

# Dryden as 'the father of English Criticism'

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The 'father of English Criticism' is the title conferred on John Dryden by Dr. Johnson who said, "Dryden may be properly considered as the father of English Criticism, as the writer who first taught us to determine upon principles the merit of composition."

Before Dryden English criticism was just a blind imitation of the ancients. It was he who liberated it from classicism and rightly therefore, "It is in virtue of his 'liberal classicism' and sturdy independence of spirit that Jonson deserves the title of being the first English critic." Not that there was no criticism in England before Dryden. There had been critics like Sir Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson. But they were critics merely by chance; their critical works are merely occasional utterances on the critical art. Sidney's Apology arose out of the need to defend poetry against Puritan attack, and the learned Ben's critical utterances are in the nature of jottings on just a few things that interested him. While Jonson is ruthless, Dryden is tolerant: While Jonson is limited, Dryden is urbane in his critical range.

## • His Liberal Classicism —

The earlier criticism was 'magisterial' or dogmatic. Dryden, on the other hand, is never magisterial or 'Pontifical', he is sceptical, he does not lay down the rules, he rather sets out to discover the rules for his guidance in writing plays, as well as in judging of those written by others. He rather derides those who are dogmatic or too sure in knowing the correct thing. The sceptical tone of his criticism is but a reflection of his personality — gentle, modest, unassuming, intelligent, free from dogmatism and vanity of every kind.

## • His Contribution to Descriptive Criticism —

George Watson says — "The first English man to attempt any extended descriptive criticism was John Dryden. The

earlier English criticism was either theoretical or legislative. The critics were merely content to lay down the rule. It is Dryden who inaugurates the era of descriptive criticism. He was qualified for the function by his wide reading and learning. He had, "not only read and digested Sophocles, Euripides, Theocritus and Virgil, but also Shakespeare; Ben Jonson, Fletcher and a host of other writers, both ancient and modern. It is in his criticism that literary analysis, the dominant concern of the modern critic, emerges for the first time. There is no surviving Elizabethan analysis of an Elizabethan play, and no contemporary analysis of a metaphysical poem. It is in Dryden's *examens* of *The Silent Woman* that we get the first elaborate critical analysis of a literary work in English.

### Pioneer in the field of historical criticism -

Dryden is also a pioneer in the field of historical criticism. He recognises that the genius and temperament differ from age to age, and hence literature in different periods of history is bound to be different. He traces the decay of literature in the Pre-Restoration era to historical causes and its revival, "to the restoration of our happiness." Thus he recognises that the Elizabethan Drama and the Restoration Drama are governed by different literary conventions.

### Dryden's Contribution to Comparative Criticism :-

Dryden has added a new dimension to criticism by his method of comparative analysis. His comparative studies of Greek, Roman, French and English writers show not only the wide range of his knowledge but also the catholicity of his taste and a sensitiveness to literary values in whatever literature they may

be found. In this connection, as David Daiches observes, "We must remember, too, that Dryden's method shifts according to the work he is discussing; he was intelligent and sensitive enough as a critic to realize that different kinds of works require different critical approaches. He would never have analysed Shakespeare the way he analysed Jonson, for he knew that they were doing different sorts of thing." This makes Dryden's criticism highly individualized and free from the rigidity of a system.

#### Dryden's Contribution to Theoretical Criticism -

In the field of theoretical criticism, Dryden's best contribution lies in the modification of the ancient doctrines rather than in the creation of new theories. He tested every accepted critical canon of the ancients in the light of 'modernity' and exploded some of their outmoded concepts. He recognised the fundamental truth that 'the climate, the age, the disposition of people, to which a poet writes, may be so different, that what pleased the Greeks would not satisfy an English audience.'

For these qualities and for his native sensibility, for his liberal classicism, for his catholicity of taste and broadness of outlook, his conversational pace, the gentlemanly tone and cool, judicious posture and above all for his animate and easy style that Dryden deserves to be called the father of English criticism.

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