CHAPTER II

DRYDEN

Dryden and Morgan are like the prologue and the epilogue to the Shakespeare criticism that one finds between them. Dryden's Shakespeare criticism provides significant guidelines to the Shakespeare critics of the following age, so much so that it would indeed be difficult to imagine how the 18th century might have thought about Shakespeare if Dryden had not spoken out on the subject. As we shall seek to make clear in the course of our discussion in this chapter, both the peculiar merits and drawbacks of 18th century Shakespeare criticism are, by and large, also the merits and drawbacks of Dryden's own criticism. His insights and perceptions were taken advantage of by the succeeding generations. His description of Shakespeare as Nature's mouthpiece (doubtless, this view had been in vogue since Ben Jonson, but the point is that Dryden gave it much of the substance that it previously lacked.) was to find repeated echoes in the later critics like Rowe, Addison, Pope, Warton, Johnson and Richardson, among others. His rare appreciation of the beauty of Shakespeare's language (in his preface to All for Love which we shall discuss later) in the midst of his general disapproval of much of it is a fine anticipation.
of such appreciative references to Shakespeare's language as those of Gray, Pope, Whiter and Kames.

His spirited and well-argued defence of tragi-comedy and of Shakespeare's disregard of the unities was later to find a vigorous iteration in Samuel Johnson.

He also anticipates those who were subsequently to acquit Shakespeare of the charge of breaking sundry other rules. He speaks of Shakespeare's 'magic' as Rowe, Addison, Pope, Warton, Morgan and others are to do later. His recognition of the inimitable character of Shakespeare's creations is echoed by his successors.

On the other hand, Dryden's disability in the face of Shakespeare's language (notwithstanding what we said a little earlier about his mention of Shakespeare's language in the preface to All for Love, Dryden's general attitude to it was one of disapproval) and poetry is again greatly shared by the 18th century.

If, therefore, Dryden stands at the end of the 17th century, he may with equal force be said to be standing at the beginning of the 18th century whose ideas and tendencies he helped greatly to mould. He is an indispensable introduction to the 18th century.

"The foundations of most of the literature of the first half of the 18th century were laid down in the Seventeenth. Dryden not only dominates his own age, but throws his shadow over the next."1

We began our discussion of the age in the previous chapter by drawing attention to the profound and far-reaching changes the society had undergone since the Renaissance. We saw how the altered social and national temper sought new directions of endeavour and emphasised new values in the cultural domain. It may perhaps be considered advisable that we begin our consideration of Dryden laying further stress on this aspect of things in order that his thoughts on Shakespeare — may appear in proper relation to the time of their genesis.

Writing about Chaucer Sir Philip Sidney remarks in his celebrated essay 'An Apology for Poetry' that he cannot but marvel that "he (Chaucer) in that misty time could see so clearly." One approaching Dryden's estimate of Shakespeare is tempted to speak in a like vein. For Dryden did indeed see Shakespeare "so clearly" and he did, in a way, live in a "misty time." His utterances on Shakespeare are like a sudden gust of fresh wind that sweeps away much of the cobweb of musty thinking of the time. True, historically, one does not have to travel a long distance from the Elizabethan to the Augustan times;

one cannot speak of an interval of so much as a century. Yet there is a profound cleavage from the cultural point of view. The fundamental difference centred round the attitude towards life to which we have already drawn attention. "As Dryden's attempts to refine Shakespeare show, it was already difficult in 1693 to appreciate Elizabethan and Jacobean drama for the right reasons. The meaning of the language had been lost, just as the dramatic conventions on which the Elizabethan stage had established its greatness, had been forgotten. The classics no less than the Puritans had dealt it the fatal blow. People could no longer conceive that an author so careless of rules, so cavalier in his treatment of a refined taste, might, by genius alone, produce immortal masterpieces. They forgot that other ages had other rules and other tastes. They forgot also, and above all, that the contemporaries of Elizabeth and James looked to the English language to do more than did those of Charles II or Queen Anne".1

The Elizabethan world view sprang from an attitude that stood for a free, total, and uninhibited expression of the yearnings of both body and spirit, for all manner of quests and darings, and consequently for an almost endless expansion and heightening of life. It gave a loose to the imagination which was making ever-new expeditions into the unknown, and bringing fresh conquests for man. The result was an incredibly rich, complex and comprehensive life which found itself reflected in art and literature. As Henri Fluchere puts it so vividly:

"The great currents of thought, the passionate curiosities, the secret fears which haunted or passed through the minds of the Elizabethans can now be read,

no longer as filigree work in the dramatist's texts but as the tormented inspiration of these works. Roughly half a century (1580-1640) saw the drama open, expand and die. It was a period of transition, one might almost say of revolution. Old beliefs crumbled, old values collapsed; a new world came painfully to birth in enthusiasm and distress, now bubbling over with hope, with the pride of conquest and measureless ambition, now suffering unspeakable nostalgias, agonising soul-torturings and blackest desairs.

