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John Dryden's Shakespearean criticism.

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Thesis

JOHN DRYDEN'S SHAKESPEAREAN CRITICISM

by

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GENERAL SUMMARY

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Introduction

When John Dryden began his critical writings, English criticism¹ as a separate art and branch of literature was comparatively new.

In the Essay on Satire, 1693, Dryden said that at the beginning of his career as a critic he found himself, "before the use of the loadstone or knowledge of the compass, . . . sailing in a vast ocean without other help than the pole-star of the ancients and the rules of the French stage among the moderns."² Though Dryden felt himself a pioneer in English criticism and Samuel Johnson in the next century referred to him as the "father of English criticism",³ it is impossible for us to ignore the fact that such illustrious Englishmen as Sir Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson had preceded him in this field. However in that branch of criticism devoted to Shakespeare, Dryden was the first great critic to leave to posterity any large amount of material. It is true that many allusions, casual references, and eulogies, as well as scattered critical comments had been written of the great Elizabethan, but these were for the most part either frankly impressionistic or else governed by the narrow rules of an art as yet "too uncertain of itself to be liberal."⁴ Ben Jonson wrote wisely on the subject, but his comments were casual and brief.

John Dryden was well fitted to judge intelligently of Shakespeare. In his critical writings were blended two great forces: the spontaneous imagination of the Renaissance period plus the scientific correctness of the Neo-Classic. Standing in English literature, as he did, at the beginning of an age whose emphasis was

1 Ralli, History of Shakespearean Criticism, I, p.1

2 Ker, Essays of Dryden, p.16

3 Johnson, Lives, I, p.410

4 Ralli, op.cit., p.1

(All references to Dryden's essays will be to Ker's edition, unless otherwise stated.)

upon reason and form, and knowing full well its teachings, Dryden nevertheless insisted upon freedom of spirit and independence of judgment such as characterized the generation that had just passed away. He was far enough removed from the Elizabethan age to have a better perspective of Shakespeare than did the contemporaries of the great bard. Moreover his own experience as a playwright and poet gave him practical knowledge upon which to base his conclusions. For these reasons Dryden's Shakespearean criticism is significant, and I therefore propose to make a study of it the object of this thesis. In order to carry out this purpose I shall (1) trace briefly what had been accomplished in Shakespearean criticism up to and including Dryden's day; (2) indicate the influence upon Dryden of French critical theory of the day; (3) present fully his unfavorable criticism of Shakespeare's works; (4) discuss his attempts through adaptation to improve certain of Shakespeare's works; (5) give in some detail his favorable criticism of Shakespeare's works. Upon these points I shall base my evaluation of Dryden's contribution to Shakespearean criticism.

The first undoubted reference to Shakespeare that has been preserved to us is uncomplimentary. Robert Greene in his Groatsworth of Wit; Bought with a Million of Repentance,¹ written shortly before his death in 1592, called Shakespeare an "upstart crow", a reviser of other men's plays. With the sharpness of malice he adds: "He is in his owne conceit the only Shake-scene in a countrie." This allusion by Greene is important only in that it shows that at this early date Shakespeare had begun to write plays good enough to rouse the jealousy of other writers. In December of the same year Henry Chettle, who had apparently published Greene's work, apologized for it, saying of Shakespeare: "Divers of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writing, that aprooves his Art."² Chettle's apologetic statement indicates that men of consequence (divers of worship) thought well of Shakespeare both as a man and a writer.

From this time onward there were many scattered allusions to Shakespeare, most of them eulogistic in vein.³ His reputation at first apparently rested largely upon his poems; such constantly repeated epithets as "honey-tongued", "sugar-tongued", "mellifluous" were applied to the poet who wrote upon the theme of passion. Indeed a poem written by Henry Willebisse in 1594 represented Shakespeare as an authority on love.⁴ Complimentary references to his plays also are not lacking at this period, and they increase in number as time goes on. Much of the contemporary praise of Shakespeare is couched in the typically extravagant language of

1 , Shakspeare Allusion-Book, I, p.2

2 Ibid. p. 4

3 Ibid.pp. 5-46

4 Ibid.p.9

the time, and does not imply a realization of the poet's true greatness. It was mostly inspired by "blind affection",¹ as Ben Jonson said. In the midst of these encomiums by Shakespeare's contemporaries, the great men like Bacon and Lord Brooke were silent. John Munro, the editor of the Shakspeare Allusion-Book, attributes this to the fact that "a creative age, like the Elizabethan, cannot be justly critical; in particular it cannot be critical of one whose work is in progress in its midst Then too we have to notice that the distinguishing qualities which constitute Shakespeare's universal eminence are those which a studious perusal of the text alone can demonstrate. It was only after the publication of the Folio that adequate material was provided for such a study, and even then, except in a few great minds, like Milton's, recognition did not come till systematic criticism had begun to do its work."²

Of the early allusions to Shakespeare coming before the publication of the First Folio, the most important came in the Palladis Tamia³ of Francis Meres, published in 1598. In this, Meres refers to Shakespeare again in the conventional Elizabethan epithets, "mellifluous and honey-tongued", but he also states boldly: "As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for comedy and tragedy among the Latins so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage." He then cites Shakespeare's principal plays which had been written so far. Later he speaks with a flash of critical insight of the great playwright's "fine-filled phrase."

1 Sh. Allusion-Book, p.307

2 Ibid., Introduction, p.xxxiii

3 Ibid., p.46

However, in Ben Jonson's eulogy prefixed to the First Folio (1623)¹ we get at last an adequate recognition of Shakespeare's greatness. The learned Ben Jonson knew Shakespeare well, and "lov'd the man, on this side Idolatry"; moreover he understood the powers which made him immortal. His eulogy begins by declaring that Shakespeare cannot be praised too much; he is the "Soule of the Age"; he stands above Chaucer, Spenser, Beaumont; even excelling "Marlowe's mighty line". Though he had "small Latin and less Greeke", yet he may be compared to any of the poets of "insolent Greece or haughty Rome"; and then comes the famous verse: "He was not of an age, but for all time". He imitated nature so well that he outdid in this respect Aristophanes, Terence, and Plautus. Nor was he lacking in art. "A good Poet's made, as well as borne." Finally Jonson speaks in praise of Shakespeare's "well-turned and true-filled lines."

This is what Jonson said in praise of the great dead poet, but he does not find him faultless. In the Timber¹ and elsewhere² he ascribes to him two types of fault: (1) carelessness, or too great facility in writing, (2) ignorance of the ancients and want of learning.

The first charge we find expressed in Timber, 1641: "I remember, the Players have often mentioned it as an honor to Shakespeare, that in his writings, (whatsoever he penn'd) hee never blotted out line. My answer hath beene, would he had blotted a thousand His wit was in his owne power; would the rule of it had been so too. Many times he fell into those things could not escape laughter But he redeemed his vices, with his vertues. There was ever more in him to be prayseed, than

1. Sh.Allusion-Book, p.307

2. Ibid. p.348

3. See next page for definite references.

to be pardoned."

Thus, according to Jonson, though Shakespeare's excellences far outweighed his failings, yet he was guilty of the faults that follow upon¹ hasty and facile writing. "The indifferent eye," says John Munro, with which Shakespeare looked on the many minor errors, the anachronisms, and historical inaccuracies which are scattered broadcast through his plays could not win Jonson's approval. The spontaneity and profusion of Shakespeare's genius with its 'right happy and copious industry', bursting into creation with such facility that his 'pious fellows', Heminge and Condell, received scarcely a blot in his papers, were not such as Jonson associated with the art of a dramatist. If Shakespeare never blotted a line, Jonson thought he should have done, as he himself doubtless did freely."

The second charge which Jonson made against Shakespeare became famous later (in the Restoration period). Because of his ignorance of the ancients, Shakespeare "wanted art",² said Jonson; he meant this in the sense that Shakespeare did not observe the unities and other dicta handed down from the authority of Aristotle and Horace. In the Prologue to Every Man in His Humor,³ Jonson ridiculed Shakespeare's dramatic improprieties, such as his violation of the unity of time and place, and his violation of the decorum of the stage. In Nicholas Rowe's account of the argument between⁴ Jonson and John Hales, Hales heard "Ben frequently reproach him (Shakespeare) with want of learning and ignorance of the ancients."

1 Sh. Allusion-Book, Introduction, p.XLII

2 Ibid., p.274 (Notes by Wm. Drummond of Conversations with B.J.)

3 Ibid. p.263

4 Ibid. p.373

I have given Jonson's critical opinions of Shakespeare in some detail; for we shall find that in a later period, Dryden's adverse criticism of Shakespeare has much in common with Ben Jonson's. Dryden's critique is much more detailed than Jonson's, and is influenced by the theories and taste of his own age, but his essential complaint against Shakespeare is based too upon his failure to observe the rules and his carelessness. But Dryden's appreciation of Shakespeare, like Jonson's, is original, spontaneous, and rises above narrow limits and prejudices.

Between Jonson's eulogy prefixed to the Folio of 1623 and Dryden's Essay on Dramatic Poesy, stretched a period of some forty-five years. During this time, as hitherto, there was much reference to Shakespeare and his work, but little scientifically reasoned criticism. We have many evidences that Shakespeare's fame grew rapidly. For example, the frequent quotations from Shakespeare used by contemporary writers indicate that people assumed that Shakespeare's works were well known.¹ Moreover the frank borrowing from Shakespeare's works that characterized this period, and the ascribing of inferior material to Shakespeare in order to gain popularity for it show indirectly that the reputation of the great playwright was high at this time.

The best critical comments are to be found in the Introductions² prefixed to the various Folios. Besides Jonson's famous lines, there were other laudatory verses by other authors placed before the First Folio. Each of these was characterized by the extravagant exuberance of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, but each records appreciation, though blind, of Shakespeare.

1 See Charles Johnson's Shakespeare and His Critics, p.37

2 Sh.Allusion-Book, Introduction, p.XLVII

Yet we cannot say that all the appreciation of Shakespeare was "blind". In the Second Folio (published in 1632) is a fine tribute to Shakespeare, which is considered as a sort of rival to that of Ben Jonson, affixed to the First Folio. The initials I.M.S. are placed at the end of this tribute. Who the writer was is open to much conjecture. The poem is unalloyed praise of the great Elizabethan. It is especially noteworthy for the fact that the author realizes Shakespeare's ability to make his characters live and his skill in playing upon the emotions of his audience:

"To raise our ancient Sovereignes from their herse
Enlive their pale trunks, that the present age 1
Joyes in their joy, and trembles at their rage."

I.M.S. also asserts that Shakespeare is able

"To steere th' affection; and by heavenly fire
Mould us anew." 2

This is much akin to Aristotle's purging of the emotions by fear and pity.

When we read such encomiastic poems as the work of I.M.S., we cannot say that all early seventeenth century criticism of Shakespeare was blind adoration or unreasoning. In flashes, at least, such men as he gave intelligent comments. Yet these comments were few. There was as yet no critical work of any length that gave a scientific attempt at evaluating the great poet.

