CHAPTER TWO

CRITICAL PREFACES TO PLAYS
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The present chapter deals with a detailed analysis of John Dryden's critical prefaces to plays.

In these prefaces, Dryden did not deal with any one particular issue but with various themes. The prefaces are generally informal and inconclusive. Dryden himself confessed, 'I have not engaged myself to any perfect pattern, neither am I loaded with a full cargo.'

Dryden had a natural sanity of taste and straightforward perception of the deeper character of men. He introduced an element of liberalism to English criticism and adopted a novel way of airing his views.

Dryden was a clear thinker and he pondered the rules of his art. "--- his various essays, prefaces, epistles, prologues, and epilogues inaugurate in England modern literary criticism and propound not without certain strong personal touches, the doctrine of classicism then in its opening stage"*.

Apart from his major critical piece, 'An Essay of Dramatic Poesy', most of Dryden's contribution to English literary criticism comes in the form of prefaces and prologues.

In his prefaces, Dryden discusses literary principles; he explains, justifies, attacks - but in any of his prefaces, his own creative work is never far from discussion. As a critic Dryden stood alone in his good sense, his keen insight and his wide acquaintance with both art and nature. Johnson appreciates his intimitable style and his effectiveness as a critic - "His prefaces 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. What is little is gay; what is great is splendid. - - - Though all is easy, nothing is feeble;
though all seems careless there is nothing harsh; and though
since his earlier works more than a century has passed,
they have yet nothing uncouth or obsolete."1.

In the preface to 'The Rival Ladies', Dryden tries
to explain the difficulties of a dramatist when he says that
a dramatist might also be allowed to make mistakes, for
it is he who undertakes to move so many characters and
humours in a play and also to make them work so naturally.
He accepts that his preface is not perfect, but he feels
that neither are our best plays perfect and gives a logical
reason for this. "For the stage being the representation
of the World, and the actions in it, how can it be imagined
that the picture of human life can be more exact than
life itself is?"2. This view of Dryden shows that his criticism
is based upon general common sense.

1. Lives of the English Poets, Johnson, ed. Berbic Hill,
1905.
2 To & John Dryden, Selected Criticism, ed. James Kinsley
and George Parfitt, 1970.
Dryden mainly deals with the question of verse most suitable for dramatic purpose in the present preface. He praises the Italian, French and Spanish dramatists for employing rhyming verse. "All the Spanish and Italian tragedies I have yet seen are writ in rhyme."3. Although he credits Shakespeare with "a larger soul of poetry than any of our nation,"4. he blames him for inventing the blank verse. "Shakespeare was the first who, to shun the pains of continual rhyming, invented that kind of writing which we call 'blank - verse.'5. He felt that blank verse was but little removed from mere prose, whereas "rhyme has all the advantages of prose besides its own."6. However, the most important benefit of rhyming, according to Dryden, is that it controls fancy, "For imagination in a poet is a faculty so wild and lawless that, like a high ranging spaniel, it must have clogs
tied to it, lest it outrun the judgement.\textsuperscript{7} Since rhyming is comparatively more difficult, he feels that a poet will try to omit all unnecessary things. "But, certainly, that which most regulates the fancy, and gives the judgement its busiest employment, is like to bring forth the richest and clearest thoughts."\textsuperscript{8} John Dryden was not very experienced when he wrote this preface and was not right in criticising blank verse as nothing much different from mere prose. "So far Dryden obviously fails to appreciate the subtler qualities of blank verse, concerning which he was to learn much by later experience."\textsuperscript{9}

However, whether rhyme or blank verse, Dryden was absolutely right when he said that the subject is most important. "But as the best medicines may lose their virtue by being ill applied, so is it with verse, if a fit subject be

\textsuperscript{9} English Literary Criticism, 17th & 18th C., J.W.H. Atkins, 1951.
Dryden's tribute to Shakespeare in his prologue to 'The Tempest' is a good example of his criticism being genuine.

"As when a tree's cut down, the secret root
Lives under ground, and thence new branches shoot,
So, from old Shakespeare's honoured dust, this day
Springs up and buds a new reviving play."11.

The fact that Dryden realized Shakespeare to be a genius at a time when Shakespeare was not yet popularly known as a great dramatist proves the depth of Dryden's critical abilities.

Even if a tree is cut down, the roots of the tree continue living underground and later new branches emerge from them. Similarly, though Shakespeare left the World, the great plays written by him are like the roots of a tree

which remain unaffected. Just as new branches emerge from the roots underground, Shakespeare's work helps other budding dramatists and enables them to produce good plays.

Even for the genius of other great writers, Dryden gives the credit to Shakespeare.

"One imitates him most, the other best,
If they have since out writ all other men,
'Tis with the drops which fell from Shakespeare's Pen."12.