"On the one hand, there was the will to power which would assert its empire over space, time, matter and even God; on the other, consciousness of failure which the weaknesses and contradictions of human nature made inevitable, even in the hour of the most brilliant triumphs, so near is victory to defeat. Hence the cries of joy, the walls of anguish, bursts of laughter, calls to revolt, melodious ecstasies, prophetic fears that fill to overflowing the tumultuous torrent of Elizabethan literature...."1

The Augustan attitude, broadly speaking, underlined the mere intellect with a virtual denial of imagination and mystery. Inevitably, life became narrower and poorer. To the people of the Restoration, the Elizabethans appeared so different, indeed so outlandish that even Dryden referred to them as "the Giant Race before the Flood." The Civil War, the Puritan rule, and the later French influence on life and letters, had all conspired to bring about a fundamental change in ideas and ideals. The ideas and ideals, newly made current, helped to form scales in the eyes of the people, especially in regard to their attitude to the Elizabethans. As John Butt observes:

"..... The gulf which separated the two ages

and seemed so obvious to Dryden and his successors as they contrasted the products of the untutored genius of the earlier age with their own more 'correct' taste, did in fact exist. The Civil Wars and the period of Puritan supremacy had lasted eighteen years, long enough to permit an even greater break in tradition than actually occurred."

'This 'break in tradition' led to a loss of rapport and of a vital bridge of understanding. It was, therefore, creditable of Dryden to have been able largely to pierce through the 'mist' around him and see and declare much of Shakespeare's greatness. However, it should be mentioned in this connection that Dryden just could not overcome all the limitations and handicaps of his age, which explains much of his questioning attitude towards Shakespeare's language. To this point we shall return soon.

What Johnson said of Dryden's poetry would seem to apply more meaningfully to his Shakespeare criticism: "He found it brick, and he left it marble." Indeed, Johnson speaks of "Dryden's gold" to describe Dryden's appreciation of Shakespeare: "The account of Shakespeare may stand as a perpetual model of encomiastic criticism; exact without minuteness, and lofty without exaggeration..... nor can the editors and admirers of Shakespeare, in all their emulation of reverence, boast of much more than of having diffused and paraphrased this epitome of excellence, of having changed Dryden's gold for baser metal....."

The historical importance of Dryden's achievement cannot be over-emphasised. There was not

3. Ibid, P. 327.
much Shakespeare criticism before him. If we leave aside Ben Jonson, there certainly are not many who can compel any respectful attention of a Shakespeare scholar.

Before we proceed further it may be well to recall Dryden's stature and distinctive character as a literary critic as such. He is a great name in the history of English literary criticism. His Essay of Dramatic Poesy (1668) and Preface to the Fables (1700) are a landmark in the annals of critical literature; in them he has displayed his instinctive and profound preoccupation with literary and aesthetic principles, and has recorded his seminal observations on their merit and application. He talks on Shakespeare, Jonson, and Chaucer, on the French writers, on the ancient Romans and Greeks such as Virgil and Aristotle and Plato. And throughout he demonstrates "an effective use of the psychological, comparative, and historical methods in forming literary judgments. It all marked an advance in critical activities, and opened up new possibilities in theorising and judgment alike."

His happy faculty of sympathy, his ready response to great literature, the freshness, vigour and charm of his approach — all these go to make Dryden

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1. English Literary Criticism, 17th & 18th Centuries, Atkins, P. 143.
a spiritual descendant of Longinus and Sir Philip Sidney. As Saintsbury remarks so aptly:

"There is in him ...... a vein and style in 'judging of Authors' which goes straight back to Longinus."¹

This brings us back to the influence that we traced on the intellectual and artistic climate of the time. We saw how Longinus's 'On the Sublime' burst upon the rule-bound classicists sending a thrill through them and causing a healthy liberalisation of rigid rules. This work gave the most powerful fillip to the new liberal tendency with its increasing recognition of the vital role played by the imagination in making a work of art what it is. While not underestimating the place in poetry and rhetoric of the classical qualities of logic, decorum and structure, Longinus attached a still higher value to originality and the power of moving the reader or the auditor. Dryden did a great deal to disseminate this new spirit.

