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ARISTOTLE IN DRYDEN'S DRAMATIC CRITICISM.



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ARISTOTLE IN DRYDEN'S DRAMATIC CRITICISM.

"When I was myself in the rudiments of my poetry, without name or reputation in the world, having rather the ambition of a writer than the skill; when I was drawing the outline of an art, without any living master to instruct me in it; an art which had been better praised than studied in England, ---- when thus, as I may say, before the use of the loadstone, or knowledge of the compass, I was sailing in a vast ocean, without any other help than the pole star of the ancients, and the rules of the French stage among the moderns; ---- even then, I had the presumption to dedicate to your lordship ---- An Essay." ⁽¹⁾ These words of Dryden, written in 1692, describe fairly the situation in which he found himself at the outset of his dramatic and critical career. Such English critical tradition as there was, derived from the neo-classic Ben Jonson; and the prevailing influence in the criticism of the day was the neo-classicism of the French. Liberal-ity regarding adherence to the rules of the ancients, would, then, be an innovation. To trace in Dryden's dramatic criticism his attitude toward Aristotle as an authority for English drama, will be, in so far, to determine his contribution to English dramatic criticism.

(1) Works, Scott XIII:5.

In *An Essay Of Dramatic Poesy* we have not only the conclusions on dramatic theory which Dryden had reached in 1665, but the process by which he came to them. He had found in fashion rhymed, heroic plays; he had read and admired the works of the Shakespearean dramatists; he had read, and, of course, failed to reconcile with these plays, such formal criticism as was at hand. His ponderings upon the problems presented and his decision in favor of rhyme and in favor of English plays, offend as they might against the rules of classic criticism, are set forth in the dialogue of which the essay is composed. I say that his decision is given, for there are numerous indications that Eugenius and Neander, the champions in the dialogue of the English plays represent the real opinions of Dryden. Perhaps two of the indications will be sufficient. In the essay itself, after Eugenius' speech in favor of English plays against all comers, we find the words, "Eugenius ---- seemed to have the better of the argument." ⁽¹⁾ And in the note to the reader, prefixed to the published essay, Dryden says, "The drift of the ensuing discourse was chiefly to vindicate the honor of our English writers, from the censure of those who unjustly prefer the French before them." ⁽²⁾

Accepting then, the view that in the persons of Eugenius and Neander, Dryden speaks, let us see what was his attitude towards Aristotle in this, his first critical work of any importance. We see at once that he was intimately acquainted with Aristotle's criticism, for in what he calls "this incorrect essay, written in the country, without the help of books" ⁽³⁾ he quotes

(1) Works, Mitford. II:232. (2) Ibid. p.221. (3) Throughout, I have endeavored to save words by the use of italics. They are never Dryden's.

frequently and correctly from the Poetics. Moreover, he disposes of the current error about the unity of place. Eugenius says, "Give me leave to tell you, that the unity of place, however it might be practiced by them, [the ancients] was never any of their rules: we find it neither in Aristotle or Horace, or any who have written of it, till in our age the French poets first made it a precept of the stage." His conclusion as to the use of Aristotle's generalizations as rules for English playwrights is given in the reply of Eugenius to Lisideius:-

Lisideius.-- "I must remember you, that all the rules by which we practice the drama at this day, were delivered to us from the observations which Aristotle made, of those poets who either lived before him, or were his contemporaries. ----"

Eugenius.-- "I have observed in your speech that the former part of it is convincing, as to what the moderns have profited by the rules of the ancients; but in the latter you are careful to conceal how much they have excelled them. We own all the helps we have from them, and want neither veneration nor gratitude, while we acknowledge that to overcome them we must make use of the advantages that we have received from them; but to these assistances we have joined our industry; for, had we sat down with a dull imitation of them, we might then have lost somewhat of the old perfection, but never acquired any that was new. We draw not therefore after their lines, but those of Nature; and having the life before us, besides the experience of all they knew, it was no wonder if we hit some airs and features which they have missed. I deny not what you have urged of arts and sciences, that they have flourished in some ages more than others; but your instance of

philosophy makes for me; for if natural causes be more known now than in the time of Aristotle, because more studied, it follows, that poesy and other arts may, with the same pains arrive still nearer to perfection."⁽¹⁾

Three years after this, in A Defense of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy, an answer to Sir Robert Howard's criticisms of it in the preface to the Great Favourite, we find Dryden making formal statement of allegiance to Aristotle. "He must pardon me if I have that veneration for Aristotle, Horace, Ben Jonson and Corneille, that I dare not serve him in such a cause, and against such heroes, but rather fight under their protection, ----"⁽²⁾ Yet the allegiance is more formal than real. For, when it suits his purpose, he goes directly counter to Aristotle's precepts. Of Heroic Plays, an Essay written while he still maintains that he bows to the authority of Aristotle, contains the following:-

