



# AN ESSAY ON DRAMATIC POESY

*John Dryden*

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John Dryden was a major essayist of the English literary tradition. His works are so praiseworthy that Samuel Johnson, a contemporary of Dryden and himself a major critic, called him ‘the father of English criticism’ along with commenting that English prose starts with Dryden’s *An Essay on Dramatic Poesy*.

Along with his wide-ranging criticism of epic, poetry, plays, etc., he also wrote plays, prefaces, prologues. His contribution to the field of criticism influenced writers like Pope, Johnson, Mathew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, etc.

And he is mostly famous for his poetic works like “*Mac Flecknoe*”, *Absalom and Achitophel*, etc., and his dramatic works like *All for Love*, *Aurang-zebe*, and *Marriage a la Mode*.

## An Essay of Dramatic Poesy: Introduction

Criticism flourished in England during the restoration of Stuarts. *An Essay on Dramatic Poesy* deals with the views of major critics and the tastes of men and women of the time of Dryden.

The work is in the form of semi-drama thus making abstract theories interesting. In the late 17th century, Shakespeare was severely criticised for his careless attitude towards the mixing of genres. It was Dryden who elevated Shakespeare to height for his natural genius.

The narrative of *An Essay on Dramatic Poesy* has four debaters among whom, Neander is the one who holds the views of Dryden. Unlike other characters, Neander does not diminish the arguments that are on contrary to his views. Though he himself favours modern drama, he does not blame others.

# Short Summary

The beginning of the narrative *An Essay on Dramatic Poesy* is as follows. A battle is going on between England and the Netherlands.

Four gentlemen namely Crites, Eugenius, Lisideius and Neander are travelling by boat to see the battle and start a discussion on modern literature.

Crites opens the discussion by saying that none of his contemporaries (i.e. moderns) can equal the standards and the rules set by ancient Greeks and Romans. Eugenius restrains him from wasting time on finding demerits. He asks him to find relative merit in Greeks and Moderns.

Crites favours classical drama i.e. the drama of Aristotle who believed that drama is “*imitation of life*”. Crites holds that drama of such ancients is successful because it depicts life. He says that both classical and neoclassical favour rules and unities (*time, place and action*).

According to Crites, modern dramatists are shadows of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Seneca and Terence. E.g. Elizabethan dramatist Ben Jonson borrowed from Classics and felt proud to call himself modern Horace. The classical is more skilful in language than their successors. At this, he ends up his conversation.

## Views of Eugenius

Eugenius favours modern dramatists. However, instead of telling about the virtues of moderns, he criticises the faults of Classical playwrights. According to him, the Classical drama is not divided into acts and also lacks originality.

→ Their tragedies are based on worn-out myths that are already known to the audience and their comedies are based on overused curiosity of stolen heiresses and miraculous restorations.

There disregard poetic justice. Instead of punishing the vice and rewarding the virtue, they have often shown prosperous wickedness and an unhappy devotion. The classical drama also lacks affection.

The Heroes of Homer were lovers of appetite, food etc, while the modern characters of French drama gave up everything (*sleep, water and food*) for the sake of love.

## Views of Lisiideius

Lisiideius favours French drama of earlier 17th century. French drama led by Pierre Corneille strictly followed unities of time, pace and action. The French dramatists never mix tragedy and comedy.

They strictly adhere to the poetic justice i.e. reward the virtue and punishment the vice. For this, they even alter the original situation.

The French dramatists interweave truth with fiction to make it interesting bringing elements that lead to fate and borrow from history to reward the virtuous which he was earlier deprived of.

They prefer emotions over plots. Violent actions take place off stage and are told by messengers rather than showing them in real.

## Views of Neander

Neander contradicts Lisideius' arguments favouring the superiority of French drama. He talks about the greatness of Elizabethans. For him, Elizabethans fulfil the drama's requirement i.e. imitation of life.