"In English criticism the influence of this work (On the Sublime) was first clearly seen in Dryden's Apology for Heroic Poetry (1677), in which besides discussing the theory of the heroic poem, Dryden also dealt with the qualifications of the critic and the methods proper to criticism. The majority of Dryden's

own essays exemplify the new and liberal spirit of criticism which many other writers, from Steele, Addison, and Pope to Goldsmith continued to advocate and practice. It is noteworthy that in spite of neo-classicism, Dryden and the majority of English eighteenth century critics preserved a spirit of independence and breadth of judgment."

Indeed, much of what Dryden says of Shakespeare is, as Saintsbury remarks so happily, born of a temperament akin to that of Longinus. It may be useful to quote Longinus at this point:

"Sublimity is a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse. It is the source of the distinction of the very greatest poets and prose writers and the means by which they have given eternal life to their own fame. For grandeur produces ecstasy rather than persuasion in the hearer; and the combination of wonder and astonishment always proves superior to the merely persuasive and pleasant. This is because persuasion is on the whole something we can control, whereas amazement and wonder exert invincible power and get the better of every hearer. Experience in invention and ability to order and arrange material cannot be detected in single passages; we begin to appreciate them only when we see the whole context. Sublimity, on the other hand, produced at the right moment, tears everything up like a whirlwind, and exhibits the orator's whole power at a single blow." 2

In the following passage Atkins draws attention to Dryden's instinctive response to and appreciation of great literature capable, as Longinus says, of causing ecstasy, wonder and astonishment, and of 'tearing everything up like a whirlwind.'

"The secret of Dryden's greatness as a critic lay after all in himself, in that native sensibility which made him keenly alive to artistic values, capable also of a dispassionate psychological


analysis of those values. What he found to admire in Shakespeare or Chaucer was based on no formal rules, but on his own instinctive reactions submitted to the test of nature or reason, a test, it should be added, which to him represented something more than mere commonsense or the prose understanding. The truth was that his judgment, at its best, both in theorising and appreciating, was of a supra-rational kind. It sprang from an imaginative sympathy which soared beyond anything that the pure unaided intellect could discern. But when all is said, what gives to his criticism its supreme value is that personal, irresistible quality which Gibbon later on ascribed to Longinus. 'Longinus', he states, 'not only lays bare his own spiritual experiences, ... but he does so in such a way and with such enthusiasm that he succeeds in communicating his feelings to others'. And this compelling treatment, this infectious praise of great literature is characteristic of Dryden as well."

A striking similarity is noticeable between what Dryden says of Chaucer and what he says of Shakespeare. A brief comparative study is likely to help us to make a point.

Here are some of the observations that Dryden made about Chaucer:

"He must have been a man of a most wonderful comprehensive nature, because, as it has been truly observed of him, he has taken into the compass of his Canterbury Tales the various manners and humours (as we now call them) of the whole English nation in his age."

"'Tis sufficient to say, according to the proverb, that here is God's plenty."

"Chaucer, I confess, is a rough diamond, and must first be polished ere he shines. I deny not likewise, that living in our early days of poetry, he writes not always of a piece; but sometimes mingles trivial things with those of greater moment."

1. English Literary Criticism, 17th & 18th Centuries, Atkins, PP 144-145.
3. Ibid, P. 190.
And now we turn to some of the criticism that Dryden wrote on 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."1

"Shakespeare had an universal mind, which comprehended all Characters and Passions."2

"Never did any other 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."3

And, "If Shakespeare were stripped of all the bombast 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."4

The comparison is revealing. In the first place, it shows how delightfully enthusiastic Dryden could be, showing a Longinian vein, in his admiration for his great predecessors. Secondly, it shows how he could find serious fault with them even when he was highlighting their merits and excellences. The words quoted are curiously similar. One might have thought that the two men who caused these memorable utterances lived either in the same age or at least in similar

4. Preface to Troilus & Cressida, 1679.
environments. And yet the fact is that a gulf of time and thought separates them: Chaucer is a radiant product of the Middle Ages only touched by the faint breath of the Renaissance and Shakespeare rides magnificently on the very crest of it.

The point that emerges is that while Dryden, in the Longinian manner, had an unerring eye for the genius of Chaucer and Shakespeare, and also had the liberality of bestowing high praise on them, he yet had his reservations. The reservations he had on Chaucer are understandable. Chaucer indeed lived in still antique times, and wrote, among other things, antique English. To all appearances, he perhaps needed a modern habiliment. But what about Shakespeare? An answer to this may be found in the Augustans' conviction that they, the first generation of decent people in England, and that they had most fortunately emerged to true culture from out of the barbarism in which the Elizabethans had wallowed.

