

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## John Dryden (1631-1700)

*Essay of Dramatic Poesy; Absalom and Achitophel; MacFlecknoe (A, 880-916)*

A graduate of Cambridge, Dryden, like many of the literary figures central to British literature, grew up with a disciplined knowledge of the Classics, which were long to be the backbone of his sensibility. The training in formal verse, social participation, and a brilliant ear for the cadences of English, all followed Dryden into a career of highly public literary prominence, which rendered him the most noted literary figure in England for the last forty years of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He was a playwright, satirist, lyric and ode writer, translator. From his vast body of work we include, here, three texts: a fragment of his brilliant and judicious literary criticism, which was style setting for his age, and from which we can still learn; two longish satirical poems, one a downright libelous take off on a second rate dramatist, the other a serious accusation of political plotting against the Crown.

*Question: Can we read Dryden as Living Poetry in our Time?*

This question is simplistic, but we risk it in order to make a point: that Dryden's poetry, robust, full with rhyming couplets and classical allusions, on the whole "morally directed,' delighting in public satire—that this poetry is foreign to the usual tastes in poetry at our time. (The fact is, that the best of 18<sup>th</sup> century poetry, like that of Pope, to follow, ploughed the same ground as Dryden; but that after the Romantic Movement—and we will soon read Wordsworth—the taste for Dryden-like poetry became rare, and remains so.) Thus the question, *what kind of poetry does Dryden write?* takes aim at the whole issue of style and tone change in literary history. These large formal shifts in tone are also parts of sensibility shifts, which of course are lodged in the larger political-economic landscape of a period, and thus prove difficult to transcend. You might thus reflect on what it means "to be inscribed within a certain period of taste."

*Comparative Literature:*

1. Dryden was a much published translator of Latin literature, in his age, an age when such work could be remunerative and of intense public interest. (The Renaissance marked a renewal of interest in Greek and Latin literatures, especially in their original forms. By Dryden's time, the ability to read these languages had started to decline, but, like most of the writers we have been reading, above, Dryden was intensely educated, from childhood on, in Latin and some Greek.) To widen your sense of this classical tradition, and the waves of change that have stirred it during our modern centuries, take a look at Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 1985). You will see that the Renaissance fervor for the Classics has persisted through many ups and downs of taste.

2. Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* may well attract your interest, for its creative role in the development of English literary awareness. Dryden was deeply aware of the classical tradition of criticism, and especially of the role of the Elizabethan period in fortifying the English sense of its own literary values. Long after his time, Dryden's *Essay* remained a standard setter for writing in English. Suggestion: take a look at Rene Wellek, *History of Literary Criticism*, a massive context setter for the whole western enterprise of literary critical awareness.