

John Dryden: as a critic

It was no less exact than Dr. Johnson who wrote that "Dryden may be properly considered the father of English Criticism". Dryden evolved and articulated an impressive body of a critical principles for practical literary appreciation of principles. His literary criticism makes a pretty sizable volume. Dryden deals with most literary questions which were the burning issues of his age. He founded new tradition and deed a signal service to literary criticism. Dryden "praised" what he "taught". He was the first English critic who attempted the extended descriptive criticism. Dryden's "The rivals ladies" contains the germ of descriptive criticism. Dryden selects "The silent women" as "The pattern" of a perfect play. Of this play, Dryden proposes to make a short examen according to those rules which the French observe. The intrinsic merits of the "examen" unlike the historical is very limited.

Dryden's criticism of Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher and Chaucer and their works is much more substantial than his "examen". This aggressive nationalism distorts to some extent his appreciation of English writers. However, he has some illuminating remarks to make. As regards Shakespeare, we find Dryden strangely cowed down by the worthless and vituperative criticism of his contemporary R. B. Johnson. His accurate analysis of Chaucer's traits in his "Preface To The Fables", remains something rare and of permanent value in English criticism.

As a critic, Dryden was influenced by ancient Greek and Roman critics such as Aristotle, Longinus and Horace. The age in which he lived was under their influence and Dryden was not isolationist enough to escape the spirit of the age. However his liberalism, scepticism, and

dynamism and Probabilism, helped him to fight a few dogmas imported from abroad the French neo-classicists of his age struck to Aristotelian guns with tenacity. While paying due respect to Aristotle, Dryden refused to swear by the name. He demolished the formidable trinity of "three unities". Dryden, like Longinus believed in inspiration and the in-born creative power of the poets. He favoured the romantic extravagance of Shakespeare and candidly criticised the ancient Roman and contemporary French drama which strictly followed all the "rules" of composition, but he refused to worship the rules.

Dryden's intellectual scepticism was greatly responsible for his liberal and somewhat loose outlook. His Probabilism as a literary critic is both his strength and weakness. Dryden's whole career as a critic is permeated by what we might tactfully call his sense of occasion.

Dryden's impatience with classical "rule" arose mainly from his abundant "Historic sense". He was the first critic who emphasised the dynamic character of literature. Literature, literature, according to Dryden, is expressive of the genius of a nation, and it necessarily keeps pace with time. He was not cowed down by the authority of Aristotle. The chief triumph of Dryden's "examens" lies in its attempt at comparative criticism, "Dryden", says Scott - James; "opens a new field of comparative criticism". Dryden is rightly regarded as "the Father of Comparative Criticism".