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Dryden's theory of criticism in "an essay of dramatic poesy"

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Abstract

The present research work deals with the claims of Dryden to be regarded as the father of practical & criticism. We discuss here Dryden as a critic. In this research paper we discuss Dryden's theory of dramatic poetry as expounded in "An essay of Dramatic Poesy", 1668 and we can critically assess the definition of drama and point out what according to Dryden is the nature and function of poetry. John Dryden occupies a rare position in the history of English literature; he was the greatest man of letters in his age as he was also the greatest critic in his country. It is with justice that Dr. Johnson calls Dryden, "The father of English criticism." The only formal and complete work of criticism by Dryden is the "Essay of Dramatic Poesy". Here we discussed Dryden's theory of criticism in "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy" (1668).

Keywords: Criticism, theory, dramatic poesy, Dryden

1. Introduction

John Dryden was born on 9th August, 1631, at Aldwincle in Northamptonshire. He was educated at Westminster School under the famous headmastership of Dr. Richard Burby. He later went to Trinity College, Cambridge. He became friendly with Sir Robert Howard after the restoration and married Howard's sister in 1663. He had gained command over his political powers. His literary career can be roughly divided into three periods:

1. The dramatic period lasting till 1680.
2. The period of his greatest works going up to 1699.
3. The period of translations and miscellaneous production.

Dryden was made poet Laureate in 1670. With the accession of James II to the English throne, Dryden became a catholic. After the glorious revolution however, his popularity declined. His honours were taken away and he was made poet laureate. Dryden died in 1700, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. Dryden was the literary dictator of his time, like Ben Johnson before and Dr. Johnson after him.

The age of Dryden roughly spans the period from the restoration of Charles II in 1660 to the year 1700. Dryden best represents the English mind of this period. It is necessary to study the social, political and literary background for "when we reach the works of Dryden we make a study of his age", as Nicolle Smith has observed. John Dryden occupies a rare position in the history of English literature. He was the greatest man of letters in his age and he was also the greatest critic. The critical comments and views of Dryden are mainly to be found in dedications and prefaces to his poems, plays and other works scattered over the period 1660-1700. The only formal and complete work of criticism by Dryden is the "Essay of Dramatic Poesy".

Dryden enjoys the reputation of one of towering figures of the new-classical age. It was Dr. Johnson who first called Dryden "the father of English criticism as the writer who taught us to determine upon the principles, the merit of composition." Despite the scattered nature of his criticism, "The Essay on Dramatic Poesy" stands as a landmark of his critical pronouncements covering a variety of aspects of dramatic criticism. Drama, Epic, Tragedy, comedy and the nature and function of poetry all retrieve due attention from him. It is said that Dryden inaugurated the era of descriptive criticism. In the words of George Watson, "Dryden has given us a fine specimen of descriptive criticism." There is no other literary giant who has more confidence in his own power and clarity of vision.

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2. Discussion

The most elaborate and one of the most attractive and lively of Dryden's critical works in the "Essay of Dramatic Poesy", which was first published in 1668 but written three years earlier. In this work he reveals once again his unsettled views regarding the drama. The method he adopts for voicing his perplexities is that of the dialogue, a device obviously suggested by earlier conventional discussions in several continental writers. It was a form which permitted a full discussion of conflicting views, without requiring any definite conclusion. Thus Dryden's purpose is to debate, not to dogmatize. The discussion takes place against a pleasant setting. Four characters, mainly, critic their views on drama. The main theme is to vindicate English plays. The case for the ancients is presented by critics, the moderns, are supported by Eugeniusz and the respective merits of French and English plays are argued by Lisideius and Neander. "The Essay of Dramatic Poesy" is a land mark in the history of English criticism for its liveliness, shrewd reasoning and urbanity, and for the acute and masterly appreciations of Shakespeare and Johnson it contains Dr. Johnson calls Dryden "The father of English criticism". His poetic talents did not prevent him from critically assessing the worth of real poetry.

Sensibility and keen awareness of artistic values can be considered the most salient features of his critical faculty. His imagination was highly creative and it is the principal thing that accounts for much that is noble and great in the literary criticism that Dryden has offered us. The influence of the ancient or classical Greek and Roman poets is obvious in Dryden's poetry. But he was not the blind follower of established critics. Dryden established English norms for proper criticism.

Dryden is undoubtedly the pioneer in the field of historical and comparative criticism. He shows a well-developed historical sense. He recognises that the genius and temperament differ from age to age and hence literature in different periods of history is bound to be different. They recognise that Elizabethan drama and the Restoration drama are governed by different literary conventions. He claims that Aristotle himself might have revised his rules and written differently if he had lived in the modern era. Thus, Dryden believes the truth that literature is not static but a dynamic process. Similarly, he recognises that the temperament of the French and English differ and hence the literatures of the two countries are bound to be different. In the essay, there is a constant weighing and balancing of the qualities of the English drama as against those of the French. "Dryden's ability to read any work under consideration with full and sympathetic understanding is super". Remarks Daurid Daiches in "Critical Approaches to literature", he is obviously the first in England to analyse English and foreign plays and examine their comparative merits and demerits."

