**An Essay on Dramatic Poesy**

**John Dryden**

Study Material by

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**Introduction**

Marked, in the beginning, by a dark period of opportunities with no affinity with classical texts John Dryden’s literary career then entered a phase where he perused the antique rules of drama and their practical application on English Elizabethan and Restoration theatre. Dryden’s England was in fear of Popery and subjugation to France; they were still in the memories of Bloody Mary sacrificing the Protestants in the yester century. The powerful and popular rivals like Thomas Shadwell and Richard Flecknoe and the swift changes in the authority of literature, religion and politics pressured Dryden to produce a bunch of literary works that were solely to express his support to either of the groups. *An Essay on Dramatic Poesy* is a work where he, by using a dialogue device modelled on the ancient masters, brings various critical arguments of his contemporary England regarding dramatic poetry. A seemingly desperate and embarrassing justification of English theatre by Dryden through his alter ego as a fine English man called Neander indicates a period in the British history where not only creating poetry was important but also the marketing of culture and fashioning of new idioms of art.

**Summary of the Text**

The speakers: Crites, Eugenius, Lisideius and Neander.

The following is the table to show who speaks for whom.

**Crites- Ancients**

**Eugenius- Moderns**

**Lisideius- The French**

**Neander- The English**

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**Crites**: He represents Sir Robert Howard. He is a person of sharp judgement. His delicate taste in wit has been misinterpreted as ill-natured by many. He is the one who suggests that the topic of discussion should be Dramatic Poesy. Crites asserts the superiority of the ancients over the moderns. He says that the ancients have been faithful imitators and wise observers of nature while the modern disfigured and ill represented nature in their plays. He ascribes all the rules of dramatic poesy to the ancients. Focusing on the three unities, Crites says that the ancients followed unity of time especially in their tragedies. They were careful on the unity of place that they set a single scene all through the play. But Crites approves a more practical and believable change in the scenes only if the locations are nearby. In this observation the French are the next best after the ancients, according to Crites, as in their plays “if the act begins in a garden, a street, or a chamber, ’tis ended in the same place” (Essay of Dramatic Poesy, 355). As for the unity of action it must be singular otherwise it would no longer be a play but two. Among the English playwrights Ben Jonson is the best example for following ancients’ rules.

**Eugenius**:  He represents Lord Buckhurst aka Charles Sackville, the patron of John Dryden. He points out the deficiencies of the ancients and the merits of the moderns. First of all he blames the ancients for not establishing a fixed number of acts in a play as they wrote by the entrances of each character or chorus and not by acts. By repeating the stories, like in the case of the play *Oedipus*, they killed the novelty and delight of the play, the second being one of the two chief purposes of a play (teach and delight). Their characters, though indeed are imitations of nature, are narrow. As for the three unities, the unity of place was never followed or invented by them as neither Aristotle nor Horace wrote about it. It was the French poets who made it a rule of the stage. The ancients showed no poetic justice in their plays as their heroes were unhappy in piety and thrived in wickedness. But we do not see such lack of decorum in modern plays. Since the ancients specialised in each genre, as tragedians wrote tragedies and comedians wrote comedies, none of the above mentioned drawbacks is excusable. Their elaborate choice of words was not suitable to the palate of common people. Lastly the ancients were dull and tasteless in presenting love and other softer passions on stage. They focused so much on harsh emotions such as lust, anger, cruelty, revenge and ambition that they were more capable for raising horror than compassion in audience. Their lovers said little with no passion. To this Crites gives an explanation justifying the ancients’ poor presentation of love for their age encouraged such a mode of representation of love on stage. Crites also reminds the company that if the ancients were born in the modern era they would surely have accommodated to the age and its audience’s taste.

**Lisideius**: He represents Sir Charles Sedley. He undertakes the advocacy of the French drama against the English on the ground of the former’s adherence to the unities, great structural regularity and the use of rhyme. Lisideius admits that around forty years ago the English plays were better than the French. But the French are the best of all nations in following the three unities. The French take maximum thirty hours of plot time without breaking the golden rule of the natural time prescribed by the ancients. In following the unity of place they are so intact that they set the scenes in the compass of the same town or city. To follow the unity of action they omit under-plots in their plays. While praising the French for their scrupulous attention to the three unities Lisideius criticises the English for their tragicomedies with many under-plots as they effectively are the most absurd in all the theatres in the world. He says that one can spot the same emotions of a mental asylum in a tragicomedy. The French even surpasses the ancients in basing their plays on some history. The French playwrights put pleasing fiction into the factuality of their plays in order to give it poetic justice. Lisideius also criticises Shakespeare’s historical plays for cramming up years of history in two and half hours which in effect becomes not an imitation of nature but a miniature. Following this statement Lisideius mocks Ben Jonson for his mixing of comedy and tragedy in his plays. Returning to praising the French Lisideius says that they avoid tumult on stage by reporting duels and battles on stage while the English playwrights make their characters fight on stage as if they were competing for a prize. The English make a ridiculous charade of five men and a drum to indicate an army or a comical act of murder with artificial weapons which are so blunt that it would take an hour to kill a man in real life. This is why the audience laugh instead of feeling sad on watching the English tragic scenes for dying is art only a Roman gladiator can do in its actual sense. The French excels the British in this by the power of their playwrights’ skills which equal to the enactment of such scenes by actors with lively description. Because such enactments of actions will only cause aversion in audience hence they are to be avoided by the playwrights. The French also has a sensible conversion at the end of a play and are skilled in using rhymes while the English poets are very poor at using rhyme.