The Augustan age came under the all-pervasive spell of reason and good sense, of correctness and respectability and of the rules of the ancients. The writings of the age were required to be precise, correct, and decorous, scrupulously eschewing the conceits and extravagance of the Elizabethan and Jacobean writers. Thus Dryden, while he abandoned 'metaphysics' and Jacobean over-luxuriance in favour
of the style of Sir John Denham, declared that the latter's Cooper Hill "is, and ever will be, the exact standard of good writing."

It may be possible now to see why Dryden should have gone in for finding fault with certain aspects of Shakespeare's writings, more particularly his language, in the manner in which he did. It was in the ultimate analysis, the reaction of the Age of Reason and Obedience to the Age of Imagination and Freedom.

Indeed, it needs stressing that notwithstanding his remarkable breadth of sympathy, Dryden was handicapped in understanding and taking a full measure of Shakespeare. He recognised Shakespeare's surpassing genius but largely failed to appreciate his language, his poetry. He also called in question some of Shakespeare's artistic judgments. As Henri Fluchère justly remarks:

"The style of Dryden's Age had, in fact, lost the incomparable vitality of the Shakespearean period, familiarity with mystery, dramatic rhetoric and the common touch."\(^1\)

Dryden disliked certain features of Shakespeare's plays to such an extent that he and Davenant and others forced Measure for Measure, Macbeth, Troilus and Cressida, The Tempest, and some more plays — into severe and symmetrical moulds of classical drama; and incidentally, they added a spicier love-interest than that contained in Shakespeare's plays, the heroines of which were originally acted by boys, an interest essential to

\(^1\) Shakespeare, 1953, P. 130.
success at the court of Charles II.

We shall now take a closer look at Dryden's limitations. The following passages bear out his lack of understanding of Shakespeare's language and poetry:

"He is many times flat, insipid: his comic wit degenerating into clenches, his serious swelling into bombast."  

"He often obscures his meaning 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 new words and phrases, or racking words which were in use, into the violence of a catachresis."  

The charges of unintelligibility, of going beyond the bounds of judgment, and of coining new words and phrases, are quite understandable as coming from one, who, in accordance with the ideals of his age (ideals shaped under the influence of such men as Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, and Newton who laid exclusive emphasis on logical, clear thinking and helped to undermine the role and status of poetry, or the crusading zeal of Bishop Sprat as reflected in his History of The Royal Society which gave a new definition of the function and ideal of the English language) was taught to admire and use a clear and unambiguous style and respect the authority of judgment as being of the greatest importance in literary

2. Preface to Troilus & Cressida, 1679.
composition. But it is a bit curious that the charge of 'bombast' should have come from Dryden who himself can be accused of this fault in his plays.

Dryden unsparingly censures some plays for their 'ridiculous incoherent story':

"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's Lost, Measure for Measure; which were either grounded on impossibilities, or at least so meanly written, that the comedy neither caused you mirth, nor the serious part your concernment."

It may perhaps be admitted in fairness to Dryden that Shakespeare does exhibit unevenness of composition and faulty structure in some of his plays — defects to which Walter Raleigh, among others, has rightly called attention and which have been sought to be explained by modern criticism and scholarship.

It needs to be recorded in this connection that subsequent critics like Rowe and Addison, Pope and Johnson are in substantial agreement with Dryden with regard to his disapproving remarks on some aspects of Shakespeare's language, style and taste. In fact, Dryden's formulation of these depreciatory points does not seem to have been enlarged in any significant manner, but is only echoed in the main. We shall state the views of those critics

in the following chapters and discuss them with reference to Dryden's views which we have just dealt with.

Yet, this is, not all of Dryden the Shakespeare critic. In fact, it would be unfair to keep insisting on this side of his criticism to the neglect of the other - perhaps the more important side, revealing as it does Dryden who excels in sympathetic criticism and who, therefore, can be called the spiritual descendant of Longinus. It is really important to note that the incapacities detailed above did not after all prevent him from realising and according rapturous recognition to the supreme genius of Shakespeare. It is noteworthy that his somewhat limited understanding of the Elizabethan age could not after all diminish his admiration for Shakespeare. And this was possible because of what T.S. Eliot calls "the singular individual genius of Dryden."¹ Eliot further observes that "whenever Dryden mentions Shakespeare, Dryden's opinion must be treated with respect."²

What Eliot means evidently is that Dryden, while pronouncing on Shakespeare, more than merely represents his age. And it must always be remembered that the age in which he thought and wrote was a

². Ibid, P. 292.
peculiarly limiting age. It nearly shackled the artist's freedom instead of encouraging it. As we have been constantly emphasising, it imposed laws from without — laws of the ancients as also of Boileau and others of his kind. It spoke of ever-fixed principles and rigid literary 'kinds'. In such a state of letters — canonised and tamed — to be able to see in Shakespeare, the proud non-conformist — beauty and greatness, and further to defend his unconventional practices, needed 'singular genius' indeed.

