

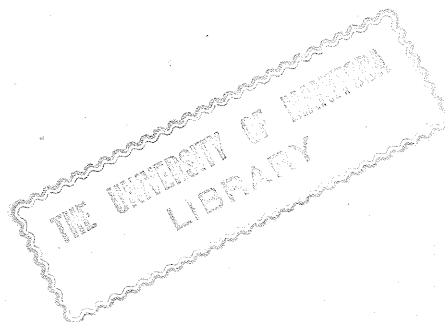
DRYDEN'S DRAMATIC THEORY AND PRACTICE

by

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INTRODUCTION

Any study of Restoration literature almost automatically begins with a study of the works of John Dryden, poet, critic, and dramatist. What Ward says of Restoration drama can be applied with equal truth to both Restoration poetry and Restoration criticism: "The Restoration drama....will be best understood and best appreciated by those who consistently regard Dryden as its central figure."<sup>1</sup> For almost four decades Dryden was the dominant figure of English literature; his position as popular dramatist and respected critic indicates that his works closely reflect the period in which, and for which, he wrote. He is the literary barometer of his age; with keen sensitivity to the tastes of his public he produced plays which pleased his audience, plays which became popular because they appealed to the tastes of the time. To study Dryden's drama, therefore, it is of vital importance to remember the audience for which he wrote. As a professional writer depending upon the sale of plays and poems for his livelihood, Dryden must be considered in relation to his period.

In this thesis, Dryden's dramatic theory and practice will be examined with the purpose of showing how closely he followed the trends of his time, how he sensed the demands of his public, and how he attempted to satisfy them. He wrote for the narrow court circle of witty, intelligent, cultured, critical courtiers, courtiers who were also brutal, licentious rakes. The changing demands of this small section of society were the demands which determined the type of drama which Dryden wrote. His changing

dramatic practice, in turn, influenced his dramatic theory, which was frequently an apology for, or a defence of, a particular play or a particular type of play. In this study of Dryden, as a dramatist and as a critic, I have attempted to show the close relationship between his theory and his practice, a relationship which helps to explain much of his inconsistency as a critic. The changes which occur in his theory and practice, as noted above, depend largely upon the demands of his changing audience.

I have chosen to limit the examination of Dryden's dramatic practice to six plays, selected as being typical of various phases of his dramatic career. These plays provide examples of four dramatic types: heroic drama, neo-classical tragedy, tragic-comedy, and comedy. The study of his criticism is also limited to that part which deals with drama; his other critical essays have been ignored as being outside the scope of this paper. The selection of plays and essays, necessary because of the limited space, seems sufficient to prove that Dryden's criticism and Dryden's plays are interdependent and inseparable.

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1. A. W. Ward, English Dramatic Literature, (London: MacMillan and Co., 1899), Vol.III, p. 390.

CHAPTER I

DRYDEN'S CRITICAL HERITAGE

Spingarn concludes the introduction to his selection of seventeenth-century criticism with a vivid description of the complexity of the period: "Seventeenth-century criticism is really a very troubled stream; winds from every quarter blow across its surface; currents from many springs and tributaries struggle for mastery within it."<sup>1</sup> He then adds: "In the work of Dryden.... all these currents of thought are utilized, all these forms and moods of criticism are more or less mirrored; in this field he is, after all, the chief representative of his century, and, in more senses than one, the first great modern critic."<sup>2</sup> This reflection of prevailing ideas in Dryden's criticism makes it essential to know something about the background of English criticism which Dryden inherited. Dryden, with his keen intellectual curiosity, drew many of his critical theories from his lesser known predecessors. While helping to establish ideas more firmly, and while expressing theories with vigorous clarity, Dryden was not an original thinker. As Bredvold says: "He was not a discoverer of new ideas; his whole intellectual biography consists of his ardent and curious examination and testing of those ideas which were current in his age."<sup>3</sup>

In order to understand Dryden's criticism, therefore, it is necessary to begin with a brief survey of some of the English critical essays of Dryden's predecessors.

According to Saintsbury, Dryden "started with every ad-

vantage, except those of a body of English criticism behind him, and of a thorough knowledge of the whole of English literature."<sup>4</sup> A study of Dryden's critical writing reveals, however, that he had the "advantage" of an important, if small, group of critical essays ranging from Ascham's Scholemaster to the letters of Davenant and Hobbes. It is almost a paradox that Renaissance criticism from its beginning had strong classical tendencies. Even in the age of Marlowe, Spenser and Shakespeare, critical essays were tinged with classicism, in marked contrast to the general atmosphere of luxuriant freedom. Ascham, with his high opinion of Italian culture and his low opinion of Italian morals, is described by Spingarn as "not only the first English man of letters, but also the first English classicist."<sup>5</sup> From his emphasis on form and style, and his concern for education in the Latin classics, it is a short step to the second group of Renaissance critics whose chief concern was with metrical studies and classification into types. The classical elements are again evident; Harvey advocated the use of quantitative verse while Campion and Daniel discussed the suitability of rhyme for English poetry.

