and did not dare to venture on the lines of a face, or the proportion of the body. They are inferior to the (English) Moderns in all these respects.

(ii) Even the Ancients' observance of the three unities is not perfect. The Ancient critics, like Horace and Aristotle, did not make mention of the Unity of Place. Even the Ancients did not always observe the Unity of Time. Euripides, a great dramatist, no doubt, confines his action to one day, but, then, he commits many absurdities.

(iii) There is too much of narration at the cost of Action. Instead of providing the necessary information to the audience through dialogues the Ancients often do so through monologues. The result is, their play becomes monotonous and tiresome.

(iv) Their plays do not perform one of the functions of drama, that of giving delight as well as instruction. There is no poetic justice in their plays. Instead of punishing vice and rewarding virtue, they have often shown a prosperous wickedness, and an unhappy piety.

(v) Eugenius agrees with Crites that they are not competent to judge the language of the Ancients since it is dead, and many of their stories, customs, habits, etc., have been lost to them. However, they have certain glaring faults which cannot be denied. They are often too bold in their metaphors and in their coinages. As far as possible, only such words should be used as are in common use, and new words should be coined only when absolutely

necessary. Horace himself has recommended this rule, but the Ancients violated it frequently.

(vi) Ancient themes are equally defective. The proper end of Tragedy is to arouse “admiration and concernment (pity)”. But their themes are lust, cruelty, murder, and bloodshed, which instead of arousing admiration and pity arouse “horror and terror”. The horror of such themes can be softened a little by the introduction of love scenes, but in the treatment of this passion they are much inferior to such Moderns as Shakespeare and Fletcher. In their comedies, no doubt they introduce a few scenes of tenderness but, then, their lovers talk very little.

From line number 440, Eugenius' point of view begins. At first, he criticises certain points from Crites' speech and then goes on to talk about the classical Aristotelian notion of division of play. He goes on to talk about Terence. In the next 400 lines or so, he makes a case for moderns against the ancients.

Important lines - 440-840

SUGGESTED READINGS

1. ENGLISH CRITICAL TEXTS - D.J.ENRIGHT AND ERNST DE CHICKERA
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essay_of_Dramatick_Poesie
3. <https://web.archive.org/web/20050731015658/http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/drampoet.html>

REFERENCES

1. ENRIGHT AND CHIKERA
2. WIKI EDUCATOR