By reason of this 'singular individual genius' Dryden could see what not many others could see; he could argue for certain freedoms and relaxation from rules in a manner uniquely his own. His large-hearted appreciation and eulogy of Shakespeare was indeed instinctive. To quote Bosker:

"... it must not be forgotten that there was a general tendency in the latter part of the seventeenth century, and also in Pope's time, to regard the rules in their strictest form as un-English."¹

And, when we remember this fact, we do not experience much difficulty in seeing how some great Augustans could enjoy themselves, in such a remarkable degree, in Shakespeare's world in the face of neo-classical injunctions.

¹ Literary Criticism in the Age of Johnson, 1954, A. Bosker, P. 6.
There is ample evidence of Dryden having been deeply occupied with the examples of unconventional composition that Shakespeare had left. As Nichol Smith remarks so aptly: "Dryden was so fully representative of his age that the public debate on the methods of the drama is adequately reflected in the debate in his own mind."  

The work of Dryden that calls for special mention in this regard is An Essay of Dramatic Poetry (1668). Evidently under the overwhelming impact of Shakespeare's plays, Dryden brings the classical models and principles, the French drama and the native plays within the capacious ambit of his discourse. He puts the rules of the ancients and the obedient conformity of the French to a searching examination. He discusses the so-called unities, the tragi-comedies, the respective merits of rhyme and blank verse and often comes to conclusions that are nearly revolutionary. Not that he was altogether uninfluenced by French models. As we shall soon see, he was inconsistent, at one time favouring blank verse, at another rhyme; now conforming to the French 'rules', then ignoring them altogether. But as has been rightly pointed out:

"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."1

And as Nichol Smith has put it:

"His apparent inconsistencies are only proof of a live intelligence open to new impressions, and ready for new ventures. Amid all his doubts, he was guided and controlled by tastes and sympathies that were proudly English. Some of his statements, if taken out of their setting, may suggest scant respect for the Elizabethans. In self-defence he enlarged on the failings of the 'last age'; and he never hesitated to speak of Shakespeare's faults. But he also said that Shakespeare's critics

'In the attempt are lost
When most they rail, know then they envy most.'

"His belief in the unmatched greatness of Shakespeare was stated deliberately, once and for all, in the glowing tributes in the early Essay of Dramatic Poetry."2

On the question of the so-called unities of time and place, Dryden entertains no doubt as to what makes for dramatic variety and effectiveness. Richly aided by his keen sensibilities and "live intelligence", he joins issue with those pedants who condemned Shakespeare because he was either ignorant of or ignored the Poetics of Aristotle, and who thought that the English drama should imitate the classical drama of the French, of Corneille, Moliere, and Racine,

and puts up a spirited defence of the rejection of
the unities in the following words:

"By their servile observations of the
unities of time and place, and integrity of scenes,
they (the French) have brought on themselves that
dearth of plot, narrowness of imagination, which
may be observed in all their plays. How many
beautiful accidents might naturally happen in two
or three days which cannot arrive with any
probability in the compass of twenty four hours?
There is time to be allowed also for maturity of
design, which, amongst great and prudent persons,
such as are often represented in tragedy, cannot
with any likelihood of truth, be brought to pass
at so short a warning. Further, by tying themselves
strictly to the unity of place and unbroken scenes,
they are forced many times to omit some beauties
which cannot be shown where the act began; but
might, if the scene were interrupted and the stage
cleared for the persons to enter in another place;
and therefore the French poets are often forced upon
absurdities; for if the act begins in a Chamber,
all the persons in the play must have some business
or other to come hither, or else they are not to be
shown that act; and sometimes their characters are very
unfitting to appear there....."

These words of clear-sighted perception
would seem to tear the rules to shreds. As we
have pointed out before and shall see later also,
Dryden in this matter he anticipates Samuel Johnson
whose solid commonsense speaks out in an equally
convincing manner.

To the detractors of tragi-comedy he
replies with equal certitude and self-assurance.
Citing the 'old rule of Logic' that contraries, when
placed near to each other, set off each other, Dryden

1. Essay of Dramatic Poesy, in English Critical
Essays, XVI-XVIII Centuries, ed. E.D. Jones,
1956, P. 146.
says that he "cannot but conclude, to the honour 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."^1

It is interesting to note how far we have come from the days of Sir Philip Sidney's "mongrel tragi-comedy", once again commonsense speaks out and liberal temper prevails; and once again Dryden anticipates Johnson. It is indeed true that Dryden "throws his shadow" over the next century.