The first great essay of English criticism is Sidney's Defence of Poesy, described by Spingarn as "a veritable epitome of the literary criticism of the Italian Renaissance;....no other work....can be said to give so complete and so noble a conception of the temper and the principles of Renaissance criticism."<sup>6</sup> The essay is devoted to an attempt to demonstrate the essential nobility

of poets and poetry; Sidney uses classical examples and authority to defend the poetry he loves as a romantic. In his section on the drama Sidney bases his theory on a rather mutilated Aristotle, approving the use of the unities, and decrying the prevalence of tragi-comedy. The inconsistency of the tone of Sidney's Arcadia with that of his own critical opinions of poetry (which term would include the fiction of the Arcadia) would seem to indicate that the creative spirit of the Elizabethans was under no such restraint as criticism advocated.

Ben Jonson's limited critical works establish him as another of Dryden's critical ancestors. A comprehensive study of Jonson's criticism is impossible here; it will be enough to show that Dryden was influenced by the work of his great predecessor. Wylie's description of Jonson as poet and critic could be applied with almost equal truth to Dryden: "Consciousness of purpose, deference to the past, acceptance of reason as the supreme authority, mark Jonson's poetry and criticism."<sup>7</sup> It is evident that Dryden was familiar with the works of Jonson when we note that Jonson and Dryden each wrote on the comparison of poetry and painting, on the introduction of new words into the English language, on the identification of the author and his poem. The same quality of "self-conscious art, guided by the rules of criticism,"<sup>8</sup> can be noted in each critic. Jonson's criticism of Marlowe's "scenicall strutting and furious vociferation,"<sup>9</sup> and his comments on Shakespeare's need of a curb sound very similar to Dryden's alternation of praise and condemnation. Jonson, like Dryden,

could judge an author according to classical standards, but at the same time he could say about Shakespeare: "I lov'd the man and doe honour his memory, on this side Idolatry."<sup>10</sup> Bronowski, in his study of Dryden's criticism, places great emphasis on the debt owed by Dryden to Jonson: "The principles which ruled Jonson's mind rule Dryden's. To study Dryden is first to study Jonson."<sup>11</sup>

Between Jonson and Dryden little criticism of real importance appears; however, some of the opinions expressed are interesting historically. A few examples of critics whose opinions are of such interest illustrate the variety of theories. John Webster, in spite of his spectacular and blood~~e~~thirsty plays, recognizes the classical ideals, blaming his audience for his deviation from classical form. Chapman's theory of translation is that the translator is to follow "the material things themselves, and sentences to weigh diligently, and to clothe and adorn them with words....as are most apt for the language into which they are converted."<sup>12</sup> Edmund Bolton cautions writers against the evil of pandering to the tastes of the readers; Henry Peacham is an admirer of the ancients and a staunch supporter of the great power of poetry which "can turne brutishnesse into civilitie, make the lewd honest, turne hatred to love...."<sup>13</sup> Henry Reynolds considers poetry from the point of view of the metaphysical poets; to him a good poem is one that cannot be too easily understood, the meat must be protected from vulgar and half-educated readers. As Basil Willey says, "He praises the Ancients for the care with which they wrapped up their meanings, thus ensuring that only the discerning should



understand them."<sup>14</sup>

Two critics of greater importance as predecessors of Dryden are Davenant and Hobbes, who can be considered together because of their letters containing critical theories. Jonson had realized that the vagueness of critical terms caused confusion in writing and understanding critical essays. Both Davenant and Hobbes defined certain critical terms. Davenant's conception of "wit" is: "the laborious and the lucky resultances of thought....Wit is not only the luck and labour, but also the dexterity of thought.... bringing swiftly home to the memory universal surveys. It is the Soul's Powder."<sup>15</sup> This definition was apparently too vague, too all-inclusive to satisfy Hobbes, who divided the mental processes necessary for the poetic function into judgment and fancy: "Time and Education begets experience; Experience begets memory; Memory begets Judgement and Fancy: Judgement begets the strength and structure, and Fancy begets the ornaments of a Poem."<sup>16</sup> From this division fancy and wit became identified, and by 1650 the need for judgment as well as fancy was recognized. Spingarn emphasizes the transitional state of English criticism represented by Davenant and Hobbes: "The long campaign of good sense against the figures of rhetoric"<sup>17</sup> had not yet excluded the fancy. "The rationalistic temper had not as yet flooded criticism to the exclusion of all imaginative elements."<sup>18</sup> Davenant's theory of epic poetry, elaborated further by Hobbes<sup>19</sup> was one of Dryden's sources for his theories on the heroic drama.<sup>20</sup>

