

AN ESSAY OF DRAMATIC POESY

DRYDEN

INTRODUCTION TO THE ESSAY

John Dryden

A prominent English poet, critic, translator, and playwright who dominated the literary life of the Restoration Age. He was a literary genius and critic and considering his extraordinary literary contribution, he was made the Poet Laureate of England in 1668.

Dryden's thoughts of literary criticism on ancient, modern and English Literature, especially on Drama, are presented in dialogue forms in the essay. There are four speakers. Each one argues strongly as to which one is better, "Ancient or Modern, and French or English?"

Dryden agrees in general terms with Aristotle's definition of poetry as a process of imitation though he has to add some qualifiers to it. The generally accepted view of poetry in Dryden's day was that it had to be a close imitation of facts past or present.

Plato wanted poetry to instruct the reader, Aristotle to delight, Horace to do both, and Longinus to transport. Dryden was a bit moderate and considerate in his views and familiar with all of them. He was of the opinion that the final end of poetry is delight and transport rather than instruction. It does not imitate life but presents its own version of it. According to Dryden, the poet is neither a teacher nor a bare imitator – like a photographer – but a creator, one who, with life or Nature as his raw material, creates new things altogether resembling the original. According to him, poetry is a work of art rather than mere imitation. Dryden felt the necessity of fancy, or what Coleridge later would call "the shaping spirit of imagination".

GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE ESSAY

An Essay of Dramatic Poesy is written in the form of a dialogue among four gentlemen: Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius and Neander. Neander speaks for Dryden himself.

Eugenius favours modern English dramatists by attacking the classical playwrights, who did not themselves always observe the unity of place.

Crites defends the ancients and points out that they invited the principles of dramatic art paved by Aristotle and Horace. Crites opposes rhyme in plays and argues that though the moderns excel in sciences, the ancient age was the true age of poetry. Lisideius defends the French playwrights and attacks the English tendency to mix genres.

Neander speaks in favour of the Moderns and respects the Ancients; he is however critical of the rigid rules of dramas and favours rhyme. Neander who is a spokesperson of Dryden, argues that 'tragic-comedy' (Dryden's phrase for what we now call 'tragi-comedy') is the best form for a play; because it is closer to life in which emotions are heightened by mirth and sadness. He also finds subplots as an integral part to enrich a play. He finds single action in French dramas to be rather inadequate since it so often has a narrowing and cramping effect.

Neander is ok with the violation of the three unities because he thinks that it leads to the variety in the English plays. Dryden thus argues against the neo-classical critics. Since nobody speaks in rhyme in real life, he supports the use of blank verse in drama and says that the use of rhyme in serious plays is justifiable in place of the blank verse.

Important points to be looked at :

- The date on which the discussion takes place
- The place at which the discussion takes place
- The real names of the Characters
- The definition of a play

Important lines:

- 1-5
- 15-20
- 54-61
- 150-180
- 198-206
- 222-225

REFER TO THE NET EXAM QUESTIONS OF 2012,2016 AND 2017.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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

REFERENCES

1. ENRIGHT AND CHIKERA
2. WIKI EDUCATOR