"And if any man object the improbabilities of a spirit appearing, or of a place raised by magic; I boldly answer him, that an heroic poet is not tied to a bare representation of what is true, or exceedingly probable."⁽³⁾ To an objection in regard to an action of Almanzor, the hero of the play to which this essay is prefixed, he answers, "This is indeed the most improbable of all his actions, but it is far from being impossible."⁽⁴⁾ This in the face of the teaching of his professed master, "The poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities!"⁽⁵⁾ He even defends the unity of place, which in the Essay of Dramatic Poesy he had de-

(1) Works, Mitford. II:228. (2) Works, Scott-Saintsbury. II:304. Hereafter references to this edition will be given by number only. (3) IV:18. (4) IV:20. (5) Butcher's Poetics, p.95.

clared was not to be found in Aristotle. "So then, the less change of place there is, the less time is taken up in transporting the persons of the drama, with analogy to reason; and in this analogy, or resemblance of fiction to truth, consists the excellency of the play." One more instance will, I think, establish that Dryden was not at this period walking by the light of Aristotle, however loud might be his profession. In the epilogue to *The Conquest of Granada* he had said of the Elizabethan age, "Fame then was cheap, and the first comer sped." He felt himself obliged to defend this in what he termed *A Defence of The Epilogue; or, An Essay on The Dramatic Poetry of The Last Age*, but which might more truly have been called "*A Defence of the Plays of This Age by Detraction of Those of the Last Age.*" In this essay he adopts the strict French interpretations of Aristotle, and their refinements upon him: ridiculing the "lameness" of the plots of the Elizabethans, which in one play many times took up the business of an age, exhibiting Fletcher's breaches of "the decorum of the stage," and Ben Jonson's "meanness of Expression;" but, above all, taking the principle of imitation literally, ascribing much of the excellence of the plays of the day to the advantage enjoyed by the poets of imitating the refined manners of the court due to the example of the King.

The marked contrast between the above opinions and those expressed in the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* can be explained in just one way: at the time of their writing, Dryden was in favor at court, and was writing, and hence defending, the heroic plays demanded by the fashionable taste.

Before the writing of his next considerable critical essay Dryden had been supplanted in court favor, and was no longer

committed to one style of drama. We are not surprised, therefore, to find a corresponding freedom in his theory. The very title of the essay, *The Author's Apology for Heroic Poetry and Poetic Licence*, indicates it. He deprecates such ultra-classicism as he himself had exhibited in the essays just preceding, and, oblivious of his minute criticisms of Ben Jonson in *The Defense of the Epilogue*, calls it "malicious and unmanly to snarl at little lapses of a pen. ----" Criticism, as it was first instituted by Aristotle was meant a standard of judging well; the chiefest part of which is, to observe excellencies which shall delight a reasonable reader. If the design, the conduct, the thoughts, and the expressions of a poem, be generally such as proceed from a true genius of poetry, the critic ought to pass his judgment in favor of the author. ---- And Longinus, who was undoubtedly, after Aristotle, the greatest critic among the Greeks ---- has judiciously preferred the sublime genius that sometimes errs, to the middling and indifferent one, which makes few faults, but seldom or never rises to any excellence.-- Aristotle raised the fabric of his poetry from observation of those things in which Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus pleased: He considered how they raised the passions, and thence has drawn rules for our imitation. ---- Thus, I grant you, that knowledge of nature was the original rule; and that all poets ought to study her, as well as Aristotle and Horace, her interpreters. But then this also undeniably follows, that those things, which delight all ages, must have been an imitation of nature; which is all I contend." ⁽¹⁾ It will be seen that in respect to the authority of Aristotle he is working

(1) IV:111.

back to the position held in The Essay of Dramatic Poesy.

This position is more unmistakable in the Heads Of An Answer to Rymer. In 1678 Thomas Rymer published "The Tragedies of the Last Age Considered and Examined by the Practice of the Ancients, and the Common Sense of all Ages, in a letter to Fleetwood and Shepherd." The practice of the ancients and the common sense of all ages, according to the judicial sense of Thomas Rymer, condemned the Tragedies of the last age to outer darkness. Dryden wrote in a copy of the book an outline of an answer, which was never expanded and not published till after his death. Wherefore we know that the following assertions represent Dryden's convictions:-