We encounter in the introduction to the Second Folio the great name of Milton. His epitaph on Shakespeare is the appreciation of one great poet for another. Though its sincerity and realization of Shakespeare's greatness are genuine, its brief nature allows little scope for critical analysis. However, in this epitaph and also in his poem L'Allegro, Milton expressed an idea which, like Jonson's famous saying,

1 Sh. Allusion-Book, p.364

2 Ibid., p.365

became the watchword of many later critics of Shakespeare.¹ He said in the epitaph:

"For whil'st to the shame of slow-endeavoring Art
Thy easy numbers flow" 2

And in L'Allegro, after referring to the learned Jonson, he said:

"Or sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child,
Warble his native wood-notes wild." 3

This is the first reference to Shakespeare as a natural, untrained genius in contrast to Jonson's learned art. From Milton's authority the idea was seized upon and flourished during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴ For example, prefixed to an edition of Shakespeare's poems published in 1640, is a verse by Leonard Digges,⁵ which begins thus:

"Poets are borne, not made; when I would prove
This truth, the glad remembrance I must love
Of never dying Shakespeare
Next Nature only helpt him

Besides this reference to Shakespeare as a natural genius, there occurs in this poem the famous line:

"Art without Art unparallel'd as yet."

A little later he speaks of the "well-labored art" of Jonson. Digges' verse has interest for us also because of its account of the popularity of Shakespeare's plays to the theatre-goers of the time. Evidently Shakespeare's plays were far more popular than those of Jonson, be he ever so learned:

"So I have seene, when Cesar would appeare,
And on the stage at halfe-sword parley were
Brutus and Cassius: oh, how the audience
Were ravish'd, with what wonder they went thence
When some new day they would not brooke a line,
Of tedious (tho' well-labored) Catiline:

1. cf. Lounsbury, Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist, p.2

2. Shakespeare Allusion-Book, I, p.342

3. Ibid. p.372

4. Lounsbury, Op. cit. p. 3

5. Shakespeare Allusion-Book, I, pp.455,456

"Sejanus too was irksome, they prized more
 Honest Iago, or the jealous Moore.
 And though the Fox and subtile Alchemist,
 Long intermitted could not quite be mist,
 Yet these sometimes, even at a friends desire
 Acted, have scarce defraied the Seacoale fire
 And door-keepers; when let but Falstaffe come,
 Hal, Paines, the rest, you scarce shall have a roome
 All is so pester'd; let but Beatrice
 And Benedicke be seene, loe in a trice
 The cockpit, Galleries, Boxes, all are full
 To hear Malvoglio, the crosse garter's Gull."

In his contrast of Shakespeare's natural genius and Jonson's "well-
 1
 labored" art, Digges is one of many. At first the critics were content
 to point out the difference between "nature" and "art", or like Digges,
 to proclaim Nature higher than Art, but with the restoration of the half-
 French King Charles to the throne of England and the influx of French
 critical ideas to England, gradually, to the professional critic, art
 came to be of more importance. The neo-classical influence, with its
 strict insistence upon the classical unities and ancient models, set up in
 England a school of thought which frowned upon Shakespeare, the untutored
 child of Nature, and approved rather the regularity of Ben Jonson.
 Professor Lounsbury in his book, Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist, says:
 "Jonson taught the doctrine of the unities; yet there was no general assent
 to the doctrine up to the Restoration French influence converted
 into positive obligation what had been considered a matter of choice."²

We come now to the age of Dryden, with whose Shakespearean criticism
 this thesis is primarily concerned. Before we consider his work, however,
 let us glance briefly at a few critics who were writing of Shakespeare at
 approximately the same time that Dryden wrote.

In 1664, a work entitled A Short Discourse of the English Stage

¹ Sh. Allusion-Book, I, Introduction, p.LXI

² Lounsbury, op.cit. p.40

was published by Richard Flecknoe; in it these words occur:

"To compare our English Dramatic Poets together, Shakespeare excelled in a natural vein, Fletcher in wit, and Jonson in gravity and ponderousness of style; whose only fault was, he was too elaborate; and had he mixed less erudition with his playes, they had been more pleasant and delightful than they are. Comparing him with Shakespeare, you shall see the difference betwixt Nature and Art; and with Fletcher, the difference betwixt Wit and Judgment: Wit being an exuberant thing, like Nilus, never more commendable than when it overflows; but Judgment a stayed and reposed thing, always containing itself within bounds and limits."¹

The names of the three Elizabethans are linked here, as is almost invariably the case when one of them is discussed in the dramatic criticism of the Restoration Period, where Jonson and Fletcher are placed on a level with Shakespeare, if not above him. In this essay of Flecknoe's we note the usual insistence upon Shakespeare's "natural vein" and Jonson's "art".

In contrast to the criticism of Flecknoe and others who were content for the most part to repeat stereotyped phrases, we have the opinion of the breezy and ingenuous Pepys, who was totally unconcerned with dogma. Perhaps the most eloquent testimony of the interest of Shakespeare's plays to Pepys is the fact that between 1661 and 1667 he attended some thirty-nine performances of them. He saw Macbeth nine times, Hamlet four times, and The Tempest six times. Macbeth was his favorite play and his good opinion of it increased each time he saw it; The Tempest also pleased him the more he saw it; and he was "mightily pleased" with Hamlet. However, Midsummer Night's Dream was "the most

insipid, ridiculous play "he ever saw in his life"; Romeo and Juliet was "the worst play he'd ever heard in his life". Twelfth Night and The Taming of the Shrew were "silly plays".¹ Pepys was a frank impressionist, whose ideas are interesting as those of an average citizen of the day. He took a "fearful joy" in going to the theatre, from which the ban was newly lifted. When theatres first reopened (1660), the dramas of Shakespeare, Jonson, and Fletcher were presented to the audiences, but gradually they were displaced by the newer plays based upon the French model.

² Professor Lounsbury says that during the twenty years after the Restoration the reputation of Shakespeare was "lower than it has been at any period before or since". By scholars he was considered inferior³ to Jonson; by the theatre-going public Fletcher was preferred.

Yet there were always those who appreciated Shakespeare. For example, Margaret Cavendish, whose Letters⁴ were written in 1664, made the statement that Shakespeare's excellence in describing character is so great that the reader feels himself one of the characters. Moreover, the great dramatist so ably portrays women that "one would think he had been metamorphosed from a man to a woman." This special faculty of Shakespeare to create living feminine characters was not universally recognized until comparatively late in the history of Shakespearean criticism; yet Margaret Cavendish speaks of it here. Her criticisms, it is interesting to note, are from the point of view of the reader of the plays rather than the witness of them upon the stage.

1 Sh. Allusion-Book: Pepys Diary, pp.89-96

2 Lounsbury: Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist, p.264

3 Ker: Dryden's Essays, p.81

4 Sh. Allusion-Book, p.133

Edward Phillips, who wrote his Theatrum Poetarum¹ in 1675 expressed the idea that "Shakespeare in spite of all his unfiled expressions, his rambling and indigested Fancys, the laughter of the critical, yet must be confess't a Poet above many that go beyond him in Literature some degrees." He also said that though some others may pretend to a more exact Decorum and economy than Shakespeare, yet "never any represented nature more purely to the life, and where the polishments of art are most wanting, as probably his learning was not extraordinary, he pleaseth with a certain wild and native Elegance."

Though Phillips retained the distinction between "native Elegance" and "polishments of art", he realized that Shakespeare's genius was superior to the narrow rules of the Neo-classicists. In this he was like Dryden; indeed his Theatrum Poetarum may well have been influenced by Dryden's Essay on Dramatic Poesy which had been published in 1668.

In contrast to Phillips, Thomas Rymer stands as the example of extreme abuse of Shakespeare. The basis of his attack was Shakespeare's failure to follow the "rules"; for Rymer, a rabid Neo-classicist, was totally lacking in aesthetic appreciation of Shakespeare's romantic genius. So he was capable of such ill-natured remarks as these:

"In the Neighing of a Horse, or in the growling of a Mastiff, there is a meaning, there is as lively expression, and, may I say, more humanity, than many times in the Tragical flights of Shakespeare."²

He condemns Othello thus:

"There is in this Play some burlesk, some humour, and ramble of Comical Wit, some shew and some Mimickry to divert the spectators;

1. Sh. Allusion-Book, pp.21-23

2. Spingarn, II: Rymer: Short View of Tragedy, p.225

but the tragical part is plainly none other than a Bloody Farce, without salt or savour."¹

The reason that Shakespeare was poor in writing tragedies, according to Rymer, was that he wrote to please an audience made up of "Carpenters and Coblers".²

The scurrilities of Rymer need not detain us; they are important only in that they show narrow neo-classicism carried to its extreme of absurdity. Surprising as it seems to us now, Rymer was respected as a critic in his own day. Even Dryden was influenced by him at first; but later (1694), seeing more clearly, he censured Rymer:

"For my own part I reverence Mr. Rymer's Learning, but I detest his Ill Nature and his Arrogance. I indeed, and such as I, have reason to be afraid of him, but Shakespear has not."³

SUMMARY OF PART I

By the majority of Shakespeare's contemporaries, he was loved and honored, though it was a blind affection, for the most part, which found expression in the typically extravagant Elizabethan epithets with which they characterized him. His very earliest reputation rested upon his poems, but his fame as a playwright also spread rapidly. Up to the closing of the theatres in 1642, he was recognized as the writer of popular and effective plays, but there was little understanding of his true greatness.

Ben Jonson, however, in the Folio of 1623, gave an adequate tribute to his genius. It was he also who first stated that Shakespeare "wanted art" because he did not observe the classical unities and other requirements of the drama handed down from antiquity. It was John Milton,

1. Spingarn, Rymer, Short View of Tragedy, p.255

2. Ibid., p.234

3. Sh.Allusion-Book, II, p.402

who, in his epitaph on Shakespeare and also in his L'Allegro, pointed out the distinction between Shakespeare's "natural" genius and Jonson's learned "art", an idea often repeated thereafter in the dogma of criticism. From these beginnings grew two general theories concerning Shakespeare: (1) that he was an "inspired barbarian", who did not need to follow any rules of art; (2) that he was highly "irregular" because he did not fulfill the requirements of classical antiquity for the drama.

The idea that Shakespeare was blameworthy because he did not follow the "rules" of the ancients, as interpreted by the French neo-classicists, rapidly gained credence in England after the Restoration, when French critical theory invaded England. It was at this time also that Shakespeare's name was coupled with those of Jonson and Fletcher in critical discussion of the drama. At no time before or since has the reputation of Shakespeare been as low as it was in the years that followed the Restoration. Then Jonson was placed higher by scholars; Fletcher was preferred by theatre-goers. As an example of the extreme to which neo-classical condemnation of Shakespeare could go, the critical works of Thomas Rymer stand out. It is well to remember, however, that intimate knowledge of Shakespeare's works was the privilege of comparatively few during the seventeenth century; for printed copies of his plays were not widespread. Many people were content to repeat accepted formulas of the day in application to Shakespeare. However, there were always those who honestly appreciated the great Elizabethan. Many of these, no doubt, were inarticulate; their ideas never found their way into print. Others wrote in flashes of inspiration some fine though brief critical comments which showed at least a partial

conception of Shakespeare's mighty genius. Such people as Ben Jonson and Milton in the earlier part of the century and Margaret Cavendish and Edward Phillips near the end of the century recorded their tributes to the great playwright. Of all seventeenth century critics, however, it was John Dryden who left to posterity the fullest, most sympathetic, and most scientifically reasoned critical comment upon Shakespeare. He came closest to the realization that Shakespeare was the exponent of the highest and truest art.