French drama raises perfection but has no soul or emotions as it primarily focuses on the plot. For Neander, tragicomedy is the best form of drama. Both sadness as well as joy are heightened and are set side by side. Hence it is closest to life.

He believes that subplots enrich the drama. This French drama having a single plot lacks this vividness. Further Samuel Johnson (*who defended Shakespeare's disregard of unities*), he believes that adherence to unities prevents depth.

According to him, deviation from set rules and unities gives diverse themes to drama. Neander rejects the argument that change of place and time diminishes dramatic credibility in drama.



For him, human actions will seem more natural if they get enough time to develop. He also argues that Shakespeare is *“the man who of all the modern and perhaps ancient poets, and largest and most comprehensive soul”*.

Francis Beaumont and John Fletchers’ dramas are rich in wit and have smoothness and polish in their language.

→ Neander says, *“I am apt to believe the English language in them arrived at its highest perfection”*. If Ben Jonson is a genius for correctness, Shakespeare excels him in wit.

His arguments end with the familiar comparison, *“Shakespeare was the Homer, or father of our dramatic poets; Jonson was the Virgil, the pattern of elaborate writing; I admire him, but I love Shakespeare.”*

Thus for him, Elizabethans are superior because they have a variety of themes, emotions, deviations, wit. They do not adhere to rules as well. Thus their drama is really an imitation of life.

At the end of the discussion, there is an argument between Crites and Neander over rhyme in plays. Crites believes that Blank Verse as the poetic form nearest to prose is most suitable for drama.

On the other hand, Neander defends rhyme as it briefly and clearly explains everything. The boat on which they all were riding reaches its destination, the stairs at Somerset House and the discussion ends without any conclusion being made.

## An Essay on Dramatic Poesy: Detail Analysis

Dryden's *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* explicitly states in the begin that its aim is to have our English writers to stay away from those who prefer French over English. The essay is a debate on the use of rhyme in the drama that took place originally between Sir Robert Howard and John Dryden.

However, there are four characters in the essay: Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius, and Neander, which are originally identified as Charles Sackville, who was a patron of Dryden and poet himself, Sir Robert Howard, Dryden's brother-in-law, Sir Charles Sedley, and Neander, Dryden himself, respectively.

Of the various that this debate concerns itself, one the typical issue of ancients and moderns. In neoclassical times, supporters of ancients believed that modern society has corrupted the man and society, and looked for answers in the old texts.

Moderns, on the other hand, were breaking away or abandoning the old ideals completely. They saw the modern world as the development of human nature because of Renaissance ideals. Other issues that the essay deals with are the classical model of 'unities of time, place and action', the classical distinction of genres such as tragedy and comedy, etc.

The essay shows a shift in the definition of drama from classical to modern with Lisideius defining it. A mention of delight, humour and representation of human nature are found missing in the classical definition of drama. So, a movement towards a modern kind of drama is evident.

On the other hand, Crites argues that everything/every rule that we know about drama is told to us by Aristotle, Horace and others. He believes that we have nothing new to offer except calling our wit to be superior. In his opinion, modern plays are failures.

By calling moderns to be the ones who don't indulge in mere imitation of the ancients, Eugenius becomes the first to defend the moderns. Modern do not follow ancients in order to create something, they have nature and humans to draw inspirations from. He believes that with the wisdom of the ancients, we also have our own experiences of the world to understand it.

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On the point of French versus English, Lisideius prefers French and Neander (Dryden) defend the English. Lisideius argues that French drama follows all the unities, provides a variety of emotions, He argues that French has the right way of dividing the time among narration, action, dialogue.

Dryden, in his support of English drama, doesn't refute any claim made by Lisideius in favour of the French; on the other hand, argues that all that is considered erroneous in the English drama is actually a virtue that surpasses traditional techniques.

An Essay of Dramatic Poesy deals with the views of major critics and the tastes of men and women of the time of Dryden. This work is in the form of semi-drama thus making abstract theories interesting. In the late 17th century, Shakespeare was severely criticised for his careless attitude towards the mixing of genres.

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