

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1666)**

John Dryden

*The Ars Poetica in British Literature* English literature (especially poetry) has long grown alongside a rich self-awareness, a sense of what a work of literature can or should be. A stimulating precedent for this self-awareness was established by the Roman poet, Horace (19 B.C.) who in his *Art of Poetry* laid down a pastiche of errors common to the inexperience of poetry, and of tricks of the trade familiar to the greatest in poetic persuasion. In the larger sense, Horace taught the good writer how to become the very good, if not great, writer. (*Poeta nascitur, non fit*, says this critic—the poet is born not made, that is he is either is by nature a poet—who like Horace himself was born bawling in hexameters, the classic line—or will never become one.)

*Early English Poetry* English poetry—with its roots in such great culture-poetry as Chaucer's, and such eery archaic brilliance as *Beowulf*—has long batted on the power of significant poetic analysis. Sir Philip Sidney took arms, in his *Defence of Poetry* (1595) against downright opponents of the art, against whom he arrayed the most powerful argument for disciplined beauty, the Platonic tradition; he showed us, in his sonnet-sequence *Astrophil and Stella*, how skillfully he was able to turn passion up a notch with imaginative planning. Ben Jonson (*Every Man in his Humour*, 1598) ushers in the full power of Jacobean retrospect, bringing the experience of the classical literary heritage to bear as a high standard criterion by which to cut down literary pretensions.

*Nineteenth century* A line of high poetic talents follows Jonson into the style and taste worlds of diverse centuries. Paying ardent attention to the social values of the poet's work. George Meredith (*An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit*, 1877) and Percy Bysshe Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry* (1821) assume different postures in their defenses of poetry. Shelley carries us back into the Platonic zones we travelled (with Sir Philip Sidney, in the Elizabethan period while Meredith introduces us to a celebration of the role of comic drama in the refinement of social culture, and particularly features the socializing role played by women as actors, participants, and delighters in drama. Meredith's study is an original treatise on the essential role of the imaginative arts in seasoning simple social co-existence.

*Dryden's role in establishing the English ars poetica* Dryden, like Sidney, undertakes a broad survey of the place of literature in ancient and modern cultures, reviewing many of the themes—ancients versus moderns, Aristotelian 'rules' versus more naturalistic treatments in English drama, the nature and value of blank verse and rhymed verse in drama. The introduction to the discussion is itself a piece of drama, for it introduces four friends engaged in heated conversation, concerning the broad issue of whether ancient or modern cultures are the finer.

*On the barge* The conversation of the present essay transpires in a barge on the Thames, at the moment when the cannons of the British fleet are just announcing their victory at sea, over a contingent of the Dutch navy. The participants in the discussion—Crites, Eugenius, Lasideius, and Dryden himself, self-named Neander (*new man*) for his more modest social status than that of the other three aristocrats—are deep in debate. (Each of the gentlemen is a well-known figure in British cultural circles.) The topics the four persons lay before themselves, as they bask in a moment of special British culture pride, are of three sorts: the relative values of ancient and modern drama—a branch of the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, a hot topic of the time; as it coincided with the effort to create a colloquial new style in English; whether French or English drama is the better—the position of Neander, a staunch supporter of Shakespeare's work; the issue of whether blank verse or rhymed verse is more suitable for drama.

*The conflicting opinions* Dryden masters the flow of discourse. Crites sets a leading tone by supporting the case for the superiority of ancient drama, and thus of course of the principles of Aristotle's *Poetics*, which were opinion setting in Dryden's time. With this bolus of presumptions Crites establishes himself as

a defender of principles and crisp thinking. (He witticizes that his only regret, at the British victory in the field, is that it would open the floodgates of 'bad celebratory poetry' 'ill poets should be as well silenced as seditious preachers.' To Crites Lisideus retorts that the poetry he most hates is that current and trendy kind of Clevelandism—a reference of the moment, to a Royalist fop poetaster. Banter of this sort launches counterattacks of wit which bring together the four barge passengers, as they leave the fading noise of the battle behind them. It is in such interplays of known personalities, with currently topical literary issues, that the four worldly friends make their ways upstream. The direction of the four person discourse is sharpened, when Lisideus asks Crites to explain in which aspect of poetry he thinks the ancients superior to the moderns: Crites' response, that dramatic poetry best shows the superiority of the ancients, immediately channels the discussion into matters of the theater.

*Change in the meaning of nature* The meat of the dispute, that develops around Crites' support for ancient theater, turns on the validity of the Aristotelean position, that great theater presents what Crites calls a 'just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind.' The mainline of response, to this 'ancient' perspective, is the provocative view of Eugenius, that a new nature has been created, by the progress of 'modern science'—in optics, medicine, anatomy, astronomy—so that the old adages, about drawing wisdom for art, from nature, need to be reconfigured. A lively debate ensues, in the course of which the whole issue of the useful and morally enriching in art is raised for reexplanation. Dryden the author adroitly navigates the discussion into issues of cultural self-imaging, and in his remarks on a 'new nature' gives the ball to Eugenius, for a number of his most brilliant points in literary theory.