Dryden praises Shakespeare for inspiring all the other creative writers that followed him. In fact, they were so greatly influenced by this genius that all they wanted to achieve was to be able to write plays the way Shakespeare did. If some of them were successful creative writers, they did owe their success to Shakespeare.
We can find valuable critical principles in Dryden's preface to 'The Mock Astrologer'. Dryden suggests something like a new conception of comic art. While respecting the works of his predecessors, he finds the need to improve wherever necessary. "I have prepared to treat of the improvement of our language since Fletcher's and Jonson's days, and consequently of our refining the courtship, raillery and conversation of our plays." 13.

Different forms of drama appeal to different types of people, and perhaps it is not right on our part to judge one form to be inferior to others. However, Dryden does not seem to have valued 'Comedy' as much as 'Tragedy'. "Neither, indeed, do I value a reputation gained from comedy so far as to concern myself about it anymore than I needs must in my own defence, for I think it, in its own nature,
inferior to all sorts of dramatic writing."14. But at the same time he was wise to accept the fact that what appears to him as low, might appeal to others. "But let all men please according to their several tastes: that which is not pleasant to me may be to others who judge better."15.

However, what Dryden specifically disliked is not natural comedy, but the low comedy which requires unnatural scenes and vulgar conversation. "I detest those farces which are now the most frequent entertainments of the stage—Comedy presents us with the imperfections of human nature. Farce entertains us with what is monstrous and chimerical; the one causes laughter in those who can judge of men and manners, by the lively representation of their folly or corruption; the other produces the same effect in those who can judge of neither, and that only by its extravagances."16.
Though any writer should consider the interest of the audience, Dryden makes an important observation when he says that no good poet would like to degrade himself by writing something so low in order to please his audience. "For to write unnatural things is the most probable way of pleasing them, who understand not nature. And a true poet often misses out of applause because he cannot debase himself to write so ill as to please his audience."17.

Dryden stresses on the necessity to use 'the conversation of gentlemen' even in a comedy and points out Quintilian's teaching that, "to make fun of folly is easy, for folly is laughable in itself. It is what we supply of our own that gives rise to refined laughter."18.

Whatever he wrote, Dryden had ample reason to support his work. When he was criticised for not rewarding
virtue and punishing vice in some of his comedies, he justified his work pointing out that, "In tragedy, where the actions and persons are great, and the crimes horrid, the laws of justice are more strictly to be observed, and examples of punishment to be made to deter mankind from the pursuit of vice -- -. But in comedy it is not so; for the chief end of it is divertisement and delight."19.

In his preface to 'The Conquest of Granada', Dryden defended heroic plays. "Equally significant are Dryden's remarks on yet another species of drama, namely, the heroic play, which was at the height of its popularity about 1670."20.

When Dryden along with a few others were ridiculed for writing heroic plays, Dryden, who never accepted unfair judgment, immediately wrote his defence of heroic plays. His main plea was that the heroic play in general was an

enterprising attempt to realize on stage a new form of drama more in keeping with contemporary conditions and public taste than were the tragedies and comedies of elizabethan times.

All of us would definitely agree with the view that in any given field, it is not wrong to bring about changes for the better. John Dryden should be given credit for trying to adopt new ways in writing plays and also for taking a firm stand in defending himself. "But it was only custom which cozened us so long; we thought, because Shakespeare and Fletcher went no farther, that there the pillars of poetry were to be erected; that, because they excellently described passion without rhyme, therefore rhyme was not capable of describing it."21.

Dryden's resultant doctrine was that the heroic play

was none other than an imitation in little of a heroic poem in which the main theme is of love and valour. "-- an heroic play ought to be an imitation, in little of an heroic poem; and, consequently, that love and valour ought to be the subject of it."22.

Dryden also supports the nature of the heroic play when he says that, "It was in vain, that your phlegmatic heavy gownsmen denounced their 'enthusiastic' elements as unnatural; for the heroic poet was 'not tied to a bare representation of what is true or exceeding probable', but might treat of things supra natural which would give a freer scope for imagination."23.

In the "Epilogue to the Heroic Plays" and 'The Defence of the Epilogue," Dryden shows that heroic play was a form of drama in closer conformity to the genius of his age than
were the earlier tragedies and comedies. He held that the preceding age had been deficient in wit.

"They who have best succeeded on the stage,

Have still conformed their genius to their age,

Thus Jonson did mechanic humour show,

When men were dull and conversation low."24.

Dryden was not one of those who believe that whatever was done by their predecessors was right. He felt that though some of his predecessors were successful dramatists, they didn't raise above the genius of their age.

In their age men were quite dull and their conversation was low, so they could be easily pleased with whatever entertainment was provided to them. So, just because the audience was pleased, it cannot be said that the work of the dramatists was extraordinary.
He felt that in contrast to the refined manners and conversation of contemporary works, the earlier plays lacked courtliness and gallantry -

"If love and humour now are raised,
'Tis not the poet but the age is praised,
Wit's now arrived to a more high degree;
Our native language more refined and free."25.

