

AN ESSAY OF DRAMATIC POESY

DRYDEN

Neander's Point of view

Rhymed Verse versus Blank Verse Controversy:

In the Restoration era rhymed verse or Heroic Couplet was generally used as the medium of expression for Heroic Tragedy, while the great Elizabethan dramatists had used blank verse for their plays. Dryden himself used rhyme for his plays upto 'Aurangzebe'. But in the Preface to this play he bids farewell to his 'mistress rhyme', and express his intention of turning to blank verse. However, in the Essay, he has expressed himself strongly in favour of rhyme through the mouth of Neander.

Crites's attack on Rhyme occurs towards the end of the Essay, the discussion turns on rhyme and blank verse, and Crites attacks rhyme violently on the following grounds:

- Rhyme is not to be allowed in serious plays, though it may be allowed in comedies.
- Rhyme is unnatural in a play, for a play is in dialogues, and no man without premeditation speaks in rhyme.
- Blank Verse is also unnatural for no man speaks in verse either, but it is nearer to prose and Aristotle has laid down that tragedy should be written in a verse form which is nearer to prose – "Aristotle, 'Tis best to write Tragedy in that kind of Verse which is the least such, or which is nearest Prose: and this amongst the Ancients was the Iambique, and with us is blank verse." (.....)
- Drama is a 'just' representation of Nature, and rhyme is unnatural, for nobody in Nature expresses himself in rhyme. It is artificial and the art is too apparent, while true art consists in hiding art.
- It is said that rhyme helps the poet to control his fancy. But one who has not the judgment to control his fancy in blank verse will not be able to control it in

rhyme either. Artistic control is a matter of judgment and not of rhyme or verse.

Neander's defence:

- The choice and the placing of the word should be natural in a natural order – that makes the language natural, whether it is verse or rhyme that is used.
- Rhyme itself may be made to look natural by the use of run-on lines, and variety, and variety resulting from the use of hemistich, manipulation of pauses and stresses, and the change of metre. • Blank Verse is no verse at all. It is simply poetic prose and so fit only for comedies. Rhymed verse alone, made natural or near to prose, is suitable for tragedy. This would satisfy Aristotle's dictum. • Rhyme is justified by its universal use among all the civilized nations of the world.
- The Elizabethans achieved perfection in the use of blank verse and they, the Moderns, cannot excel; them, or achieve anything significant or better in the use of blank verse. Hence they must perforce use rhyme, which suits the genius of their age.
- Tragedy is a serious play representing nature exalted to its highest pitch; rhyme being the noblest kind of verse is suited to it, and not to comedy.

At the end of the Essay, Dryden gives one more reason in favour of rhyme i.e. rhyme adds to the pleasure of poetry. Rhyme helps the judgment and thus makes it easier to control the free flights of the fancy. The primary function of poetry is to give 'delight', and rhyme enables the poet to perform this function well.

CONCLUSION

DRYDEN'S IDEA OF TRAGI-COMEDY

Dryden is more considerate in his attitude towards the mingling of the tragic and the comic elements and emotions in the plays. He vindicates tragi-comedy on the following grounds:

- a) Contrasts, when placed near, set off each other.
- b) Continued gravity depresses the spirit, a scene of mirth thrown in between refreshes. It has the same effect on us as music. In other words, comic scene produces relief, though Dryden does not explicitly say so.

c) Mirth does not destroy compassion and thus the serious effect which tragedy aims at is not disturbed by mingling of tragic and comic.

d) Just as the eye can pass from an unpleasant object to a pleasant one, so also the soul can move from the tragic to the comic. And it can do so much more swiftly.

e) The English have perfected a new way of writing not known to the Ancients. If they had tragic-comedies, perhaps Aristotle would have revised his rules.

f) It is all a question of progress with the change of taste. The Ancients cannot be a model for all times and countries, "What pleased the Greeks would not satisfy an English audience". Had Aristotle seen the English plays "He might have changed his mind". The real test of excellence is not strict adherence to rules or conventions, but whether the aims of dramas have been achieved. They are achieved by the English drama.

Dryden's view on Tragi-comedy (Dryden's own phrase is 'Tragic-comedy') clearly brings out his liberal classicism, greatness and shrewdness as a critic. Dryden is of the view that mingling of the tragic and the comic provides dramatic relief.

SUMMING UP

In a nutshell, John Dryden in his essay, *An Essay on Dramatic Poesy*, gives an account of the Neo-classical theory. He defends the classical drama saying that it is an imitation of life, and reflects human nature clearly. He also discusses the three unities, rules that require a play to take place in one place, during one day, and that it develops one single action or plot.

The Essay is written in the form of a dialogue concerned to four gentlemen: Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius and Neander. Neander seems to speak for Dryden himself. Eugenius takes the side of the modern English dramatists by criticizing the faults of the classical playwrights who did not themselves observe the unity of place. But Crites defends the ancient and pointed out that they invited the principles of dramatic art enunciated by Aristotle and Horace. Crites opposes rhyme in plays and argues that through the moderns excel in science; the ancient age was the true age of poetry. Lisideius

defends the French playwrights and attacks the English tendency to mix genres. He defines a play as a just and lively image of human and the change of fortune to which it is subject for the delight and instruction of mankind.

Neander favours the Moderns, respects the Ancients, critical to rigid rules of dramas and he favours rhyme if it is in proper place like in grand subject matter. Neander a spokesperson of Dryden argues that tragic comedy is the best form for a play; because it is the closest to life in which emotions are heightened by both mirth and sadness. He also finds subplots as an integral part to enrich a play. He finds the French drama, with its single action.

Neander favours the violation of the unities because it leads to the variety in the English plays. The unities have a narrowing and crumpling effect on the French plays, which are often betrayed into absurdities from which the English plays are free. The violation of unities helps the English playwright to present a mere, just and lively image of human nature.

In his comparison of French and English drama, Neander characterizes the best proofs of the Elizabethan playwrights. He praises Shakespeare, ancients and moderns. Neander comes to the end for the superiority of the Elizabethans with a close examination of a play by Jonson which Neander believes a perfect demonstration that the English were capable of following the classical rules. In this way, Dryden's commitment to the neoclassical tradition is displayed.

IMPORTANT LINES

Line no -1125-1225
Line no - 1235-1250
Line no - 1285-1295
Line no - 1300-1310
Line no - 1445-1520
Line no - 1545-1646
Line no - 1680-1690
Line no - 1750-1790
Line no - 1790-1855
Line no - 1870-1910
Line no - 1915-1928
Line no - 2110-2160

SUGGESTED READINGS

1. A HISTORY OF LITERARY CRITICISM, M.A.R. HABIB (Ch - 12)
2. A CRITICAL HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE, DAVID DAICHES
(vol 2, ch- 15)
3. English Critical Texts, Enright and Chikera

References

1. Wikieducator
2. English Critical Texts, Enright and Chikera