The Influence of French Dramatic Theory upon Dryden

From the beginning of the Renaissance up to the Restoration the chief foreign influence upon English literature was Italian. With the return of Charles II to England, however, French influence became uppermost. This was due partly to the fact that in the seventeenth century France produced some of her greatest writers; partly to the increasing political power of France in the world; but perhaps most of all to the fact that Charles II, newly restored to the throne of England, brought back with him a taste for French manners and French literature.¹ He was himself half French (his mother was a French princess), and he had spent many of his years of exile in France. He, with his cavaliers, set the literary style in England. Dryden in his Defense of the Epilogue speaks of the king's gracious influence:

"Now, if they ask me, whence it is that our conversation is so much refined? I must freely, and without flattery, ascribe it to the court; and, in it, particularly to the King, whose example gives a law to it. His own misfortunes, and the nation's, afforded him an opportunity, which is rarely allowed to sovereign princes, I mean of travelling, and being conversant in the most polished courts of Europe; and, thereby, of cultivating a spirit which was formed by nature to receive the impression of a gallant and generous education. At his return, he found a nation lost as much in barbarism as in rebellion, and, as the excellency of his nature forgave the one, so the excellency of his manners reformed the other."²

Dryden himself, the greatest literary figure of his day in England, undoubtedly knew and felt the influence of French ideas. His own plays were based upon French models; moreover, in his critical writings he

1. cf. Halleck's English Literature, pp.258, 259

2. Ker, Dryden's Essays, I, p.176

referred frequently to French critics of the day. Besides this, he in conjunction with Sir William Soame translated into English Boileau's Art of Poetry.¹ It was through the medium of the French that English men of letters gathered most of their knowledge of Aristotle and Horace. The pseudo-classicism of the French with their polish, their regularity, and their rules became the background of literary criticism in England as well as in France.

In order to understand Dryden's attitude towards accepted dogma of the day, it is worthwhile to sketch briefly what the chief tenets of neo-classicism as interpreted by the French were.

There was, of course, first of all the theory of the three unities a heritage supposedly from Aristotle, but in reality in a radically changed and limited form. It was the Italian critics of the Renaissance period who first formulated the narrow interpretation of the three unities,² though Dryden mistakenly supposed the French poets first made the unity of place a "precept of the stage".³ In the limited form, French neo-classicists seized upon the three unities and restricted and dogmatized them still further; so that to the extremists of Dryden's day the "rules" were briefly these: (1) the unity of action required that there should be but a single plot in a drama; subplots were frowned upon; (2) the unity of time limited the action of the play to twenty-four hours at most; (3) the unity of place required that the action take place in one spot, or if in more than one, the places must be adjacent. The French added their own idea of the "liaison de scenes"; that is, scenes must interlock so that the stage never is left empty.

1. Smith and Parks, The Great Critics, pp. 224-252

2. Ibid., p. 107

3. Essay of Dramatic Poesy, p. 31

Another idea of which the French litterateurs were very fond was the so-called "decorum of the stage". This too had its source in classic example, but the original statements were misinterpreted by French nicety and strongly tinged with French thought. According to their conception of decorum, bloodshed and deeds of violence must never be portrayed upon the stage; comic material must never be mixed with tragic; and characters must always act according to certain set formulas. For example, a king must always act in kingly manner; he must not, to take one instance, demean himself by jesting with a fool. Professor S.H. Butcher has made an interesting statement upon this subject in his text, Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art:

"Aristotle does undoubtedly hold that actors in a tragedy ought to be illustrious by birth and position Moral nobility is what he demands, and this on the French stage, or at least with French critics, is transformed into an inflated dignity, a courtly etiquette and decorum, which seemed proper to high rank. The instance is one of many in which literary critics have wholly confounded the teaching of Aristotle."¹

An amusing example of the lengths to which French writers carried their idea of decorum is discussed by Maurice Baudin of New York University in a paper entitled The Shifting of Responsibility in Seventeenth Century French Tragic Drama.² He says that in the drama of this period a king was never held responsible for crimes that might cast reflections upon his royal nature. The shifting of responsibility upon prominent characters became "a matter of etiquette in which the entire cast collaborated." Such were some of the "rules" of the French stage.

1. See Spingarn, Lit. Crit. in the Renaissance, p.64

2. Modern Language Notes, Vol.49, pp.152-158

Of all the French critics, the one who influenced Dryden most was undoubtedly Pierre Corneille. A dramatist of wide popularity, Corneille, like Dryden, had practical experience upon which he based his common-sense theories of the drama. He had a wholesome respect for classicism, but refused to allow it to cramp and restrain his genius. He wrote of Aristotle and Horace with the friendly interest of a fellow worker; he did not treat the great Greek philosopher with awe, nor consider his precepts as iron-clad for his own day. This free discussion of an authority which the Neo-classicists were coming to regard as sacrosanct was reflected in Dryden, who had a love of freedom equal to Corneille's. W.P.Ker in his Introduction to Dryden's Essays says:

"From Corneille's essays Dryden seems to have got, if not the original impulse to write freely about his literary opinions, at any rate a quickening of interest in critical discussions which left its effect on all his later writings."¹

Both men alike refused to follow blindly any law-giver; both insisted that the primary function of the poet is to please the people for whom he writes. Corneille in 1637 said:

"Ce n'est pas assez d'avoir etudie dans les livres d'Aristote et d'Horace notre premier but doit etre de plaire a la cour et au peuple Il faut, s'il se peut, y ajouter les regles, afin de ne deplaire pas aux savants, et recevoir un applaudissement universal; mais surtout gagnons la voix publique."²

That Dryden heartily agreed with these sentiments is apparent in these famous sayings of his own:

I. W.P.Ker, p.XIX

2. Epitre to La Suivante, 1637(Lancaster's French Dr. Lit., p.11)

"It is not enough that Aristotle has said so, for Aristotle drew his models of tragedy from Sophocles and Euripides; and, if he had seen ours, might have changed his mind."¹

And again: "Why should there be any Ipse Dixit in our poetry, any more than there is in our Philosophy?"²

His belief as to the function of poetry is shown in these statements:

"For I confess that my chief endeavors are to delight the age in which I live."³

"To please the people ought to be the poet's aim, because plays were made for their delight."⁴

In 1637 Corneille also expressed his views on the subject of the unities. His theory was to follow the rules as far as possible, but to "enlarge" them when the subject demanded it, and even to break them when their severity seemed incompatible with beauty:

"J'aime a suivre les regles; mais loin de me rendre leur esclave, je les elargis et resserre selon le besoin qu'en a mon sujet, et je romps meme sans sans scrupule celle qui regarde la duree de l'action, quand sa severite me semble absolument incompatible avec les beautes des evenements que je decris."⁵

He made this statement just about a year after the famous Cid controversy, during which the French Academy condemned his play, Le Cid, (despite its wide popularity). The grounds upon which they censured the play were these: (1) it was not regular enough; (2) its ethics were blameworthy. The effect upon Corneille of this decision was to make him

1 Fly-leaf of Rymer's "Tragedies of the Last Age" - cf. Shakespeare and His Critics

2 Preface to Evening's Love, p.138

3 Defense of Essay of Poetry, p.116

4 Ibid. p.120

5 Epitre to La Suivante (H.C.Lancaster, French Dramatic Literature, p.10)

"think of his art", but he declined to adopt a great many of the suggestions of the Academy. "Corneille's attitude is that of an intelligent man who takes suggestions when they appear good and rejects the rest."¹

The rules, according to Corneille, are fine in theory, but experience shows that unless they are liberally interpreted, and used as the writer finds expedient, they will "banish many beauties from our stage."² These substantially are Dryden's views too; like Corneille, experience had taught him that a liberal interpretation of the unities was the only answer to the problem of reconciling freedom and authority. "Let us follow the rules," he says, "but let us follow them at a distance."³ Just how liberally Dryden interpreted the rules is discussed in some detail later in this paper.

Corneille, upon whose example Dryden drew so freely, was far more liberal in his views than the average French critic of the day. Boileau, the "law-giver of Parnassus", who "moulded the literary opinion of France for a century or more",⁴ was more typical. His teachings included commands to follow ancient models closely, to adhere strictly to rules in narrowest sense, to subject all literary work to the rigid demands of etiquette, decorum, and reason. For each branch of literature he laid down definite requirements. Against such narrow and rigid authority as this Dryden's common sense rebelled. Says Scott-James:⁵ "Having a deep affection for English literature, having also the courage of his convictions, Dryden was incapable of stomaching the puerilities of Boileau. Such finicky criticism, with its

1. Lancaster, Modern Language Notes, 44, p. 215

2. Epitre to La Suivante, p. 10

3. Works of John Dryden, Don Sebastian, VII, 312

4. Making of Literature, p. 132

5. Ibid. p. 138

precise rules and definitions, bore no correspondence to the variety of life, or the abundance of genius."

Yet the fact is that Dryden was constantly at war with himself in an attempt to render the customary homage to authority and still to maintain the freedom of thought which he realized in his heart is essential to creative work. So we find him paying respect to Rapin and Le Bossu, two critics of orthodox views. Dryden says of Rapin: "He is alone sufficient, were all the other critics lost, to teach anew the rules of writing."¹ Bossu he calls the "best of modern critics".² W.P.Ker³ thinks that Dryden's admiration for these two is due to an appreciation on the part of Dryden for their "clear reasoning and exposition", and also due to Dryden's nature, which was "not inclined to dissent from established opinion without sufficient cause". Whatever the reason, it is certain that Dryden gave higher praise to them than modern critical opinion would justify. How far their teachings affected Dryden's own views is difficult to trace; yet it is sufficiently clear that he accepted them as his authority in some instances at least. He interpreted the Aristotelian theory of katharsis according to their views, for example. He accepted their idea that "all excellent arts and particularly that of poetry have been invented and brought to perfection by men of transcendent genius; and that, therefore they who practice afterward the same arts are obliged to tread in their footsteps, and to search in their writings the foundation of them."⁴ He quoted Bossu's authority to prove that certain vices must not be ascribed to the

¹ Apology for Heroic Poetry, p.181

² Preface to Troilus and Cressida, p.211

³ Ker, Introduction, p.XVIII

⁴ Preface to Troilus and Cressida, p.211

character of a hero or a prince unless those vices be "slurred over by the artifice of the poet."¹ This, of course, is the orthodox neo-classic view of etiquette, upon which Boileau laid so much stress and which Dryden was willing to accept in theory at least.

In another place² he quotes Rapin at some length to justify the famous cliché of the neo-classicists, "nature methodized": "If the rules be well considered, we shall find them to be made only to reduce Nature into method, to trace her step by step, and not to suffer the least mark of her to escape us: 'tis only by these that probability is maintained, which is the soul of poetry."

In the matter of following French influence, as well as in other matters, Dryden was not bothered by a "foolish consistency". He was willing in theory to honor the dictates of authority; in practice he was prepared to follow them only as long as they did not clash with the demands of common sense and what the public enjoyed. Since Corneille faced squarely the struggle between freedom and authority and answered the questions it raised with independence and practical common sense, it is natural that of all French critics, he had the deepest influence upon Dryden.

SUMMARY OF PART II

With the Restoration of the Stuarts, French influence upon manners and literature entered England. Classical theories, reputedly handed down from Aristotle and Horace, were passed through the French mind, which often distorted the original and added ideas of its own; the resultant pseudo-classicism became in the late seventeenth century the basis of English as well as French literary criticism.

1. Preface to *Troilus and Cressida*, p.219

2. *Ibid.*, p.228

The chief tenets of this pseudo-classicism were the doctrine of the three unities and the decorum of the stage.

Of all French critics the one who influenced Dryden most was Pierre Corneille. The latter, a dramatist of liberal views tried to reconcile the demands of authority with the right of the individual writer to freedom of thought. So he stood for a liberal interpretation of the "rules", and even countenanced their being broken altogether when expediency required it. These were substantially Dryden's views also. Against the rigid neo-classicism of Boileau, the law-giver, he rebelled; yet we find him paying his respects to Rapin and Le Bossu, disciples of Boileau. This indicates that Dryden, like Corneille, was trying to reconcile freedom with authority. He gave lip homage to authority, but in the final analysis his chief aim was frankly to delight the age in which he lived.