In Dryden's own age, men conversed freely and their language too was much more refined and free. They were more fun loving and witty. So, though love and humour in poems or plays raised to a higher degree during his time, the age, which cannot be pleased with anything of a lesser quality, should be praised before the poet.

In connection with language, Dryden says that on almost every page of Shakespeare and Fletcher could be
found obscurities, impossible plots and clumsy expressions. And Dryden comes to the conclusion that while admiring our predecessors, we should maintain our individuality and also try to avoid their mistakes. "Let us therefore admire the beauties and the heights of Shakespeare, without falling after him into carelessness -- Let us imitate, as we are able, the quickness and easiness of Fletcher, without proposing him as a pattern to us --. Let us ascribe to Jonson the height and accuracy of judgement in the ordering of his plots, his choice of characters, --. But let us not think him a perfect pattern of imitation, for love, which is the foundation of all comedies in other languages, is scarcely mentioned in any of his plays."26.

The main point, a valuable one, which Dryden stressed is that the writers should maintain their originality. "To
conclude all, let us render to our predecessors what is their due, without confining ourselves to a servile imitation of all their writ."27.

However, Dryden had later changed his mind over rhyming and in his prologue to 'Aureng-Zebê' the last of his rhyming heroic plays, he declares:

"Our author by experience finds it true, 'Tis much more hard to please himself than you: And to confess a truth (though out of time) Grows weary of his long loved mistress, Rhyme. Passion's too fierce to be in fetters bound, And Nature flies him like enchanted ground."28

Dryden initially believed that the verse most suitable for dramatic purpose was rhyme and not blank verse. However,
later on he realizes his mistake and confesses without any false pride.

The kind of passion which has to be depicted in serious plays is so fierce that it is impossible to bend it within the narrow compass of rhyme. Free language is essential to depict passion naturally and therefore blank verse is most suitable for dramatic purpose.

In the preface to "All For Love", Dryden gives a logical reasoning for the representation of his hero as neither completely perfect nor wholly evil. "All reasonable men have long since concluded that the hero of the poem ought not to be a character of perfect virtue, for he could not, without injustice, be made unhappy; nor yet altogether wicked, because he could not then be pitied."29.

When he wrote the preface to 'The Rival Ladies',
Dryden was unable to appreciate blank verse. However, he later realizes its value and acknowledges blank verse to be better suited for his tragic purpose than rhyme. This point once again proves John Dryden to be a genuine critic. He was a confident critic and whenever he changed his views, it was not by accepting others' views blindly, but by his own experiences and knowledge.

Dryden had the courage to state that the French tragedy models were not perfect and that the French dramatists were not right in trying to make their characters too civil.

"But as the civillest man in the company is commonly the dullest, so these authors, while they are afraid to make you laugh or cry, of pure good manners make you sleep."
While writing the play 'All for Love', Dryden claimed to have followed 'the divine Shakespeare', whose purity of language and miraculous achievements had exhausted all praise. - - - 'tis almost a miracle that much of his (Shakespeare's) 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.31.

In his preface to 'Troilus and Cressida', Dryden explains the concept of imitation. His view differs from the earlier 'crude notion of a slavish copying of formal characteristics, or an indiscriminate borrowing of incidents, phrases or diction.'32.

- - - " Those great men whom we propose to ourselves as patterns of our imitation, serve us as a torch - - - to

enlighten our passage, and often elevate our thought, as high as the conception we have of our author's genius."33.

Therefore such imitation is the result of inspiration and imagination derived from earlier models. His concept not only differs from the earlier views, but is valuable. " - - - this pronouncement of Dryden is of significance in his critical development."34.

Also significant is his view that each poem or play should be all of a piece, free from irrelevancies and that the central character of a play should be placed in the foreground with minor characters in support. " - - - 'tis on this one character that the pity and terror must be principally, if not wholly, founded. A rule which is extremely necessary, and which none of the critics that I know have fully enough discovered to us."35.


In the dedication of 'The Spanish Friar,' Dryden defends the liberties of a tragicomedy; and here once again we find him trying a new model with great confidence. "I used the best of my endeavour, in the management of two pots, so very different from each other that it was not perhaps the talent of every writer to have made them of a piece." 36.

Dryden, through his character Neander, also tried to defend tragicomedy on psychological grounds. "--- if the eye can pass rapidly from an unpleasant object to a pleasant, why should we think that the soul of man is heavier than his senses? In any case, contraries, when placed near, set off each other -- -. A scene of mirth mixed with tragedy has the same effect upon us which our musick has betwixt the Acts." 37.

On the whole, Dryden's comments on dramatic principles, of characterization, as well as other matters suggested by his own experiences as a dramatist, are valuable. "--- he is the first, after Johnson, to supply in English the more essential details of Aristotle's definition of tragedy, according to which tragedy is said to be '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 emotions in our minds.'38.