"He who undertakes to answer this excellent critique of Mr. Rymer, in behalf of our English poets against the Greeks ought to do it in this manner: either by yielding to him the greatest part of what he contends for, which consists in this, that the ---- design and conduct of it, is more conducing in the Greeks to those ends of tragedy which Aristotle and he propose, namely, to cause terror and pity; yet the granting this does not set the Greeks above the English poets. But the answerer ought to prove two things: First that the fable is not the greatest masterpiece of a tragedy, though it be the foundation of it. Secondly that other ends, as suitable to the nature of tragedy, may be found in the English which are not found in the Greek. ---- The climate, the age, the disposition of the people, to which a poet writes, may be so different that what pleased the Greeks would not satisfy an English audience. ---- It is not enough that Aristotle has said so (in regard to the proper ends of tragedy] for Aristotle drew his models of tragedy from Sophocles and Euripides; and if he had seen ours, might have

changed his mind."⁽¹⁾

The preface to All for Love contains passages that inevitably recall the Poetics. "All reasonable men have long since concluded, that the hero of the poem ought not to be a character of perfect virtue, for then he could not without injustice, be made unhappy; nor yet altogether wicked, because he could not then be pitied. --- That which is wanting to work up the pity to a greater height, was not afforded me by the story; for the crimes of love, which they both committed, were not occasioned by any necessity, or fatal ignorance, but were wholly voluntary."⁽²⁾ Aristotle has, "The change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity ----. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity ----. Nor, again, should the downfall of an utter villain be exhibited. ---- There remains, then, the character ---- of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is not brought about by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty."⁽³⁾ Aristotle's precept that poets when representing men who are irascible or indolent, and who have other defects of character should preserve the type and yet ennoble it,⁽⁴⁾ shows itself in Dryden's, "I have drawn the character of Antony as favorably as Plutarch, Appian, and Dion Cassius would give me leave."⁽⁵⁾ But the agreement does not extend throughout the preface, though it is less radical than the unpublished Heads of an Answer to Rymer. The following passage repeats the heresy as to the importance of the plot, and shows skepticism, too, about the value of the unities for English drama:

(1) Mitford, II:259. (2) V:326. (3) Butcher, p.45. (4) Ibid, p.57.
(5) V:327.

"The fabric of the play is regular enough, as to the inferior parts of it; and the unities of time, place, and action, more exactly observed than perhaps the English theatre requires."

The respect for Aristotle and the determination not to follow him slavishly, expressed in the Answer, reappear. "Poets themselves are the most proper, though I conclude not the only critics. But till some genius as universal as Aristotle shall arise, one who can penetrate into all arts and sciences, without the practice of them, I shall think it reasonable, that the judgment of an artificer in his own art should be preferable to the opinion of another man; at least when he is not bribed by interest, or prejudiced by malice. ---- It remains that I acquaint the reader, that I have endeavoured in this play to follow the practice of the ancients, who, as Mr. Rymer has judiciously observed, are and ought to be our masters. Yet though their models are regular, they are too little for English tragedy; which requires to be built in larger compass."⁽¹⁾

It is rather confusing to find in the preface to Troilus and Cressida, written only a year after All for Love, opinions decidedly opposed to the foregoing. The play is founded upon Shakespeare's; and it occurs to Dryden's generalizing mind that it would be "neither unprofitable nor unpleasant" to inquire how far the tragedies of Shakespeare and Fletcher ought to be imitated. This would necessitate a criterion; so he says, "I shall endeavour, as briefly as I can, to discover the grounds and reason of all criticism, applying them in this place only to Tragedy. Aristotle and his interpreters, and Horace, and Longinus, are the authors to whom

(1) V:339.

I owe my lights; and what part soever of my own plays, or of this, which no mending could make regular, shall fall under the condemnation of such judges, it would be impudence in me to defend."⁽¹⁾

It would be possible to fill pages with passages from this essay for which parallel passages in the Poetics could be found. His definition of a tragedy is shortened from Aristotle's. "It is an imitation of one entire, great, and probable action; not told, but represented; which, by moving in us fear and pity, is conducive to the purging of those two passions in our minds."⁽²⁾ "It, (the action) must be one and single."⁽³⁾ (Aristotle, "The plot ---- must imitate one action and that a whole.")⁽⁴⁾ "It ought to be great, and to consist of great persons."⁽⁵⁾ ("---- Tragedy is an imitation of persons who are above the common level.")⁽⁶⁾ "It ought to be probable."⁽⁷⁾ ("---- It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen,-- what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity.")⁽⁸⁾ And so many others.