By sifting from the critical essays of Dryden, from his Prefaces to various plays of his own, from Prologues, Dedications, and other critical comments, one may learn Dryden's estimate of Shakespeare. He wrote no one definite essay upon Shakespeare; therefore the task of discovering his opinion of his great predecessor is somewhat involved, and requires patient piecing together of disconnected statements. The task is rendered more intricate by the fact that Dryden did not hesitate to change his opinion from time to time as to what constitutes excellence in drama. However, despite the change of mind he displayed when he abandoned rhyme for blank verse, although he had championed the former fervently at one time; despite his change of attitude on the unities, which he embraced warmly at one time, and at another declared to be relatively unimportant; despite his shifting views upon such matters as tragicomedy and the decorum of the stage,- despite all this, Dryden displayed a fundamental consistency in his appraisal of Shakespeare. Although in formulating a theory of drama he felt constrained to try to reconcile the neo-classical rules with expediency - in other words, with what the people of England in his day accepted and liked, yet in appreciating the works of Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists, he felt less constraint. In spontaneous outbursts he gave his own clear judgment untinged often by dogma. For this reason, John Harrington Smith in his critical paper entitled Dryden's Critical Temper even goes to the length of saying that of Dryden's critical work all that is "worth saving"¹ is his critical opinion of his predecessors. "Because of his profound rationalism and his changing views, Dryden's expressed ideas of

dogma are worthless; it is his appreciation of his predecessors, of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Spenser, that shows his real powers of criticism.¹

Dryden did not make of Shakespeare a faultless god. Although he admired him warmly and revered him, yet he judged him rationally and found imperfections in him. In his essay called Defence of the Epilogue, 1672, he said:

"Shakespeare, who many times has written better than any poet in any language, is yet so far from writing wit always, or expressing that wit according to the dignity of the subject, that he writes, in many places, below the dullest writer of ours, or any precedent age. Never did any author precipitate himself from such height of thought to so low expressions as he often does. He is the very Janus of poets; he wears almost everywhere two faces; and you have scarce begun to admire the one, ere you despise the other. Neither is the luxuriance of Fletcher a less fault than the carelessness of Shakespeare."²

Dryden had definite ideas concerning the imperfections of Shakespeare. He felt that they were due to Shakespeare's own carelessness (mentioned above) and to a certain "lethargy of thought"³ into which Shakespeare occasionally sank; but even more they were due to the age in which he lived; had the poet but lived in Dryden's polished generation, to which Charles had graciously brought back so much culture, then he would not have erred.

"With some errors not to be avoided in that age, Shakespeare had undoubtedly a larger soul of poesy than ever any of our nation."⁴

1 Ibid., p.201

2 Defence of the Epilogue, p.172

3 Ibid., p.176

4 Epistle Dedicatory of the Rival Ladies, p.6

"But the times were ignorant in which they (Shakespeare and Fletcher) lived I will, therefore, spare my own trouble of inquiring into their faults; who had they lived now, had doubtless written more¹ correctly."

In the Prologue to Troilus and Cressida, 1679, has the ghost of Shakespeare speak thus:

"Untaught, unpractised in a barbarous age
I found not but created first the stage."²

What were the faults which Dryden ascribed to Shakespeare? For the sake of convenience, we may classify them under three general heads: (1) defects in plot structure, (2) errors in sense and language, (3) incorrectness of wit.

In order to understand his attitude towards the matter of plot structure, it is necessary to consider Dryden's final decision on the importance of the classical unities in the construction of drama. Although he wavered somewhat in his allegiance to the unities, yet in the final analysis his plea was for as close an observance of the unities as was compatible with reason and common-sense. While he admitted freely that fine plays had been produced with utter disregard to the unities, he felt that these plays would have been so much the better had they adhered to an observance of the "rules" liberally interpreted. Although the French contrive their plots more regularly than the English, "yet", says Dryden, "I am of opinion that neither our faults nor their virtues³ are considerable enough to place them above us." And again, "'Tis true those beauties of the French poetry are such as will raise perfection higher where it is, but are not sufficient to give it where it is not:

1 Defence of the Epilogue, p.169

2 Sh.Allusion-Book, Vol.II,p.251

3 Essay of Dramatic Poesy,pp.67,68

they are indeed the beauties of the statue, but not of a man, because not animated with the Soul of poesy."¹ That a blind insistence upon the neo-classical unities in their narrowest sense was unwise, Dryden realized. Corneille himself had confessed that he felt constrained by them and that many beauties of the stage were lost because of them. Dryden said in the Essay of Dramatic Poesy: "By their servile observations of the Unities of Time and Place, and integrity of scenes, they have brought on themselves that dearth of plot, and narrowness of imagination, which may be observed in all their plays."²

Let us then have liberality in our interpretation of the unities, but let us not abandon them entirely if we would have the highest degree of excellence in our plays. This was Dryden's idea. His conception of how liberal the dramatist should be is clearly stated. His conclusions concerning the unity of time were as follows: "The imaginary time of every play ought to be contrived into as narrow a compass as the nature of the plot, the quality of the persons, and variety of accidents will allow."³ Concerning the unity of place he said: "The scene of the action may be laid in several places in the same town or city, or places adjacent to each other in the same country," but "the nearer and fewer those imaginary places are, the greater resemblance they will have to truth."⁴ His ideas on the unity of action he gave in his Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy. Following the example of Aristotle, the plot should be "one and single"; but Terence had double actions in his plays, "for it was his custom to translate two Greek comedies, and to weave them into one

1. An Essay of Dramatic Poesy, p.68

2: Ibid., p.76

3. Defense of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy, p.130

4. Ibid., p.129

of his, and one was principal, the other secondary or subservient. And this had obtained on the English stage to give us the pleasure of variety."¹

In another place² he said: "Our variety, if well ordered, will afford greater pleasure to the audience." In this interpretation of the unity of action, namely that a play may have subplots, providing they are in orderly relation to the main plot and properly in subservience to it, Dryden is not far from the modern point of view.

In brief then, while Dryden did not consider the unities of paramount importance, he felt that a reasonable adherence to a liberalized version of them was beneficial. Towards other requirements of the neo-classical school he was equally unwilling to be arbitrary. For example, he saw no reason why the English drama might not mix tragic and comic material:

"I must therefore have stronger arguments, ere I am convinced that compassion and mirth in the same subject destroy each other; and in the meantime cannot but conclude, to the honor of our nation, that we have invented, increased, and perfected a more pleasant way of writing for the stage, than was ever known to the ancients or moderns of any nation, which is tragi-comedy."³

As for showing tumult and bloodshed on the stage, he agreed that it was "indecent", but regretted that his countrymen refused to have "the object of horror taken from them."⁴ However, "If we are to be blamed for showing too much of the action, the French are as faulty for discovering too little of it: a mean betwixt both should be observed by every judicious writer."⁵

¹ Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy, p. 208

² Essay of Dramatic Poesy, p. 71

³ Ibid., p. 70

⁴ Ibid., p. 74

⁵ Ibid., p. 75

Of course Dryden recognized the fact that Shakespeare made no attempt, usually, to observe the rules. Although he deplored mildly this non-observance and obviously felt that more regularity in some of Shakespeare's plays would have been salutary, yet he did not make a serious charge of it; indeed there are other defects of plot which Dryden seemed to emphasize more. In An Essay of Dramatic Poesy it is true that he put into the mouth of Lisideius the following words:

"If you consider the historical plays of Shakespeare, they are rather so many chronicles of kings, or the business many times of thirty or forty years, cramped into a representation of two hours and a half; which is not to imitate or paint Nature, but rather to draw her in miniature, to take her in little; to look upon her through the wrong end of perspective, and receive her images not only much less, but infinitely more imperfect than life; this, instead of making a play delightful, renders it ridiculous."¹ The words of Lisideius probably do not represent Dryden's own views, but rather, since this essay is in the form of a debate, these views represent the ideas of one class of critics of the day. Dryden's own convictions are expressed by the character Neander who speaks later in the essay. Neander admits that French plays are more regular than English, but contends (as we have already indicated) that even so English plays are superior. He deprecates the French custom of observing the unities servilely. Thus apparently he does not concede to Lisideius' condemnation of Shakespeare.

Later (1672), in the Defence of the Epilogue, Dryden spoke in his own person, and in more pointed criticism of Shakespeare's plots (he included Fletcher in this criticism, :

"Witness the lameness of their plots; many of which, especially those which they writ first. were made up of some ridiculous, incoherent story, which in one play many times took up the business of an age. I suppose I need not name 'Pericles, Prince of Tyre', nor the historical plays of Shakespeare: besides many of the rest, as 'The Winter's Tale', 'Love's Labour Lost', 'Measure for Measure', which were either grounded on impossibilities, or at least so meanly written, that the comedy neither¹ caused your mirth, nor the serious part your concernment."

Here it is true he did criticize Shakespeare's flagrant disregard of the unity of time, but this criticism seems secondary: he leaned more heavily upon the "lameness" of the plots, which he attributed to the ridiculousness and incoherence of the story and to the fact that such stories were "grounded upon impossibilities" or "meanly written". Though Dryden's language is harsh, (we question the "meanly written") yet his criticism is not entirely unfounded. Shakespeare worshippers may excuse the violent anachronisms and discrepancies in the plots of such plays as The Winter's Tale upon whatever grounds they like. A romantic age later was to view with horror any adverse criticism of Shakespeare; for the great bard was held above criticism. But there are modern critics who agree with Dryden that some of Shakespeare's plots are structurally far² from perfect and might well have been improved upon by their author.

In the Preface to Troilus and Cressida, 1679, which contains the essay The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy, Dryden seems temporarily to be under the sway of Rapin, Bossu, and Rymer. In this essay we find his strictest insistence upon the rules. The occasion of writing it was the publishing of his own adaptation of Shakespeare's work. He says of

1 Defense of the Epilogue, p.165

2 cf. Stoll's Poets and Playwrights pp.55-60

Shakespeare's original:

"For the play itself, the author seems to have begun it with some fire; the characters of Pandarus and Thersites are promising enough; but as if he grew weary of his task, after an entrance or two, he lets them fall: and the latter part of the tragedy is nothing but a confusion of drums and trumpets, excursions and alarms. The chief persons, who give name to the tragedy, are left alive; Cressida is false, and is not punished. Yet after all because the play is Shakespeare's, and that there appeared in some places of it the admirable genius of the author, I undertook to remove that heap of rubbish under which many excellent thoughts lay wholly buried."¹ The reference to poetic justice and the superciliousness of tone that calls any of Shakespeare's work "rubbish" remind one strongly of Rymer, who was, by the way, a friend of Dryden's. Further influence of Rymer is shown in the following statement: "How defective Shakespeare and Fletcher have been in all their plots, Mr. Rymer has discovered in his criticisms."² In the same essay Dryden says: "In the mechanic beauties of the plot, which are the observation of the three Unities, Time, Place, and Action they are both (Shakespeare and Fletcher) deficient; but Shakespeare most."³ The reader will note, however, that though Dryden considers it a deficiency in Shakespeare not to have observed the unities, yet after all, they are but "mechanic beauties". There are higher beauties, Dryden infers, which Shakespeare has.