Dryden is an eager advocate of the singular variety of the English plays. He does not understand why some people should "cry up the barrenness of the French plots above the variety and copiousness of the English."^2

Rightly has it been observed that "Dryden had often in regard both to the drama and to other branches of literature, defended the cause of English freedom."^3

If we have quoted fairly long passages from his Essay of Dramatic Poesy, it is because while discussing the controversial issues Dryden must have

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1. Ibid, P. 141.
2. Ibid, P. 141.
3. The Cambridge History of English Literature, Vol. VIII, Chapter I, P. 48 (1952)
had Shakespeare in mind, for it was Shakespeare who, in a more provocative way than any other writer, threw the unities to the winds, wrote tragi-comedies, and went in for a variety of plot. So that Dryden's verdict on all these counts constitutes a masterly vindication of Shakespeare and his non-conformist performances. No less is the verdict that of the age itself, for Dryden symbolises the nation's conscience with its decided preference for freedom over rule-bound conformity. The rules were there but, at bottom, they were really "un-English".

On the subject of blank verse versus rhyme his arguments remain tentative no doubt. But even though in the Essay of Dramatic Poesy he expresses himself against blank verse being used in a tragedy: ("I deny not but blank verse may also be used: and content myself only to assert, that in serious plays where the subject and characters are great, and the plot unmixed with mirth ..... rhyme is there as natural and more effectual than blank verse,"¹) it may be recalled that he himself used blank verse later, in his tragedy, All for Love.

Nevertheless, his sense of the propriety of blank verse in tragedy and his responsiveness to Shakespeare's language (which is rather unusual and therefore something unexpected considering his general attitude to the subject) find fine expression in the

following words which we quote from his preface to

All for Love:

"In my style, I have professed to imitate
the divine Shakespeare; which that I might perform
more freely, I have disencumbered myself from rhyme.
Not that I condemn my former way, but that this is
more proper to my present purpose. I hope I need
not explain myself, that I have not copied my author
servilely: 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: and that he who began dramatic poetry amongst
us, untaught by any, and as Ben Jonson tells us,
without learning, should by the force of his own
-genius perform so much, that in a manner he has left
no praise for any who came after him."

This tribute might seem to, and yet it does
not, contradict what we have noted earlier about
Dryden's general attitude to Shakespeare's language.
The truth perhaps is that while his formal Augustan
training made him disapprove of much of Shakespeare's
language, his innate sensibilities were well pleased
with it. This, incidentally, is one of the paradoxes
of the Augustan mind, and Dryden, rather naturally,
shared it. The still deeper paradox or ambivalence
of the post-Elizabethan and more particularly of
Dryden's mind in its seriously pursued efforts at
reconciling the conflicting classical practices and
those of Shakespeare, has been acutely brought out
by George Steiner as follows:-

"Since the seventeenth century, the history
of drama has been inseparable from that of critical
theory. It is to demolish an old theory or prove a

1. Preface to All for Love.
new one that many of the most famous of modern dramas have been written. No other literary form has been burdened with conflicts of definition and purpose. The Athenians and the Elizabethan theatre were innocent of theoretical debate. The *Poetics* are conceived after the fact and Shakespeare left no manual of style. In the seventeenth century, this innocence and the attendant freedom of imaginative life were forever lost. Henceforth, dramatists became critics and theoreticians. Corneille writes astringent critiques of his own plays...... the most important playwrights tend to be those who are also the most articulate of purpose...... Over all modern drama lies the cast of critical thought...... There are many plays since the late seventeenth century more fascinating for the theory they represent than for their art...... This dissociation between creative and critical value begins with Dryden. It makes of him the first of the moderns.

"His situation was artificial. He was required to restore the national tradition of drama which had been broken by the Cromwellian interlude. At the same time, however, he was compelled to take into account the new fashions and sensibility which the Restoration had brought with it. With the Restoration came a strong neo-classic impulse. Ideas such as those of Rymer were in the ascendant. How, then, could Dryden carry forward from Shakespeare and the Jacobean..... Dryden who possessed a catholic taste and a critical intelligence of the first rank, was aware of those conflicting claims. He knew that there towered at his back the divided legacy of Sophocles and Shakespeare. To which should be turn in his endeavour to re-establish a national theatre? In seeking to hammer out a compromise solution, Dryden imposed on his own plays a preliminary and concurrent apparatus of criticism. He is the first of the critic-playwrights.