"The Essay of Dramatic Poesy" demonstrates that Dryden's claim of being the father of practical criticism is amply justified. The relative superiority of the English and the French Dramatic writings was a burning issue of those days. Dryden may not have resolved it but he added fresh dimensions to the controversy. He deals with a variety of issues like the relative merit of the ancient and modern

writers; the position of the English school of drama in comparison of the French, the comparative merits of blank verse and shamed verse as a medium for drama etc. Four speakers representing four leading writers of the day including Dryden indulge in a dialogue to discuss these burning issues and each one has his own opinion. Thus, Dryden frees the criticism from its dogmatic features. He is able to raise criticism to the dignity of an art and evolve it as a distinct literary form.

In the essay, Dryden defends the English version of dramatic art, its violation of the unities and its variety of plot and character. He also offers cogent arguments in favour of tragic-comedy. The English, he says, are more sullen than the French and come to the theatre primarily for entertainment. The tragic-comedy with its greater action and variety of characters suit the genius of the English people. Thus Dryden's critical views stemmed the in favour of the neo-classical criticism and asserted the importance of the native tradition. Dryden shows himself to be keenly alive to artistic values and at the same time, he is able to a psychological analysis of those values. "Dryden clears the ground for himself by brushing away the arbitrary bans upon freedom of Judgement. He refuses to be cowed by the French playwrights and critics", remarks R.A. Scott James.

Every writer has his own limitations and Dryden is not an exception as he also muggers from certain shortcomings. He is often prejudiced in favour of his own country and age. Moreover, he failed to deal with the ultimate problems of technique. He also failed to develop certain points systematically. He often took an issue, dropped it in the interest of another point and returned to it at some later stage. He also failed to evolve a formal aesthetic principle. His work at best can be divided into three categories – speculative, prescriptive and explanatory.

He defines drama as plays. He defines drama as "A just and lively image of human nature, representing its passion and humours and the changes of fortune to which it is the subject for the delight and instruction of mankind." According to this definition, drama is an image of human nature and the image is "just" as well as "lively". Dryden seems to imply that literature imitates human actions. However it should be noted that drama is not a reproduction or copy of human nature. It is an imitation which is true to nature in a broad sense. Dryden believes that poetic imitation is different from an exact servile copy of reality. Moreover, the imitation is not only just but also "lively". The term "lively" has been interpreted in various ways. David Daiches takes it as "interesting" while R.A. Scott James says that it means "beautiful". But it is obvious that Dryden wants to emphasise the fact that the imitation of a thing should involve the heightening of its quality to make it beautiful. In other words, the poet's creative efforts come into play to make a literary piece rise above the servile copy of reality.

Dryden underlines the fact that to make the imitation just and lively, the poet's creative faculty must work. The function of imagination has also been used in the very definition of drama. It is the imagination which shapes the raw material into a more heightened and more beautiful vision of reality. The image of nature created by the poet is basically true and hence it is "just". It is clear that Dryden is more concerned

about the liveliness of a literary work. He praises Shakespeare's plays and readily overlooks their irregularities because they satisfy his criteria of liveliness. On the same ground, he prefers the variety of plot and character of English plays to the rule-bound French plays.

In his "Defence of the Essay on Dramatic Poesy" Dryden comments "Delight is the chief if not the only end of Poesy; instruction can be admitted but in the second place". Thus, it further becomes clear that a base imitation will not serve the ends of poetry instruction is secondary while delight is the first and primary function of poetry. Dryden is far in advance of his age in which instruction was regarded as the chief aim of poetry. Reality must be selected ordered and shaped by the poet's imagination just as a skilled workman shapes his material to make or create beautiful works of art. Poetic imagination transforms and transmutes reality. "The instruction which poetry gives is psychological. It is a better understanding of human nature, a keener insight into the working of human mind and heart." remarks David Dakhes.

3. Conclusion

To be concluded that the definition of drama given by Dryden may not be perfect but it has its own importance in dramatic criticism. It is significant that Dryden emphasises on the craftsmanship of the artist. It is the workmanship which can make sure that the function of drama is properly fulfilled. Dryden also believes that the definition of drama

may fit the poetry as well. It is, on the whole, clear that Dryden wanted poetry to imitate nature in such a way as to transform it into something more beautiful. Despite the faults, it must be admitted that Dryden is one of the greatest figures in the history of literary figures in the history of literary criticism. His native sensibility, his classical liberalism, his conversational ease and his easy style provide him an honourable place in the field of criticism. He was the first man to draw attention to the higher function of criticism which is the appreciation of positive literary excellences. He established the English fashion of criticising as Shakespeare did the English fashion of dramatising. "His reputation as a critic rests on sure and lasting foundations", remarks Atikins.

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