After a lengthy discussion of Rapin and Bossu as his authority Dryden concludes: "Here, therefore, the general answer may be given to the first question, how far we ought to imitate Shakespeare and Fletcher in their plots; namely, that we ought to follow them so far only as they

¹ Preface to *Troilus and Cressida*, p.203

² *Ibid.*, p.211

³ *Ibid.*, p.212

have copied the excellences of those who invented and brought to perfection Dramatic Poetry.¹ He prudently decided that all imitators of Shakespeare had better strive for regularity; for, after all, "we want his beauties to countervail our faults."²

Although Dryden temporarily bows to conventional dogma, still his instinctive admiration of Shakespeare cannot be submerged for long. Later in the same essay he speaks highly of Shakespeare, and his admiration grows. That Dryden himself failed to follow the rules in his own plays, that there is ample evidence, if one will but look to his later plays. He began by trying to adhere strictly to neo-classical requirements, but later in life decided to "err with honest Shakespeare".³

Before we leave the subject of Dryden's criticism of Shakespeare's plots, we should note one flagrant error that he made. "Most of Shakespeare's plays," he says, "I mean the stories of them, are to be found in the Hecatombuthi, or Hundred Novels of Cinthio."⁴ This error is due simply to an obvious lack of knowledge on the subject of Shakespeare's sources.

The second type of fault to be found in Shakespeare according to Dryden had to do with errors in "sense and language". The language of the Restoration period showed a marked improvement over that of Shakespeare's day, according to our critic, and therefore it is not surprising that the Elizabethan's language often seems guilty of being coarse, obscure, and obsolete. "All writers have their imperfections and failings," said Dryden sensibly: "but I may safely conclude in general, that our improprieties are less frequent, and less gross than theirs. One testimony of this is undeniable, that we are the first who have observed them; and certainly

1 Preface to Troilus and Cressida, p.211

2 Ibid., p.212

3 The Vindication (1683): Sh.Allusion-Book, p.178

4 Preface to an Evening's Love, p.146

to observe errors is a great step to the correcting of them. But malice and partiality set apart, let any man who understands English, read diligently the works of Shakespeare and Fletcher, and I dare undertake that he will find in every page either some solecism of speech, or some notorious flaw in sense."¹ And again, "I was speaking of their sense and language; and I dare almost challenge any man to show me a page together which is correct in both."² He went on from this point to show several grammatical errors occurring in the pages of Jonson's plays. He concluded by saying: "And what correctness after this can be expected from Shakespeare or from Fletcher, who wanted the learning and care which Jonson had?"³ He seems to feel rather shamefaced at this meticulous criticism of the plays of great Elizabethans; so he adds: "I once more beg the reader's pardon Only let him consider that I live in an age where my least faults are severely censured; and that I have no way left to extenuate my failings, but by showing as great in those whom we admire."⁴ A little later in the same essay, Dryden criticizes the language of Macbeth: "In reading some bombast speeches of Macbeth, which are not to be understood, (Jonson) used to say that it was a horror; and I am much afraid that this is so."⁵ There are many who would question this last remark of Dryden's, particularly since he does not substantiate it with proof. Where, for example, does he find bombast in the speeches of Macbeth?

In the Preface to Troilus and Cressida, he again scores Shakespeare's language: "Yet it must be allowed to the present age, that the tongue in general is so much refined since Shakespeare's time that many of his words, and more of his phrases, are scarce intelligible. And of those which we

1 Defence of the Epilogue, p.165

2. Ibid., p.167

3 Ibid., p.169

4 Ibid., p.167

5. Ibid., p.167

understand, some are ungrammatical, others coarse; and his whole style is so pestered with figurative expressions, that it is as affected as it is obscure. 'Tis true that in his latter plays he had worn off somewhat of the rust "¹ Later he says: "I cannot deny that he has his failings; but they are not so much in the passions themselves as in his manner of expression: he often obscures his meanings by his words, and sometimes makes it unintelligible. I will not say of so great a poet that he distinguished not the blown puffy style from true sublimity, but I may venture to maintain that the fury of his fancy often transported him beyond the bounds of judgment, either in coining of new words and phrases or racking words which were in use into the violence of a catachresis."²

To summarize then, Dryden finds in Shakespeare's language errors in grammar, occasional coarseness of expression, misuse of words, overuse of figurative language, and obscurity of meaning. To the fact that Shakespeare is sometimes guilty of these charges I think the unbiased critic will assent. How important the charges are and to what extent Shakespeare alone is responsible for them are matters open to question. Sir Sidney Lee in his Life of William Shakespeare states that many of these errors were not Shakespeare's own. "Many of the defects which Dryden imputed to the early texts were due to misapprehension either of the forms of Elizabethan or Jacobean typography. Many of the perplexities were due to early printers' spelling vagaries, their misreading of the 'copy', and their inability to reproduce intelligently any sentence in a foreign language."³ Shakespeare did not write his plays for publication, and but few of them were published during his lifetime. The fact that he

1 Preface to Troilus and Cressida, p.203

2 Ibid.

3 Lee, Life of Wm. Shakespeare, p.573

did not prepare them for publication, nor did he supervise their editing allows, of course, human error on the part of those who handled his plays to creep in. Then too allowance must be made for the fact that what might have been acceptable usage in Shakespeare's day later became incorrect. Dryden himself, of course, realized this, imputing as he does many of Shakespeare's errors to the "ignorance" of the age in which he lived. But even despite these extenuating circumstances, there is still left the charge that Shakespeare sometimes was guilty of careless errors in the language of his plays. And this charge still stands. As to the accusation of bombast¹ Dryden admits that Shakespeare is seldom guilty.

The third and last of the general charges against Shakespeare deals with a so-called incorrectness and lack of refinement in "wit". In the Author's Apology for Heroic Poetry² he gives us this: "The definition of wit (which has been so often attempted, and ever unsuccessfully by many poets) is only this: that it is a propriety of thoughts and words; or in other terms, thoughts and words elegantly adapted to the subject." This is a definition in the narrowest sense; Dryden also uses the word in a broader sense to mean a combination of intelligence and imagination.³ Although he ascribes to Shakespeare great wit, yet he avers that Shakespeare is not always the same in his expression of it, but is sometimes "incorrect". "Shakespeare is far from writing wit always, or expressing that wit according to the dignity of the subject."⁴ "He is many time flat, insipid; his comic wit degenerating into clenches (puns), his serious swelling into bombast."⁵ In the Preface to an Evening's Love, he ascribes "superfluity and waste of wit"⁶ to Shakespeare, a charge which reminds us of Jonson's

I Preface to Troilus and Cressida, p.226

2 All for Love, p.190

3 Cf. Preface to Annus Mirabilis, p.14

4 Defense of the Epilogue, p.172

5 Essay of Dramatic Poesy, p.80

6 Preface to an Evening's Love, p.140

"Would he had blotted a thousand!" Dryden regrets Shakespeare's fondness for "clenches", which he terms "the lowest and most grovelling kind of wit."¹

Besides the general charge of incorrectness in wit, Shakespeare, according to Dryden, was unable to depict the refined wit of gentlemen. "I have always acknowledged the wit of our predecessors, with all the veneration which becomes me, but, I am sure, their wit was not that of gentlemen; there was ever somewhat that was ill-bred and clownish in it, and which confessed the conversation of the authors."² This lack of Shakespeare and his contemporaries was due to the fact that "In the age³ wherein those poets lived, there was less of gallantry than in ours." In another place Dryden again regrets that Shakespeare did not understand and imitate better the conversation of polished gentlemen, whose "wild debaucheries and quickness of wit in repartees"⁴ he seems to think desirable. Mercutio was Shakespeare's best attempt along this line, according to Dryden, and the author had to kill him off early in the play⁵ because he feared "being killed by him". All thi simply shows that Dryden was strongly influenced by the taste of his age; for the type of play showing the cleverness, polish, and immorality of "gentlemen" was very popular during the Restoration period.

1 Defense of the Epilogue, p.173

2 Ibid., p.174

3 Ibid., p.175

4 Essay of Dramatic Poesy, p.81

5 Defense of the Epilogue, p.171

SUMMARY OF PART III

The sources from which the student must gather Dryden's critical estimate of Shakespeare are the Prologues, Prefaces, Dedications and other essays which Dryden wrote. There is no one essay devoted entirely to a critique of Shakespeare. Though Dryden's dramatic theory varied from time to time, his appraisal of Shakespeare was fundamentally consistent.

Dryden admired Shakespeare warmly, but he did not consider him faultless. Shakespeare's errors (which Dryden explained were due to the author's own carelessness and to the ignorance of the age in which he lived) were of three types: (1) weakness of plot structure, (2) errors in sense and language, (3) inability to depict refined with correctly. Since Dryden stood for liberality in the interpretation of neo-classical rules, he did not condemn Shakespeare too harshly for failure to observe the unities and other neo-classical requirements. He attributed the defects in plot as much to the incoherence of the stories and the fact that they were "grounded on impossibilities" as to the non-observance of the rules. His strictest insistence upon neo-classical dogma is evinced in the essay prefixed to Troilus and Cressida and called The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy, 1679; apparently he was most influenced at this time by Rapin, Bossu, and Rymer. Yet even here he clearly appreciated the fact that Shakespeare's genius rises above the "rules".

The language faults which Dryden found in Shakespeare were errors in grammar, occasional coarseness of expression, misuse of words, overuse of figurative language, and obscurity of meaning. All these errors he imputed to the ignorance of the age in which Shakespeare lived. To the same cause, as well as to too great facility in writing, Dryden attributed Shakespeare's "incorrectness of wit."

The conviction that Shakespeare's plays, though great, had grave faults in structure and language led many Restoration writers to attempt to revise several of them.¹ Though ostensibly the purpose was to make the plays conform to the purer taste of their own enlightened period, in reality there were other reasons equally strong for the revamping. According to Allardyce Nicoll's fine essays entitled Dryden as an Adapter² of Shakespeare, there were (besides genuine critical dissatisfaction) such reasons as the desire to make the plays more heroic, in accordance with the taste of the day, or more sparkling with the wit and reckless immorality that appealed to the age. Often it was merely a desire for novelty to satisfy the theater goers.

Dryden was responsible for three adaptations. He began with a version of The Tempest, written in collaboration with Davenant and first acted in 1667. This was the first and, according to Charles Johnson, the "most sacrilegious"³ of a long line of adaptations attempted by many writers of the Restoration period. It is surely the least excusable of Dryden's three adaptations; for it frankly panders to public desire for novelty and coarse, indecent wit. It was Davenant's idea (but approved by Dryden) that there should be a male counterpart for Miranda, - namely a man who had never seen a woman. As a mate for him, a twin sister for Miranda was invented by the two authors. The crowning indignity was the total submerging of the beautiful, symbolic character of Prospero in a "vast amount of buffoonery and suggestive sentences."⁴ It is a sad commentary on the times that this play was immensely popular in 1667.

1 cf. Chas. Johnson, Shakespeare and His Critics, p.72

2 Ibid., p.10

3 Johnson: loc.cit.

4 Nicoll, Dryden as an Adapter of Sh., p.16

The second of Dryden's plays based upon Shakespeare was All for Love, which cannot properly be called an adaptation, but rather a new play, suggested by Antony and Cleopatra. Though it does not equal the original in the psychological analysis of character, it is structurally superior to Shakespeare's play. All for Love was the play which Dryden himself loved best;¹ it was an example of the highest type of heroic play. It satisfied classical requirements: "The unities of Time, Place, and Action," Dryden tells us, "are more exactly observed than perhaps the English theatre requires."² Allardyce Nicoll says of the play: "The five acts of All for Love are clean cut as five separate cameos; the passions are simplified and the scenes clear and developed."³ Whereas Shakespeare's work in its discursiveness is more like a pageant than a play. We cannot deny that Dryden's objection to the rambling structure of the original play was honest. His own play is a skillful example of plot technique, not without its dramatic appeal, though Dryden could never hope to equal the hand of the master in delineation of character and in beauty of poetry.