"His attempt to reconcile the antique and the Elizabethan ideals led to a complex theory of drama. This theory, moreover, was unstable, and the balance of Dryden's judgment altered perceptibly between the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668) and the preface to *Trollus and Cressida* (1679) Dryden's point of departure was itself ambiguous. The bias of his own temper, and the example of Tasso and Corneille, inclined him towards a neo-classic observance of dramatic unities. At the same time, however, Dryden was profoundly responsive to the genius of Shakespeare and felt drawn to the richness and bustle of the Elizabethan stage ............
"Yet Dryden was clearly dissatisfied with his own work. In the preface to All for Love (1678), he seems determined to restore a Shakespearean tradition ....... But only a year later, he again shifted his critical ground. Much of the essay which precedes Dryden's version of Troilus and Cressida is a gloss on the Poetics according to the strict canons of Boileau and Rymer. Yet in the midst of the argument, we find praise for that most unclassical figure, Caliban. The entire essay is a strenuous attempt to show that Shakespearean drama does accord with Aristotle and that there is a necessary conformity between Aristotelian "rules" and a just rendition of nature. The inherent instability of such a critical view also affected Dryden's use of verse. He vacillated between a belief in the natural propriety of Shakespearean blank verse and an adherence to the rhymed couplets of the French neo-classical theatre."

Yet, inspite of this "inherent instability" of his critical view, Dryden was never in doubt of Shakespeare's genius. He was fully persuaded about the inimitable character of Shakespeare's genius which, he knew, could not be approached, far less excelled. As he says:

"To begin then with Shakespeare: he was the man who of all modern and 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 learn'd; he needed not the spectacles of books to read Nature; he looked inwards and found how there .... he is always great when some great occasion is presented to him."2

The same idea is expressed by Johnson when he says: "Nothing can please many and please long, but just representation of general nature." Or, "Shakespeare is above all, at least above all modern writers, the poet of Nature." And Pope has much the same meaning to convey when he declares that Shakespeare was "not so much an imitator as an instrument of Nature." The same attitude of regarding Shakespeare as almost identical with Nature is discernible in the critical writings of Rowe ('as Shakespeare lived under a kind of mere Light of Nature'), Addison (who refers to Shakespeare's 'mere strength of natural parts'), Gray who invokes 'Nature's darling child', and Joseph Warton ("Nature, Sophocles, and Shakespeare"), besides a host of other critics of the century.

Even when Dryden criticised, he knew what a critic was worth. Thus to Thomas Rymer who had pooh-poohed Shakespeare in A Short View of Tragedy (1693), and had himself written a tragedy, Dryden alludes in the following effective couplets:

To Shakespeare's Critique he bequeaths the Curse,  
To find his faults; and yet himself make worse;  
A precious Reader in Poetique Schools,  
Who by his own Examples damns his Rules.  

1. Prologue to Love Triumphant, 1694.
If some one is fond of harping on Shakespeare having broken rules, Dryden would answer him by asserting that "better a Mechanick Rule were stretch'd or broken, than a great Beauty were Omitted."  

The same idea is echoed by Addison in the Spectator no 592. Suffice it to say that this is an example of the gradual loosening of the stranglehold of rules, of the increasing liberalisation of critical dicta, of the recognition of the superior claims of Taste and Genius and Imagination over cold Reason. The passage which we quoted in the preceding chapter from Pope's Essay on Criticism is a further instance of the increasing realisation of the same truth.

"............... 
Some beauties yet no precept can declare ..............."

Again, Shakespeare, however he might be criticised, remained nonpareil:

"But Shakespeare's Magic could not copy'd be, Within that Circle none durst walk but he."  

Dryden's mention of Shakespeare's 'Magic' makes one reflect. After all, Dryden does not seem to have been entirely insensible to the magic touch of Shakespeare's poetry, even though his comments on it do not evidence adequate understanding. He was

1. Dedication of the Aeneis, 1697, Vide footnote 4 p 41, Shakespeare.  
2. Prologue to The Tempest; or the Enchanted Island, 1667, published 1670.
at least aware that Shakespeare, much like Prospero, had woven a great magic circle around him. It is worth noting that in this respect also Dryden proves to be an anticipator. Shakespeare's 'magic' is alluded to again and again by subsequent critics from Rowe to Morgan. By magic is possibly meant the property which causes an irresistible attraction; it is the ecstasy, the feeling of wonder and astonishment mentioned by Longinus. In other words, 'magic' stands for Pope's 'nameless graces' and 'that unequalled fire and rapture which is so forcible in Homer'. This magic can be said to be the product of a great artist's power of intuition or imagination - things that were, as we have seen, gaining ascendancy in the critical thinking of the time.