*French theater and the unities* With some shifting of position, among the four of them, the barge riders permit the topic of ancient values to morph into the issues of the contemporary French theater—Corneille, Racine, Moliere - on which yet another kind of obeisance to the ancients is being played out. The classical French playwrights are seen to dwell on the details of dramatic unity, exceeding Aristotle by the attention they devote to the three unities of *time, place, action*; regulatory unities (units) in the working out of which they are able to gain perfectly perspicuous control of the art-form taking shape before them. The contemporary variations of Spanish or Italian theater, all in their ways subtle variants on the ancient pattern of *The Poetics*, provide various additional lenses onto the possibilities offered by new form to the arguments of what were the artful works of contemporary western European dramatic art.

*The tragic moment* The final topic of discussion involves a searching dispute over what Aristotle means, when he asks literature to provide a vivid image of life, selecting from that diversity a moment—one might say the *tragic moment*-- when the intense moral implications of life declare themselves. It is, as we have seen in the opinion of several speakers, that Aristotle's view of tragedy is unsurpassed, although voices have been raised to support the increased diversity of tones in modern drama, in the 'dramatic poesie' Dryden values in his own time, with its relative freedom from verbal and rythmical rules. A particular case, of this 'new critical perspective' is raised by Neander, the essay's author, who undertakes a fresh look at Ben Jonson's play, *The Silent Woman*, 1609, and finds in it those elements of irony, comic vice, and antique reference which add up to a new form of theater. The other participants in the dialogue pitch in here, each sensitive to the virtues made available to 'modern drama' by the opening into it of the classical arguments dear to Aristotle and his contemporaries.

*The uniqueness of Dryden's Essay* The genius of Dryden's essay lies in its blend of narrative with insight. The narrative flows seamlessly along with the Thames, on which we are slipping quietly away from the site of a thunderous naval battle, in which British victory over the Dutch fleet heralds a sense of British cultural achievement, which is echoed consistently on the essay's theoretical level, (There is much interchange of opinion, say between Crites and Eugenius, but in the end each has proven open to both the ancient and modern perspectives, while Neander, Dryden himself, has both shepherded in the overall views of the text, and given hearty subscription to the aesthetics of the new Renaissance world. 'In the end,' for Dryden's self-reflective text is about itself, about the kind of ancient or modern perspective it itself offers, while offering them. Dryden is too much the artist to intrude on his own work of art with the adoption of a 'position.'

## *Study Guide*

Dryden's setting for the Essay is particularly felicitously blended into his theme. Four men in a barge, floating downstream away from the cannonades that mark, for the British, the victorious end of a war with the Netherlands. The four interlocutors, who are in fact four well known men around London, drift as though naturally into culture topics like the stage of the theater in London, and, from there, into broader issues of the nature of literary arts. Each of the men adopts a distinctive position, the views of Aristotle occupying a steady position among the gentleman critics, one on the side of the Stagirite, another at another point on the spectrum, countering the Aristotelian by claiming that the old fashioned view of nature, the proper object of mimesis, is out of date, and must give way to new views of the issue. Does the setting and management of this argument seem to you lively for today's criticism of theater? Is the old Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns still alive?

Does the incremental birth and growth of the modern makes itself known by the reading of Dryden's Essay? Do we feel we are getting there?—though of course we have no idea where we are 'going'—inwardly advancing toward the point where, as perhaps we intuited in this author's childhood—the word 'modern' glistened and shone, and only gradually loosened its grip on the 'world as an experience of language and feeling? What it might mean to observe that we feel we are 'getting there,' as we arrive at Dryden, could be suggested by casting our eyes around at three age mates of Dryden himself. Pascal, Milton, Angelus Silesius, and John Bunyan were all born within a decade of Dryden--a prolific writer from whom we have selected just one choice work. Extrapolating from the very limited sample we have of these four writers we might too hastily conclude that Dryden was nearest of the group to feeling a whole history behind and before him, and to intuiting, in a startling speech by Eugenius, that Aristotelianism was no longer a sufficient critical stand point. Would we be right to conclude with that speech, in our effort to measure degrees of approach to the modern. Does Eugenius not reach nearly to touching distance, to the nature we live today in our modern or postmodern world? Eugenius expands the understanding of nature to exceed the portrayal of significant human behaviors, and to rely on catharsis as a moral end for the theater. A variety of experimental sciences—optics, mathematics, astronomy, physics—are all mentioned as discoverers of the nature which now it is fitting for us to consider, when we say that art is an imitation of nature. Has any of the contemporaries of Dryden, mentioned above, taken so bold and concrete a step toward putting on the modern imagination?

Write at any extent you think appropriate, on the nature of modernity, the steps toward it taken by the creators interviewed in this study book, and the major trends in self-awareness prominent if western thought from the eighteenth century to our day.