Dryden's third revision was of Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida,⁴ which he rewrote in play form. In the Preface he gave an account of what he considered the defects of the original: (1) it was faulty in language; (2) the plot was not properly divided into acts and scenes; (3) the latter part was a "confusion of drums and trumpets, excursions and alarms;" (4) the chief persons were left alive; Cressida was not punished though false. All these things Dryden set about remedying, and the result was a play more simple and coherent in form and more in accordance with the Restoration taste; the new play was a heroic tragedy with poetic justice

1 Nicoll, op.cit. p.20

2 Preface to All for Love, p.192

3 Nicoll, op.cit., p.20

4 p.203

dealt out correctly and with its comic situations debased.

SUMMARY OF PART IV

Dryden's adaptations of Shakespeare's plays were written for two reasons: (1) an honest desire to improve the structure and language, which Dryden thought faulty; (2) a wish to publish novelties which would appeal to the corrupt taste of the day. Of the three revisions, All for Love is by far the finest, having the right to be called a good play in itself. Structurally it is more unified and simple than Shakespeare's play; however in character delineation and poetry it is inferior to the original. The Tempest is the worst of the adaptations; it is little short of a desecration of Shakespeare's work and it frankly panders to low taste. The adaptation of Troilus and Cressida also displays coarse wit, but in plot structure it is simple and coherent.

Dryden's Appreciation of Shakespeare

I cannot better begin a discussion of Dryden's appreciation of Shakespeare than by quoting his famous eulogy printed in the Essay of Dramatic Poesy . This critical work, published early in its author's literary career, (1668) shows the fact that from the beginning Dryden had a warm admiration and intelligent understanding of the great playwright's powers:

"To begin, then, with Shakespeare. He was the man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the images of Nature were still present to him and he drew them, not laboriously, but luckily; when he describes anything, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning, give him the greater commendation: he was naturally learned; he needed not the spectacles of books to read Nature; he looked inwards and found her there. I cannot say he is everywhere alike; were he so, I should do him injury to compare him with the greatest of mankind . . . But he is always great, when some great occasion is presented to him; no man can say he ever had a fit subject for his wit, and did not then raise himself as high above the rest of the poets,

'Quantum lenta solent inter viburna cupressi'

The consideration of this made Mr. Hales of Eaton say, that there was no subject of which any poet ever writ, but he would produce it much better treated of in Shakespeare; and however others are now generally preferred before him, yet the age wherein he lived, which had contemporaries with him Fletcher and Jonson, never equalled them to him in their esteem: and in the last King's court, when Ben's reputation was at highest, Sir John Suckling, and with him the greater part of the courtiers, set our Shakespeare far above him."

I Essay of Dramatic Poesy, p.79

Here within brief compass Dryden has recorded, early in the history of Shakespearean criticism, six attributes of Shakespeare which today are recognized and universally ascribed to Shakespeare. They are (1) his universality, (2) his intimate knowledge of Nature, (3) his native genius, (4) his vivid powers of description, (5) his ability to move the emotions, (6) his superiority to other poets. Sam Johnson in the next century felt that these lines of Dryden's might stand "as a perpetual model of encomiastic criticism, exact without minuteness and lofty without exaggeration."¹ According to Johnson there is nothing to be added to what Dryden said: "In a few lines is exhibited a character so extensive in its limitations that nothing can be added, diminished, or referred, nor can editors and admirers of Shakespeare in all their emulation of reverence, boast of much more than of having diffused and paraphrased the epitome of excellence, of having changed Dryden's gold for baser metal of lower value though of greater bulk."¹ Whether or not this be wholly true, I think it will be conceded that Dryden has put his finger upon six outstanding qualities of Shakespeare. These qualities were elaborated upon by later critics in more detail; Dryden himself repeated and amplified them in later critical comments.

Of Shakespeare's universality he said in 1679: "Shakespeare had a universal mind, which comprehended all characters and passions."² And in 1693 he said that in Shakespeare as in Homer one finds "all arts and sciences, all moral and natural philosophy without knowing that he ever studied them."³

1 Jaggard, Shakespeare Bibliography, p.85

2 Preface to Troilus and Cressida, p.228

3 The Original of Satire, p.18

This universality of Shakespeare was linked closely with the great source of all poetic inspiration - Nature. Shakespeare, Dryden insists frequently, "got his store" from Nature. In 1694, in his lines "To My Dear Friend, Mr. Congreve", he said:

"Time, Place, and Action may with pains be taught
But Genius must be born; and never can be taught.
This is your Portion; this your native store;
Heav'n, that but once was Prodigal before,
To Shakespeare gave as much; she cou'd not give him more."¹

This classification of Shakespeare as a native genius, as already indicated, was not new with Dryden. Milton was the first to so label Shakespeare and to contrast him with the learned Jonson. Dryden too repeats the idea that had grown common in his day:

"Shakespeare who (taught by none) did first impart
To Fletcher wit, to laboring Jonson art
He monarch-like gave those his subjects law²
And is that Nature, which they paint and draw."

Although the idea that Shakespeare was a native genius was common in Dryden's day, this does not alter the fact that it was a true idea. The only thing wrong with the popular conception was that the people attached more importance to "art" in the narrow sense than to native ability. But Dryden realized that this inexplicable quality, which we for lack of better term call genius, is something which places its possessor higher than ever struggling "art" could hope to climb. Shakespeare's ability to rise higher than other poets lay in the fact that he possessed more of this native and inscrutable genius:

"Shakespeare had a larger soul of poesie than ever
³
any of our nation."

1 Sh.Allusion-Book, p.173

2 Prologue to the Tempest, Sh. Allusion-Book, p.139

3 Rival Ladies, p.6

Because he was a child of Nature and gathered his inspiration directly from her, he could draw her images "not laboriously but luckily."

"Such artless beauty lies in Shakespeare's wit
'Twas well in spite of him whate'er he writ.
Those then that tax his learning are to blame,
He knew the thing but did not know the Name."¹

This native genius of Shakespeare's, then, which gave to him a universality and instinctive understanding of all forms of nature, was Shakespeare's mighty gift which excelled all else. "I cannot but conclude with Mr. Rymer," said Dryden in 1694, "that our English comedy is far beyond anything of the ancients. And notwithstanding our irregularities, so is our tragedy. Shakespeare had a genius for it; and we know that, in spite of Mr. Rymer, Genius alone is a greater virtue than all other qualities put together."²

Another quality which Dryden ascribes to Shakespeare in his early eulogy is the power of vivid description. This too is a natural outgrowth of his close identification with nature. Dryden depicts Shakespeare as god-like in his ability to comprehend in infinite understanding and sympathy all nature, human and external. He calls him "of god-like race"³ and in 1672 he said:

"In imitation Jonson's wit was shown,
Heaven made his men, but Shakespeare made his own . . .
Shakespeare like a Master did design."⁴

This god-like quality, since it enables him to "see life clearly and see it whole", naturally leads to the power of vivid description:

"I cannot leave this Subject before I do justice to that Divine Poet, by giving you one of his passionate descriptions: 'tis of Richard

1 Prologue to Julius Caesar, Sh.Allusion-Book, p.172

2 Dryden's letters, Sh.Allusion-Book, p.402

3 Sh.Allusion-Book, p.394

4 Ibid., p.172

the Second when he was depos'd, and led in Triumph through the streets of London by Henry of Bullingbrook: the painting of it is so lively, and the words so moving, that I have scarce read anything comparable to it, in any language. Suppose you had seen already the fortunate Usurper passing through the crowd, and follow'd by the shouts and acclamations of the people; and now behold King Richard entring upon the scene: consider the wretchedness of his condition, and his carriage in it; and refrain from pity if you can."¹

This power of moving the emotions of his audience is another of the qualities of Shakespeare. He understood thoroughly the passions of human beings: "If Shakespeare be allowed, as I think he must, to have his characters distinct, it will easily be inferred that he understood the nature of the passions."²

"The passions in the scene between Brutus and Cassius are extremely natural."³ Shakespeare plays upon the emotions of his audience as Seneca did in his masterpiece the Troades, which latter piece bears "the nearest resemblance of anything in their Tragedies to the excellent scenes of passion in Shakespeare."⁴

The last quality which Dryden speaks of in the eulogy in the Essay of Dramatic Poesy is Shakespeare's superiority to other poets. This is a subject which naturally should stand at the end of an account of the great poet's virtues, and therefore I defer it to the end of this discussion.

Shakespeare's powers of description reached their highest point in his character delineation. Of this greatest of qualities of the

1 Preface to Troilus and Cressida, p. 226

2 Ibid., p. 224

3 Ibid., p. 226

4 Essay of Dram. Poesy, p. 54

greatest of poets, Dryden was fully aware:

"To return once more to Shakespeare; no man ever drew so many characters, or generally distinguished 'em better from one another . . . "¹
 Dryden then goes on to cite Caliban as an example of Shakespeare's "copiousness of invention".² Begotten by an incubus on a witch, Caliban has a person, a language, and a character which suit him, both by his father's and his mother's side. In creating him Shakespeare showed a boldness almost unparalleled; the monster "is distinguished in all things from all other mortals."³

"The best of comical characters is Falstaff: there are many men resembling him; old, fat, merry, cowardly, drunken, amorous, vain, and lying. . . . He is properly not one humor, but a miscellany of humors and images, drawn from so many several men: that wherein he is singular in his wit, or those things he says praeter expectatum, unexpected by the audience; his quick evasions, when you imagine him surprised, which, as they are extremely diverting of themselves so receive a great addition from his person; for the very sight of such an unwieldy, old debauched fellow is a comedy alone."⁴

Where can one find in so short a space a better analysis of a great comic figure than this work of Dryden's?

If Shakespeare can depict a comic figure so well, his skill in depicting tragic figures is no less: Though the characters in Sophocles and Euripides are more adapted to Aristotle's ends of tragedy, pity and terror, "they are neither so many nor so various as in Shakespeare."⁵ His tragic characters are excellent. They are not better adapted to Aristotle's

1 Preface to Troilus and Cressida, p.219

2 Ibid., p.219

3 Ibid., p.120

4 Essay of Dramatic Poesy, p.84

5 Works of John Dryden, Heads of an Answer to Rymer, XV, p.388

ends of tragedy because they were written to suit the taste of their time.¹

I have already quoted Dryden's comments on the pitiful scene of the deposed Richard. Note also Shakespeare's understanding of human nature in the quarrel scene between Brutus and Cassius, which Dryden describes:

"They who think to do me an injury by saying that I have imitated the scene betwixt Brutus and Cassius, do me an honor by supposing that I could imitate the incomparable Shakespeare. . . . And if he has made Brutus, who was naturally a patient man, to fly into excess at first, let it be remembered in his defence, that, just before, he has received the news of Portia's death; whom the poet on purpose neglecting a little chronology, supposes to have died before Brutus, only to give him an occasion to be more easily exasperated. Add to this, that the injury he had received from Cassius had been long brooding on his mind; and that a melancholy man, upon consideration of an affront, especially from a friend, would be more eager in his passion than he who had given it, tho' naturally more choleric."²

The characters of Shakespeare are consistent:

"'Tis one of the excellencies of Shakespeare, that the manners of his persons are generally apparent, and you see their bent and inclinations . . . Our Shakespeare, having ascribed to Henry the Fourth the character of a king and father, gives him the perfect manners of each relation, when either he transacts with his son or with his subjects."³

"The characters of Fletcher are poor and narrow in comparison of Shakespeare's."⁴ The variety and greatness of Shakespeare's characters make them models for all English writers to imitate: "We have borrowed

1 Works of John Dryden, Heads of an Answer to Rymer, XV, p. 388

2 Preface to Troilus and Cressida, p. 204

3 Ibid., p. 217

4 Ibid., p. 220

nothing from the French; our plots are weaved in English looms: we endeavor to follow therein the variety and greatness of characters which are derived to us from Shakespeare. . . ."¹

Dryden always ascribed to Shakespeare the faculty of great wit; that is, "wit" in the sense of intelligence and imagination. He said of Shakespeare and Fletcher: "That their wit is great and many times their expressions noble, envy itself cannot deny."² Moreover, there is great beauty and depth of thought to be found in his works:

"If Shakespeare were stripped of all the bombasts in his passions, and dressed in the most vulgar words, we should find the beauties of his thoughts remaining; if his embroideries were burnt down, there would still be silver at the bottom of the melting-pot: but I fear that we, who ape his sounding words, have nothing of his thought, but are all outside; there is not so much as a dwarf within our giant's clothes."³ How humble is the tone of Dryden here as contrasted to the superciliousness we detect in such remarks as "Yet after all because the play was Shakespeare's . . . I undertook to remove the heap of rubbish under which so many excellent thoughts lay wholly buried."⁴ Even here, however, his objection is to the language only; the thought is excellent.