**Neander**: Neander is Dryden himself. He is presented here as a young English man and a scholarly gentleman with high regard to his nation. He makes sure that the French are not above the English no matter what Lisideius argues. Neander admires two things on English theatre; i) the variety of plot and characters in the English theatre and ii) its masculine fancy with its charming irregularities. The beauty of French plays is like the charm of a statue while the English plays are like a living man- animated with soul of poesy. The English has more grace and masculine charm compared to the French. On the contrary to what Lisideius said about tragicomedy and its mixing of mirth and humour Neander says that the soul of a man is capable of relishing such contrasting emotions. Tragicomedy is the more perfected way of play writing of the ancients and the moderns of any nation. He ridicules Lisideius’ contemptuous remarks of the English and retorts that the French plays, with their singular action, struggle with all the characters to push the plot forward. The variety offered by the English plays, with sub plots, more characters and quick turns, will provide greater pleasure to the audience. The French poetry and their verses are the coldest according to Neander. He mocks the French practice of long speeches in their plays by saying that no one speaks in such length in sudden gust of passion. Again, the little action the French display on stage is laughed at by Neander. He says that a good playwright should find a balance between exaggerated actions and too little actions on stage and make sure that the audience are not left unsatisfied. With the slavish adherence to the unities the French have destroyed their plots and their imagination. Neander says that he admires Ben Jonson while he loves Shakespeare because the former is learned and judicious writer any theatre ever had and the latter didn’t require books to study nature. Shakespeare had the power to make the audience visualise the story while Jonson was the master of humour and the classic style. According to Neander Jonson was the Virgil while Shakespeare was the Homer. He praises the former’s play *The Silent Woman* for its singular action and declares that it has more wit and acuteness of fancy than any other plays of Jonson. (the summary of Neander’s analysis of the play *Silent Woman* is given in the last part of this summary)

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**Argument between Crites and Neander on rhyme and Blank Verse**

After the discourse of four characters on the ancients, moderns, the French and the English Crites and Neander enter into an argument where rhyme and Blank Verse are discussed. Crites is speaking against rhyme and in favour of blank verse. Neander speaks in favour of rhyme.

**Crites**: Rhyme is not allowable in serious plays. Because rhyme is so unnatural in a play as no one speaks in rhyme in sudden gust of emotions. Even the ancients wrote in verse form Iambic which was more similar to prose. In our age what is more similar to prose is blank verse. Some say that there are two exceptions where we must use rhyme; first, is when they say rhyme gives ornamentation to repartee and second is when they say rhyme controls the poet’s luxuriant fancy. But Crites says that, in the first case, rhyme is not natural and, in the second case, that a good poet will avoid errors when he writes in blank verse and rhyme. Rhyme is incapable of expressing the great thoughts.

Neander: He says that a good poet always writes the first line keeping in mind the second line of his poetry-intending that rhyme is more creative and artful than blank verse. Rhyme can be as natural as blank verse. If no man speaks in rhyme on stage, Neander claims, no one speaks in blank verse either. The ancients not only wrote in Iambic verse but also used rhyme. Rhyming is a more perfected way of writing in our age. The only reason for the hostility towards rhyme is its novelty and one must wait till he get used to the new style of writing to like it. Of all heroic rhyme is more close to nature and noblest kind of modern verse. As tragedy and epic are basically same except for their manner of narration if rhyme can be used for epic it is good to be used for play as well. If using rhyme seems inappropriate when the hero addresses a servant on stage, Neander believes, a playwright who is a master of English language can make is as artful as Seneca did in Latin. Crite’s argument that rhyme controls the poet’s fancy and blank verse gives him more freedom to write is corrected by Neander who says that a good poet never makes mistakes in any kinds of writing.

**The Summary of Neander’s Analysis of Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene* or *The Silent Woman***

Dryden, through Neander, attempts to examine Ben Jonson’s *Epicœne* or *The Silent Woman* as it is an example of a perfect comedy in English. He admits that the play follows the unity of time, action and place. The principle action is settling Morose’s estate to Dauphine. The time is not more than a natural day and the place is within the compass of two houses. Compared to the idea of a ‘comedy’ of ancients and the French the English has a peculiar taste in humour. The English requires certain oddness or weirdness in a character in order to find him or her comic. The character has to have unusual characteristics and strange persona. But the ancients and the French never attempted to produce comic effects on stage by making a character imitate a person on stage in a disfigured manner. Ben Jonson, even though he wrote for the English, doesn’t make his characters weird for comic effect. For example the character Morose has the characteristics of any old man who has a disliking for disturbing noise and the character Falstaff, apart from his unique humour in his dialogues, looks very common with his old, fat, merry and cowardly manner. Even disguising the boy as a woman inside the plot of the play could not have fed the need for the English to see the weirdness on stage. Because in Jonson’s time even the female characters were played by young men so the character Epicœne didn’t look too comic until the last part where her identity is revealed. Dryden, in other words, says that Jonson didn’t need the effort of making these characters unworldly to make them comic. His talent was that supreme that he could bring comic effect effortlessly into English stage and the play *Silent Woman* remains as a play with more wit and acuteness of fancy than any other plays of Ben Jonson.