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M.A (English)

Semester - II

C.C - 7

Unit - III

- Dryden: An Essay of Dramatic Poesy

Q How Crites defends for the Ancients in Dryden's The Essay of Dramatic Poesy?

Ans -

"An Essay of Dramatic Poesy" was probably written in 1666 by John Dryden. It is the most attractive and lively of Dryden's critical works. It was written about three years before when plague had driven him from London and he had sought refuge at the country residence of his father-in-law at Charlton in Wiltshire. It can be read as a general defense of drama as a legitimate art form - taking up where Sir Philip Sidney's "Defense of Poesie" left off - as well as Dryden's own defense of his literary practices. The essay is structured as a dialogue among four friends on the river Thames. The group has taken refuge on a barge during a naval battle between the English and the Dutch fleets. The main purpose of the Essay, according to the introductory note "To The Reader", is historical, "to vindicate the honour of our English Writers from the Censure of those who unjustly prefer the French before them." The four gentlemen, Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius, and Neander (all aliases for actual Restoration critics and the last for Dryden himself),

begin an ironic and witty conversation on the subject of poetry, which soon turns in to a debate on the virtues of modern and ancient writers. Eugenius then points out that it would be better if they limit themselves to one particular branch of poetry. All of them agree and Crites suggests that they should confine only to Dramatic Poetry. He undertakes to present the case for the ancients. In the beginning he says that the dramatic art had been indigenous to ancient Greece, and it had attained an early maturity there. Further he says that now the dramatists are not held in that high esteem in which they used to be in ancient Greece, and therefore the desire to excel has vanished. He thinks that emulation is necessary for artistic development. This accounts in some measure for the decline in the drama. There is another factor also. He says:

"These ancients have been faithful imitators and wise observers of that nature which is so torn and ill-represented in our plays; they have handed down to us a perfect resemblance of her; which we, like ill copiers, neglecting to look on, have rendered monstrous and disfigured."

All the rules of drama were invented by the ancients and they (the Englishmen) have borrowed those rules from them. All the rules have been extracted from Aristotle's Poetics and Horace's Art of Poetry and they have not added anything of their own. He discusses at some length the merits of the Three Unities of Time, Place and Action. When judged by these rules modern plays fail. Finally, he urges that the ancients had possessed the power of expression in a superlative degree. "But if we allow the Ancients to have contrived well, we must

acknowledge them to have written better." This he proves by the deference paid to them by Ben Jonson, "the greatest man of the last age." He respected the rules of the ancients very much and always tried to imitate them. "He was not only a professed imitator of Horace, but a learned plagiarist of all the others; you track him everywhere in their snow."

Thus, Crites has presented his ideas regarding the superiority of ancients over modern writers. He represents Sir Robert Howard. He says that the ancients have been faithful imitators and wise observers of nature while the moderns disfigure and ill-represent the nature in their plays. He ascribes all the rules of dramatic poesy to the ancients.

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