It is interesting to note the paradox of Dryden's attitude toward the language of Shakespeare's plays. As we have already indicated, Dryden spoke sometimes in vigorous criticism of the language of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, finding it "coarse, ungrammatical, affected, and obscure." Yet now we hear him say: "By this grafting, as I may call it, on old words, has our tongue been beautified by the three fore-mentioned

1 Essay of Dram. Poesy, p. 78

2 Defence of the Epilogue, p. 165

3 Preface to Troilus and Cressida, p. 227

4 Ibid., p. 204

poets, Shakespeare, Fletcher, and Jonson, whose excellencies I can never enough admire."¹ As for Shakespeare's style, Dryden in 1678 when he wrote All for Love, professed to imitate the divine bard:

"In my style, I have professed to imitate the divine Shakespeare; which that I might perform more freely, I have disencumbered myself of rhyme . . . words and phrases must of necessity receive a change in succeeding ages; but it is almost a miracle that much of his language remains so pure I hope I may affirm, and without vanity, that, by imitating him, I have excelled myself throughout the play."²

In the passage quoted above, Dryden speaks of following Shakespeare's example in regard to blank verse as a medium for the drama instead of rhyme. Dryden had been an ardent champion of rhyme. In the Essay of Dramatic Poesy he spent considerable space in proving that rhyme is to be preferred. He entertained the curious notion that Shakespeare was the first to use blank verse:

"Shakespeare . . . was the first, who to shun the pains of continual riming invented that kind of writing which we call blank verse, but the French more properly, prose mesurée."³

The fact that Shakespeare, Jonson, and Fletcher wrote out of rhyme such excellent plays prepossessed people in favor of blank verse,⁴ but Dryden gravely assures us that blank verse as a medium for poetry was worn out by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and that poets of Dryden's age should therefore abandon it for rhyme.⁵ Yet later discovering himself to be wrong, he frankly disencumbered "himself of rhyme and imitated Shakespeare's use of blank verse."

1 Defence of the Epilogue, p.171

2 All for Love, p.200

3 Rival Ladies, p.6

4 Sh. Allusion-Book, p.147

5 Essay of Dramatic Poesy, p.99

One of the characteristics of the Restoration period, we have noticed, was to link together the names of Shakespeare, Jonson, and Fletcher in any discussion of the Elizabethan drama. Dryden also frequently compares them. In the Prologue to the Tempest, 1667, he conceives of Shakespeare as the master of the other two:

"Fletcher reached that which on his heights did grow,
Whilst Jonson crept and gather'd all below.
This did his Love, and that his Mirth digest:
One imitates the most, the other best.
If they have since outwrit all other men,
'Tis with the drops which fell from Shakespeare's pen."¹

However, Dryden tells us that the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher are more popular with theatre-goers of his day than either Shakespeare's or Jonson's plays, "because there is a certain gayety in their comedies and pathos in their more serious plays, which suits with all men's humors."²

There is something of the conventional in the following words of Dryden, but notice how his own enthusiasm shines through:

"If I would compare him (Jonson) with Shakespeare, I must acknowledge him the more correct poet, but Shakespeare the greater wit. 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."³

Again, in 1672, Dryden compares these two, and the preference is still for Shakespeare:

"Great Jonson did that Ignorance adore,
And though he envied much, admired him more.
The faultless Jonson equally writ well,
Shakespeare made faults; but then did more excel."⁴

1 Sh. Allusion-Book, p.139.

2 Essay of Dram. Poesy, p.81

3 Ibid., pp.82,83

4 Prologue to Julius Caesar, Sh. Allusion-Book, p.172

Dryden compares Shakespeare and Fletcher thus:

"The difference between Shakespeare and Fletcher in their plotting seems to be this; that Shakespeare generally moves more terror, and Fletcher more compassion: For the first had a more Masculine, a bolder and more fiery Genius; the second a more soft and Womanish."¹

Again in the same essay he compares them:

"Shakespeare writ better betwixt man and man; Fletcher, betwixt man and woman: consequently, the one describ'd friendship better; the other love: Yet Shakespeare taught Fletcher to write love; and Juliet, and Desdemona, are Originals. 'Tis true, the Scholar had a softer soul; but the Master had the kinder Shakespeare had a universal mind, which comprehended all Characters and Passions; Fletcher a more confin'd, and limited; for though he treated love in perfection, yet Honour, Ambition, Revenge, and generally all the stronger Passions, he either touch'd not, or not masterly. To conclude all; he was a limb of Shakespeare."²

Not only was Shakespeare greater than either of his contemporaries, he surpassed all poets, ancient or modern. This Dryden says in the Essay of Dramatic Poesy, and he repeats the same idea often, despite the fact that others were "most generally prefer'd before Shakespeare." To Dryden he was the "incomparable Shakespeare."³ He excell'd the ancients, even in their special field, the tragedy:

"In tragedy and satire I offer myself to maintain against some of our Modern Criticks, that this age and the last, particularly in England, have excell'd the Ancients in both those kinds; and I wou'd

1 Preface to Troilus and Cressida, p. 212

2 Ibid., p. 228

3 Essay of Dram. Poesy, p. 75

instance in Shakespeare of the former. . . .¹

As he excelled his predecessors and contemporaries, so too he was
greater than those who succeeded him.²

Thus we see that Dryden gave to Shakespeare the highest honors; his admiration was mingled with humble reverence:

"But spite of all his pride a secret shame,
Invades his breast at Shakespeare's sacred name:
Aw'd when he hears his God-like Romans rage,
He, in a just despair, would quit the stage."³

It seemed presumptuous for any critic to point out Shakespeare's errors; for none could hope to equal him in skill:

"To Shakespeare's critic he bequeaths the curse,
To find his faults; and yet himself make worse."⁴

In 1693 Dryden wrote the following lines in gratitude to the artist; Sir Godfrey Kneller, who had sent him a portrait of Shakespeare:

"Shakespeare, thy gift, I place before my sight;
With awe, I ask his blessing 'ere I write;
With reverence look on his Majestick Face;
Proud to be less; but of his Godlike Race.
His soul inspires me, while thy praise I write,
And I like Teucer, under Ajax fight;
Bids thee through me, be bold; with dauntless breast
Contemn the bad, and Emulate the best.
Like his, thy Criticks in th'attempt are lost;
When most they rail, know then they envy most."⁵

1 Satires of Juvenal, Sh. Allusion-Book, p. 393

2 Ibid., p. 180

3 Prologue to Aureng-Zebe, Sh. Allusion-Book, p. 227

4 Prologue to Dryden's Last Play, Sh. Allusion-Book, p. 395

5 Sh. Allusion-Book, p. 394

SUMMARY OF PART V

Dryden's most famous praise of Shakespeare occurs in the Essay of Dramatic Poesy. Of this eulogy Samuel Johnson said that it was so exact and so lofty that nothing might be added nor diminished by later critics. Probably Johnson's enthusiasm carried him too far; yet it is true that in these lines of the Essay and in later critical comments, Dryden gave a remarkably complete account of the excellences of Shakespeare. For example, he recognized in Shakespeare the two qualities which modern critics call Shakespeare's greatest, namely his universality and his supreme power of characterization.¹ The former quality Dryden simply mentions; the latter he illustrates and analyzes briefly. His discussions of such characters as Brutus, Richard, Falstaff, and Caliban serve as a beginning, simple though it be, to a long line of Shakespearean character studies which were to follow in years to come. His analyses of Falstaff and Caliban are especially true and complete.

Dryden ascribed also to Shakespeare great native genius, intimate knowledge of nature, vivid powers of description, ability to move the emotions, great intelligence and imagination, beauty and depth of thought, beauty of language, and excellence of style. It is true that he made conventional remarks about Shakespeare's native genius, Jonson's learning, and Fletcher's wit; but in comparing the three he placed Shakespeare above the other two, in spite of the current tendency among critics and theatre-goers of the day to disparage Shakespeare. In fact, Dryden placed Shakespeare high above all other poets, and gave to him, besides intelligent appreciation, love and reverence.

I cf. Ward, Hist. of Eng. Dramatic Lit., p.293

Dryden's approach to literary criticism was rational. He had a healthy skepticism of authority, which caused him to accept nothing on trust. Even the authority of the ancients he regarded with clear eyes; it was not enough that Aristotle had said so; he must try out the principles of dramatic theory for himself.¹ Those which failed to square with practical common-sense he did not hesitate to discard. In reading his critical works, therefore, one sees a logical mind at work, accepting and rejecting ideas until he arrived at what he felt to be truth. His openmindedness and breadth of intellect were such that he viewed a subject from all angles before he reached any conclusion. His very openmindedness of his caused him to be charged with inconsistency; for when new evidence or experience came to him, he did not hesitate to change his mind. His main interest in critical writing was a search for the fundamental principles of true dramatic theory; consistency in details did not concern him.

"As a matter of fact, Dryden's opinions on most subjects - and not the least on dramatic theory - were sufficiently fluid to respond without reluctance to the demands of common sense; nor did he ever take pride in a doctrinaire consistency - even with himself."²

Yet I can find little inconsistency in his Shakespearean criticism. From beginning to end, he recognized the true value of Shakespeare's work, as well as the imperfections to be found therein, and he never wavered in his admiration and appreciation. It is true that his attitude towards the neo-classic rules in their relation to Shakespeare was not always consistent. In mid-career he attached more importance to these

1 Cf. Laura Wylie, Studies in the Evolution of English Crit., p.40

2 Ward, Cambridge History of English Lit., p.15

rules than he did at either the beginning or end of his critical writings,¹ but always he realized and proclaimed the truth that Shakespeare was capable of writing great and effective plays, whether or not he observed the rules. It has been charged² that in his Shakespearean criticism Dryden, like Voltaire, praised and blamed the same things, as for example the language of Shakespeare's plays. This is only an apparent inconsistency; for Dryden praised what he found good in Shakespeare's language, and censured what he found of careless and inaccurate workmanship. "Shakespeare", he said simply, "is not everywhere alike."³ He treated Shakespeare's failings as he did his excellences with a "sweet reasonableness".