But the remarkable thing about the essay is not that he accepts many of Aristotle's rules -- no writer on the drama could well avoid that -- it is that he accepts those which he had only a short time before declared to be without authority for English playwrights, and even those added to Aristotle by his French commentators. He is relating his methods in rewriting the play. "---- I made, with no small trouble, an order and connection of all the scenes;---- and, though it was impossible to keep them all unbroken, because the scene must be sometimes in the city and sometimes in

(1) VI:259. (2) VI:260. (3) VI:260. (4) Butcher, p.35. (5) VI:262. (6) Butcher, p.57. (7) VI:262. (8) Butcher, p.35.

the camp, yet I have so ordered them, that there is coherence of them with one another, and a dependence upon the main design; no leaping from Troy to Grecian tents, and thence back again, in the same act, but a due proportion of time allowed for every motion." (1)

"In the mechanic beauties of the plot, which are the observation of the three unities, time, place, and action, they (Shakespeare and Fletcher) are both deficient; but Shakespeare most." (2) After all, if any one will ask me, whether a tragedy cannot be made up on any other grounds than those of exciting pity and terror in us;-- Bossu, the best of modern critics, answers thus in general: That all excellent arts, and particularly that of poetry, have been invented and brought to perfection by men of a transcendent genius; and that, therefore, they, who practise afterwards the same arts, are obliged to tread in their footsteps, and to search in their writings the foundation of them; for it is not just that new rules should destroy the authority of the old." (3) No passage shows so plainly, I think, the difference between the tone of this preface and that of *All for Love* as the following:-

"---- The faults of the plot (of *King and no King*) are so evidently proved, that they can no longer be denied. The beauties of it must therefore lie either in the lively touches of the passion; or we must conclude, as I think we may, that even in imperfect plots there are less degrees of nature, by which some faint emotions of pity and terror are to be raised in us." (4) There seems to him now no escape from the dictum that pity and terror are the only possible ends of tragedy.

(1) VI:256. (2) VI:265. (3) VI:263. (4) VI:264.

One more characteristic of this essay must be noticed. Dryden attempts to show that all his grounds of criticism are selected on account of their reasonableness, rather than on account of authority. For instance, after he quotes Bossu on the authority of the ancients, he continues, "But Rapin writes more particularly thus, that no passions in a story are so proper to move our concernment, as fear and pity; and that it is from our concernment we receive our pleasure, is undoubted."⁽¹⁾ And he thus concludes the preface:-

"---- The judgment, which is given here, is generally founded upon experience; but because many men are shocked at the name of rules, as if they were a kind of magisterial precept upon poets, I will conclude with the words of Rapin, in his Reflections upon Aristotle's work "Of Poetry."⁽²⁾ 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: it is only by these, that probability in fiction is maintained, which is the soul of poetry. They are founded upon good sense, and sound reason, rather than on authority; for though Aristotle and Horace are produced, yet no man must argue, that what they write is true, because they writ it; but 'tis evident, by the ridiculous mistakes and gross absurdities which have been made by those poets who have taken their fancy only for their guide, that if this fancy be not regulated, it is a mere caprice, and utterly incapable to produce a reasonable and judicious poem." The gist of the essay is, then: "Though the Elizabethans undoubtedly move us, we must acknowledge that they

(1) VI:264. (2) VI:283.

are sadly deficient in plotting, and we should not imitate them in this respect; let us go back to the rules of Aristotle, not because of the magic of his name, but because his precepts are so reasonable."

To account for this change of mood from that of the three preceding essays is difficult. It should be noticed, in the first place, that the difference is only a difference of emphasis. Any reader of Dryden's criticism will agree, I think, that the justification of judgments by reason is a characteristic throughout its course. A few facts that may help to explain its predominance just now are the following: after the production of *All for Love* Dryden quarreled with the King's company and so lost income that he had been receiving from that source; in 1679 he was granted a special pension by the King, and soon began that series of satires and arguments in support of the royal party which continued even into the next reign. Discouraged, poor, and performing day-labor with his pen, he could scarcely be expected to be in the mood for the fullest appreciation of romantic literature or for critical *defense* of it. Then too, the fact noted by Mr. William Bohn, that this essay shows a deepening of the acquaintance with Rapin which had first shown itself in the period preceding, seems to me significant. The circumstances of his life would make it likely that he would now be influenced by Rapin's rationalism.

If the above explanation of his rationalistic mood be correct, we should expect the mood to continue up to the time of his emancipation from the service of the court, in 1689. And so we do; with one exception, which is easily accounted for. The exception occurs in the dedication of *The Spanish Friar*, 1681.

"There are evidently two actions in it: but it will be clear to any judicious man, that with half the pains I could have raised a play from either of them; for this time I satisfied my humour, which was to tack two plays together; and to break a rule for the sake of variety." ⁽¹⁾ The explanation is found in the next sentence.

