

# John Dryden

classmate

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From two great French critics - Montaigne and Corneille, Dryden had learnt the method of preface criticism. As a result most of his critical pronouncements are contained in his various prefaces prefixed either to his own poetical works or those of others. Some of his well-known prefaces are - (i) Epistle dedicatory of the Rival ladies advocating the use of heroic couplet for dramatic purposes; (ii) The Apology for Heroic Poetry, prefixed to the state of Innocence, a dramatic version of Paradise Lost; (iii) Essay on Satire, prefixed to Juvenal's satire wherein he defines the aims, of satire; (iv) Essay on Heroic Tragedy prefixed to the conquest of Granada and (v) Essay on fables, prefixed to his translations from Ovid, Homer, Boccaccio and Chaucer.

The most important of Dryden's critical works, however, is his Essay on Dramatic Poesy the masterpiece on which Dryden's entire fame as a critic rests. Published in 1668, the Essay discusses the following points at length:

- (i) a comparative estimate of ancient and modern poet.
- (ii) a comparison between the French drama



and the English drama.

- (iii) the question of the superiority of Elizabethan dramatists over those of the Restoration period.
- (iv) The importance of dramatic metre laid down by the classical critics and
- (v) The relative merits of rhyme and blank verse in serious plays.

The Essay is in the form of dialogues among four characters — Dryden's brother-in-law, Robert Howard Eugenius (Lord Buckhurst) Heridicus (Sir Charles Sedley) and Neander (Dryden himself). Aboard a boat down the Thames these four witty interlocutors represent four different approaches: (i) Crites defends the ancients, (ii) Eugenius defends the superiority of Elizabethan drama (iii) Heridicus prefers the French to the early Restoration period and (iv) Neander finally defends the English as opposed to the French.

Dryden, further makes a comparison between Ben Jonson and Shakespeare. To use his own words, "compared with Shakespeare, it appears that Jonson was a more correct poet but Shakespeare was a greater wit". He had the largest and most comprehensive soul. I admire Ben but I love Shakespeare".

Dryden, however, is not without faults. He is often prejudiced in favour of his own country. He is guilty of many



inconsistencies and is often vague and desultory. But despite these shortcomings, Dryden is a critical critic par excellence. He is the first critic to recognize the truth that literature is not static but a dynamic process, it is ever growing and changing, and the rules and literary judgements also must change accordingly. He is the father of comparative criticism; a pioneer in the field of historical criticism and the leader in the era of descriptive criticism. The remark Here's God's plenty about Chaucer truly applies to his own works. T. S. Eliot rightly sums up his achievement as a critic when he remarks —

"The great work of Dryden in criticism is that at the right moment he became conscious of the necessity of affirming the native element in literature."