Dryden's approach to Shakespeare was rational; it was also inspired. In order to appreciate literary genius, it seems to me, it is necessary for the critic to have not only reason and learning (as Dryden did), but also something of that same inspirational quality that filled the poet when he wrote. Dryden had that intangible quality of critical genius which enabled him to judge of poetic genius. It was, perhaps, a combination of his broad sympathy, keen insight, instinctive love of literature, and catholic taste that furnished his inspiration. These qualities enabled him to seize upon the important values in Shakespeare's work, and place in their proper position the unimportant. They enabled him to appreciate Shakespeare when popular and critical opinion were against the great Elizabethan.

Dryden's style of critical writing is, I think, the culmination of both the rational and the inspirational. It has the clearness,

1 Cf. Sh. Allusion-Book, Introduction, p. LXXI

2 Ker, Dryden's Essays, p. LXIII

3 Essay of Dramatic Poesy, p. 80

directness, and force of logic, but it has also that which makes it original and charming: - enthusiasm, spontaneity and grace. Dr. Johnson said of Dryden's prefaces and other critical writings:

"They have not the formality of a settled style, in which the first half of the sentence betrays the other. The clauses are never balanced, nor the periods modelled: every word seems to drop by chance, though it falls into its proper place. Nothing is cold or languid; the whole is airy, animated, and vigorous; what is little, is gay; what is great, is splendid."¹

And a modern critic, T.S.Eliot, says of Dryden's prose style:

"He has all the virtues you would expect. He neither descends too low, nor attempts to fly too high; he is perfectly clear as to what he has to say; and he says it always with the right control and changes of intensity of feeling. His wit exceeds that of his contemporaries; it contributes elegance and liveliness of figure, without ever overreaching itself into facetiousness."²

Dryden's failings as a Shakespearean critic are easy to enumerate. There is first of all the fact that his knowledge of the data of Shakespeare's life and works was not always accurate. He made such mistakes as stating that Shakespeare was the creator of the English stage³ and the first one to use blank verse;⁴ he called Pericles Shakespeare's first play;⁵ most of Shakespeare's plots, he said, came from the Hecatommuthi or Hundred Novels of Cinthio.⁶ These are misstatements of fact; yet I do not find them so grievous as the superciliousness of tone that Dryden permitted himself to use sometimes in his adverse criticism

1 Ker, Introduction, p. XXVI

2 T.S. Eliot, John Dryden, p. 52

3 Preface to All for Love, Sh. Allusion-Bk., p. 243

4 Rival Ladies, Sh. Allusion-Bk., p. 148

5 Prologue to Circe, Sh. Allusion-Bk., p. 303

6 Preface to Evening's Love, p. 146

of Shakespeare. He shared with his contemporaries the smug conviction that his age was far superior in polish and culture to the rude age in which Shakespeare lived. This accounts for the overbearing superiority of tone that characterizes some of his comments on Shakespeare. We note this especially in his early and middle-period works; the last works of Dryden show that he outgrew this stage; indeed, humility and reverence characterize his last remarks on Shakespeare. After all, the wonder is not that Dryden sometimes "does not rise above the limitations of his age"¹; rather the wonder is that he is so little hampered by those limitations. Augustus Ralli in his History of Shakespearean Criticism says: "It may be said of Dryden more than any man that his virtues were his own, his faults those of his age."²

But Dryden's faults are few in comparison with his great virtues as a Shakespearean critic. Perhaps his most blameworthy error was his attempt to revise some of Shakespeare's plays, especially since he set the example which many others followed. We resent the mutilation of masterpieces by the lesser hands of small dramatists, and we deplore the introduction of indecency into the noble theme of a play like The Tempest. Dryden himself realized that he was culpable in this, and late in life he bequeathed to Shakespeare's critic the curse, to find Shakespeare's faults and "yet himself make worse."³ As for the licentiousness in his plays, both the adaptations and original plays, Dryden lived to regret that too; of all those who came under the stinging lash of Jeremy Collier's attack upon the immorality of the stage, Dryden made the most manly avowal of regret.⁴

1 Ward, History of English Dramatic Literature, p.293

2 Ralli, p.6

3 Prologue to his Last Play, Sh. Allusion-Book, p.395

4 cf. Sh. Allusion-Book, Introduction, p.LXXIII

And now we come to a consideration of the excellences of Dryden's Shakespearean criticism. The clear compactness and grace of his style we have already mentioned. A second quality is the scientific accuracy of his criticism of Shakespeare's attributes. Few will question the truth of his comments when he spoke in honor of Shakespeare, and even when he spoke in adverse criticism, most of what he said is true.

T.S.Eliot says of Dryden:

"Take his comments upon Shakespeare one by one, and you will find that most of them are just. We are so habituated to considering Shakespeare above criticism, that we cannot admit that Dryden's praise of Shakespeare is as high praise as our own; and that if we stop to apprehend the values which were rightly important for Dryden, his occasional censure of Shakespeare is usually right."¹

Another remarkable quality of Dryden's Shakespearean criticism is its completeness. Consider the casual nature of this work of Dryden's. His main purpose was never turned wholly to the subject of evaluating Shakespeare. His chief interest in his critical writings was, as before stated, concerned with dramatic theory; his remarks on Shakespeare were for the most part merely explanatory or illustrative of principles he was expounding. Moreover, we must consider the limitations which Dryden surmounted: he wrote early in the history of Shakespearean criticism; he was surrounded by current opinion disparaging to Shakespeare; he was hampered by the narrowness of neo-classic dogma. Yet in spite of all this, his estimate of Shakespeare is remarkably complete. Indeed, it would be difficult for a modern critic to find any virtue or failing in Shakespeare's works upon which Dryden has not at least touched.

Due to the casual nature of his comments, some of the points he mentioned he never developed. Nevertheless, he sometimes drew the first rough plans upon which later critics built. For example, the studies of Shakespearean characters which have occupied countless critics from Dryden's day found their beginning in him. Notice the insight and skill with which he analyzed the character of Falstaff.

Dryden's Shakespearean criticism has a very modern note. He did not, like the neo-classicists, magnify Shakespeare's faults until they obscured his virtues; nor did he, like the great horde of Romantic critics who persist up to our day, so minimize the faults of Shakespeare that they became non-existent. He did not consider Shakespeare sacrosanct nor faultless. Dryden was, rather, like the modern realist critic who recognizes both excellences and faults in the works of Shakespeare. Dryden saw, moreover, Shakespeare's virtues and failings in proper perspective. But like all critics, of whatever age, when Dryden approached close to the mighty genius of Shakespeare, he found that beyond a certain point he could not go: in the final analysis the greatness of Shakespeare's genius is inscrutable.

"A few positive statements of Shakespeare's religion and politics still linger on, but we put these aside as we attempt to form an image of him through means of his latest critics. That image is of a man like us but beyond us. He uses religion, politics, philosophy, morals, human characters, drama, verse in such a way as to exceed our power of generalization. The best way to read him is to bring to him in absolute sincerity our whole experience and feel the mystery when the mind abyss into which it plunges returns no echo. These latest critics bring to the work of interpretation not only special gifts of intellect, but of heart also and they do not bring them in vain: yet Shakespeare remains

aloof, all-absorbing - he remains Shakespeare."¹

Although before Dryden's day there were many scattered allusions to Shakespeare, there was little reasoned critical comment. The immediate contemporaries of the great Elizabethan, for the most part, admired and respected him, but they had no real conception of his greatness. Ben Jonson, however, showed true appreciation of Shakespeare's genius, as well as practical recognition of his faults.

Up to the closing of the theatres in 1642, Shakespeare's reputation as the writer of effective plays grew rapidly. Gradually, however, the idea crept in that his plays were faulty because they did not observe the classical rules. He was generally conceded to be a great natural genius, but he was thought to lack learning and art. The belief that his plays were the work of an "inspired barbarian" and that they were highly irregular became firmly established during the Restoration period when French neo-classical influence was strong in England. It was during this period that Shakespeare's reputation was at its lowest, both among critics and playgoers. Yet there were always those who honestly appreciated the works of Shakespeare. Of these, John Dryden was the first great critic to write adequately and well upon the subject.

He too was influenced somewhat by French neo-classical ideas. He knew thoroughly all the rules of dramatic theory; and what virtue there was in them he appreciated. However, he never followed the extreme neo-classical authorities who insisted upon close adherence to dogma. Among French critics of the day the one who influenced Dryden most was Pierre Corneille, who stood for liberality in the interpretation of the rules. Dryden, like him, constantly strove to reconcile the demands of authority with freedom of thought. In the final analysis Dryden felt that the poet's first aim should be to please the age in which he lived;

the "rules" were secondary. That Shakespeare had written according to the genius of his own age Dryden realized.

Dryden had the deepest appreciation of Shakespeare's excellences, but he never thought him incapable of making errors. The three types of fault of which he found Shakespeare guilty were these: (1) defects in plot structure, (2) errors in sense and language, (3) incorrectness of wit. Plot imperfections in Shakespeare he ascribed as much to carelessness and incoherence in the writing and to the fact that the plots were "grounded upon impossibilities", as to failure to observe neo-classic rules. The language faults to be found in Shakespeare he also ascribed to carelessness, but even more to the ignorance of the age in which Shakespeare lived. To this last cause he imputed also Shakespeare's failure to depict "refined wit" correctly.

The conviction that Shakespeare's plays, though great, had serious defects in plot structure and language, led Dryden (as well as other Restoration writers) to attempt revisions of Shakespeare's plays. Of the three plays he derived from Shakespeare, "All for Love" (suggested by "Antony and Cleopatra") is the only one worthy to be called a good play. Structurally it is superior to Shakespeare's play, but it does not equal the beauty of poetry nor the psychological analysis of character in the original play. The other two adaptations, "The Tempest" and "Troilus and Cressida", while unified and coherent in structure, cannot be forgiven their coarse wit and immorality, earmarks of the Restoration taste in drama.

In his favorable criticism of Shakespeare, Dryden displayed remarkable power. His enthusiastic appreciation showed recognition of most, if not all, of the great bard's fine qualities. He honored Shakespeare for his universality, his great native genius, his intimate

knowledge of nature, his vivid powers of description, his supreme ability in characterization, his skill in moving the emotions, his great intelligence and imagination, the depth of his thought, the beauty of his language, and the excellence of his style. He recognized, moreover, Shakespeare's superiority to other poets, ancient and modern.

Dryden's Shakespearean criticism was rational; it was also inspired. Though in his general views upon dramatic theory, he sometimes displayed a certain inconsistency due to his impartiality and openmindedness, yet his Shakespearean criticism was fundamentally consistent. In style, his critical prose is both logical and charming, combining clearness and force with originality and grace.

Dryden's knowledge of Shakespeare's life and works was not always accurate; moreover, he succumbed at times, to the limitations of his age to the extent that his adverse criticism of Shakespeare took on a superciliousness of tone. He shared with his contemporaries the notion that his own age was far superior to Shakespeare's in learning and polish. Yet this superciliousness of tone was but temporary; the greater part of his critical comment was whole-souled in its admiration of Shakespeare.

In consideration of the early stage in which criticism was when Dryden wrote and in consideration of the narrowness of the precepts that governed critical opinion of his day, his Shakespearean criticism is remarkably accurate and complete. He showed an originality and independence of thought that enabled him to understand and evaluate correctly the greatness of Shakespeare, in an age when critical opinion was against the great playwright. Yet he did not commit the error of the Romantic critics who were to follow his own age: he did not discount the weaknesses to be found even in the greatest of writers. In fact, in his appraisal of Shakespeare, Dryden has much in common with the

realistic point of view of Shakespearean critics of our own day.

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