Although several instances of his debt to his predecessors

in isolated cases have been given, Dryden's heritage in the field of English literary criticism was vague, confused, and uncertain. The relation between creative work and critical theory, except for Jonson, was very slight. Adding to the confusion of contradictory elements was the growing influence of French criticism, particularly that of Corneille, "undoubtedly the Frenchman who, directly and indirectly, most influenced English thought during the early years of the Restoration."<sup>21</sup> The chief benefit of the earlier English criticism was to raise the problems which Dryden and his age attempted to solve; the solutions took various forms, ranging from the virtuosi school of taste to the school of sense, exemplified by Temple on the one extreme and Rymer on the other. Dryden's peculiar quality of sensitivity to the ideas and tastes of his time appears to have been touched, at various times, by all the diverse trends of seventeenth century criticism. The problems discussed in his first critical work of importance indicate Dryden's breadth of interest, his ability to see all sides of a question and his skill in expressing his opinions on literary problems: "The Essay of Dramatic Poesy....takes us to the very centre of the literary consciousness of the day."<sup>22</sup> The subjects under discussion include the contrast of French and English plays, the use of rhyme in tragedy, the question of the unities, and the relative ability of ancients and moderns. Although Wylie states that "Dryden's vital interest was always with the present and future,"<sup>23</sup> it is evident that the forces of the past have also had profound influence on his thoughts. The problems under dis-

cussion are dealt with in terms of the present and the future, but many of Dryden's ideas were borrowed from earlier writers.

The tentative nature of Dryden's early criticism, evident in this famous essay, is an indication of the temper of the time. The Restoration period, in terms of literature as well as of politics and religion, was influenced by the scientific spirit, the growth of rationalism, and the urge to classify and organize. The earlier critical essays of Dryden reflect his sceptical, inquisitive, experimental nature in their comparative freedom from rules. W. E. Bohn describes Dryden as "boldly taking his stand upon his literary instincts.... He is attempting to give theoretic justification to what his feelings recognize as beautiful."<sup>24</sup>

Dryden's criticism is largely concerned with problems of the drama. This is to be expected when we realize that a large part of his critical work depends upon his interests at each particular period. As Dryden's creative energies were long concentrated upon the drama, it is natural to discover that his criticism echoes the problems to be overcome by the working dramatist. The study of his dramatic theory leads us directly to a consideration of his dramatic practice; only by a study of both drama and dramatic theory can the complete picture be seen. Dryden's dramatic theory and practice provide evidence to prove that he was, both consciously and unconsciously, a true representative of his age, an age of change and uncertainty leading towards a period of serenity, calm, and completeness.

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Footnotes.

1. Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century, ed. by J. E. Spingarn, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), Introduction, p. CVI.
2. Loc. cit.
3. L. T. Bredvold, The Intellectual Milieu of John Dryden, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1934), p.152.
4. G. Saintsbury, A History of English Criticism, (London: Blackwood, 1911), p.111.
5. J.E. Spingarn, A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), p.255.
6. Spingarn, op. cit., p.268.
7. L. J. Wylie, Evolution of English Criticism, (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1903), p.14.
8. Spingarn, op. cit., p.258.
9. Critical Essays, op. cit., Vol. I, p.23.
10. Ibid., p.19.
11. J. Bronowski, The Poet's Defence, (Cambridge University Press, 1939), p.89.
12. Critical Essays, op. cit., Vol.I, p.72.
13. Ibid., Vol.I, p.118.
14. Basil Willey, The Seventeenth Century Background, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1934), p.209.
15. Critical Essays, op. cit., Vol.II, p.20.
16. Ibid., Vol.II, p.59.
17. Ibid., Vol.I, p.XXXVII.
18. Ibid., Vol.I, p.XXXVI.
19. Bonamy Dobrée, Restoration Tragedy, 1660-1720, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), p.13.
20. Essays of John Dryden, ed. by W. P. Ker, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), Vol.I, p.150.

21. Wylie, op. cit., p.19.
22. Wylie, op. cit., p.26.
23. Ibid., p.29.
24. W. E. Bohn, "John Dryden's Literary Criticism", P.M.L.A., XV(1907), p.74.