And when in this context we remember that momentous observation which we have already quoted ("...... It is almost a miracle that much of his language remains so pure......") and yet another remarkable comment ("when he describes anything, you more than see it, you feel it too"), we are left in no doubt with what quickened sensibilities and degree of penetration Dryden read Shakespeare and enjoyed him. Further, in these observations on Shakespeare's

1. Vide Pope's Preface to his translation of *Iliad* quoted in the previous chapter, p 84.
language and his imagery he again anticipates the views of Rowe, Pope, Kames and Morison, among others.

True it is that there are times when Dryden makes mention of Fletcher along with Shakespeare. True, he does have a sense of Fletcher's greatness as a poet and playwright. Otherwise, he could not have thought it necessary to assess Fletcher while assessing Shakespeare. They are put together, though it must be noted that Fletcher is never allowed to take precedence over Shakespeare. The comparative study of the two ever remains tentative. We wonder how a critic of Dryden's stature could judge it all right to place them in the same category and put them nearly on the same pedestal. We quote Dryden:

"Shakespeare writ better betwixt man and man: Fletcher betwixt man and woman: consequently, the one described friendship better: the other love."

If we find it a little difficult to follow the soundness of this opinion, we may perhaps turn to T.S. Eliot who will give us the necessary perspective. Eliot says:

"We may incline to think that Shakespeare's contemporaries underestimated his accomplishment, and were blind to his genius; forgetting that greatness is in a sense the result of time. It has again and again been illustrated that the opinion of contemporaneity is imperfect; and that even when it shows intelligent appreciation and enjoyment, it is apt surprisingly to elevate some quite insignificant figure above a very great one. Our opinions of our own contemporaries will probably seem grotesque to

1. Preface to Troilus and Cressida, 1679.
the future. I believe that if I had lived in the
seventeenth century, it is quite likely that I should
have preferred Beaumont and Fletcher to Shakespeare."

These discerning words enable us to see
how commendably free Dryden was from even such a
likely faux pas in his critical estimates of Shakespeare
and Fletcher. We recognise that his judgment does
not exactly seem grotesque to us. We also recognise
that even though he lived in the seventeenth century
he did not exactly prefer Beaumont and Fletcher to
Shakespeare — a preference which, as Eliot points out,
would have been understandable. Dryden's sanity of
judgment becomes manifest in the following pronouncements:

"Yet Shakespeare taught Fletcher to
write love; and Juliet and Deadmons are originals.....
Shakespeare had an universal mind, which comprehended
all characters and passions; Fletcher a more confined
and limited; for though he treated love in perfection,
yet honour, ambition, revenge, and generally all the
stronger passions, he either touched not, or not
masterly. To conclude all, he was a limb of Shakespeare." 2

This is doubtless a judicious summing up.
Dryden puts Fletcher in his place by calling him a
"limb of Shakespeare." Eliot himself would command
this sanity of judgment. It may perhaps be pertinent
here to recall what Raleigh called "the cool and manly
utterances of Dryden" among other Augustan critics.

Summing up, we would say that Dryden's
opinions on Shakespeare, while being deeply coloured

1. Eliot's essay 'From Dryden to Coleridge', in A
Companion to Shakespeare Studies, ed. Granville
2. Preface to Troilus & Cressida, 1679.
by the general critical temper of his time, at times transcend the limitations of his age. We have sought to study his Shakespeare criticism constantly against his own cultural and critical background. And we feel that it is necessary to emphasise that while being deeply rooted in his age, he could occasionally go ahead of it. As noticed, he makes several pronouncements mainly on his own, his opinions springing then from his almost instinctive sense of great literature. His critical temper was essentially that of Longinus whose influence on the age was ostensively profound.

Besides, his criticism of Shakespeare proves to be a great inheritance to the critics of the following century. Indeed, Dryden's criticism determines the critical thinking on Shakespeare during the greater part of the 18th century. "This 'model of ecoclastic criticism', this 'epitome of excellence' as Samuel Johnson called it, introduced the clearly marked type of appreciation which prevailed until the third quarter of the 18th century and is excellently represented by the Preface of Pope."¹

Finally, it is characterised by a singular honesty. There is no touch of cant, no air of going beyond one's depths, of making pronouncements somewhat with a view to gratifying the_ things that came to taint some of nineteenth century criticism of Shakespeare.

Even when Dryden errs we quite understand him. There is a distinctive manliness about it all. As Raleigh so aptly puts it, we come round to Dryden’s criticism of Shakespeare “with a heightened sense of the value of moderation and candour.”¹

Above all, the marvel is that he could see as much as he did, in almost the same sense in which Sir Philip Sidney used the phrase in seeking to describe Chaucer’s vision.

In the next chapter we pass to Nicholas Rowe who will be found to reflect a good deal of Dryden in his Shakespeare criticism. We shall study his work in close relation to the temper of his time.

¹ Vide the Introduction, P. 5.