"The truth is, the audience are grown weary of continued melancholy scenes; and I dare venture to prophesy, that few tragedies, except those in verse, shall succeed in this age, if they are not lightened with a course of mirth. ----" ⁽²⁾ In the rest of the dedication he insists upon propriety of wording. He condemns most heartily the bombast of his own heroic plays, and declares that it is his ambition to be read, "for the propriety of thoughts and words, which are the hidden beauties of a play are but confusedly judged in the vehemence of action. ----" ⁽³⁾

"Propriety" is the keynote in the preface to Albion and Albanus, 1685. "Propriety of thought is that fancy which arises naturally from the subject, or which the poet adapts to it; propriety of words is the clothing of those thoughts with such expressions as are naturally proper to them; and from both of these, ⁽⁴⁾ if they be judiciously performed, the delight of poetry results." "---- Where gods are introduced, a supreme power is to be understood, and second causes are out of doors; yet propriety is to be observed even here. The gods are all to manage their peculiar provinces; and what was attributed by the heathens to one power ought not to be performed by any other." ⁽⁵⁾ It is of a piece with the preface to Troilus and Cressida in an explicit reference, too, as

(1) VI:409. (2) VI:410. (3) VI:409. (4) VII:228. (5) VII:229.

well as in mood. "It is divided, according to the plain and natural method of every action, into three parts. For even Aristotle himself is contented to say simply, that in all actions there is a beginning, a middle, and an end. ---." (1)

Although compelled, after the revolution of 1688-9 had accomplished "the ruin of his small fortunes," to write a few plays, Dryden confesses in the preface to *Don Sebastian* that the increasing difficulties of the stage have given him a loathing for it. Naturally, then, he ceases to write on matters dramatic. Not until several years have gone by, do we find a renewed interest in dramatic theory. In the introduction to *A Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire*, 1693, he again proclaims the superiority of modern over ancient drama. And once more an attempt of Rymer's to condemn Shakespeare when tried by classic laws, draws from Dryden a reply. In 1692, Rymer published his *Short View of Tragedy*, and in the dedication to the *Third Miscellany* in 1693, Dryden takes occasion to reaffirm the inadequacy of these laws for English drama. The important parts for our purpose are these:-

"---- If we, or our greater fathers, have not yet brought the drama to absolute perfection, yet at least we have carried it much farther than these ancient Greeks ----." "They (the French) follow the ancients too servilely, in the mechanic rules, and we assume too much licence to ourselves, in keeping them only in view at too great a distance." (2)

(1) VII:238. (2) Works, Riverside Edition, II:1117.

This purely inductive study, undertaken to find in how far Dryden in his dramatic theory departed from the strict classicism of traditional and contemporary criticism, has incidentally illustrated the fact demonstrated by Mr. Bohn, that Dryden's criticism falls into periods corresponding to the activities of his life. Up to 1666, he is freely experimenting, both in practice and theory; from that time until 1675 he is the court poet, and is writing and justifying the courtly heroic play; from 1675 to 1679, while he is out of favor at court he writes an imitation of Shakespeare to "please himself," he says, and critically defends the romantic drama; from 1679 to 1689 he is writing satire and argument in the service of the court, and producing carefully reasoned, formal criticism, close in spirit and content to Pope's *Essay on Criticism*; from 1689 to his death, when he is more and more free to do literary work which is really to his taste, what little he has to say on the drama is in the spirit of the other two unhampered periods.

This proved fact, the close relation between his criticism and his circumstances, is of the utmost importance for this inquiry, for it serves to explain what would otherwise seem hopeless inconsistency in Dryden's attitude toward Aristotle. It shows that what he has to say about Aristotle in the second period is really negligible; it is a mere twisting of authority to defend a species of literature not in itself defensible. The criticism of the fourth period cannot be dismissed as insincere. But, as has already been explained, it was temporary. What Dryden really did "lay to heart" regarding the use of Aristotle's rules as authority for the English drama must be determined from the criticism of his

first, third, and last periods. It is comprised in the following three quotations, taken respectively from *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, *The Heads of An Answer to Rymer*, and the dedication of *The Third Miscellany*:-

"---- If natural causes be more known now than in the time of Aristotle, because more studied, it follows that poesy and other arts may, with the same pains arrive still nearer to perfection." "Aristotle drew his models of tragedy from Sophocles and Euripides; and if he had seen ours, might have changed his mind." "They (the French) follow the ancients too servilely, in the mechanic rules, and we assume too much licence to ourselves, in keeping them only in view at too great a distance." In 1693, Dryden says what he said in 1665, accentuating a little the requirement of restraint.

