

Dryden's Views on Superiority of English Play

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Lisideus praises the French drama for its economy, observance of the unities of time, place and action, well-construction and organization of plot, economy of construction, naturalness of expression, prominence given to the hero, maintenance of purity of the genre and not mixing the tragic and the comic, excellent judgement in the use of narration, avoiding the representation of violent actions such as battles and deaths, and preference of the rhymed verse etc.

It is now Neander (Dryden's) turn to take up the challenge and vindicate the English drama, which after all was the main object of the Essay. To begin with, he openly acknowledges the regularity of the French plays, their observance of the laws of comedy and decorum with more exactness than the English. But so far as the ultimate test of a play as a 'lively image of Nature' is concerned the French drama falls below perfection. It may be more regular but it lacks life and variety, which are better qualities. The beauties of a French play are 'the beauties of statue, but of a man, because not animated with the soul of poesy; which is imitation of humour and passions.' English drama, on the other hand, has far more life and variety, and hence superior to French drama.

Neander then proceeds to defend the English practice of mingling tragic and comic elements against the French practice of their rigid separation. He argues that tragi-comedy is not inartistic, since we can, in fact, enjoy both gaiety and sadness together; the one serves to relieve the other. 'A scene mixed with tragedy has the same effect upon us which our music has betwixt the acts, which we find a relief to us from the best plots and language of the stage, if the discourses have been long.' He, therefore, affirms that the English '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.'

He then takes up the question of plot and wonders why Livideus pruned the barrenness of the French plots above the variety and copiousness of the English. He can not admire the severity of French plays in excluding underplots and minor episodes. English plays are superior to the French in this respect, as they have under-plots or by concerns besides the main design. An underplot - he argues, enriches the play, without violating the essential unity of action, provided that it harmonises with the main plot. English plays in having these underplots, add a pleasant variety and 'afford a greater pleasure to the audience.'

The pre-occupation of the French plays with a single theme does not give them any advantage in the expression of passion. Their verses are cold and the long speeches in their plays are tiresome. During the performance of a French play, "we are concerned for our troubles, instead of being concerned for their imaginary heroes."

Long speeches may suit the genius of the French, they do not suit English who are a more sullen people and come to the stage for refreshment. Short speeches and replies are more likely to move the passions, and repartee are the chief graces of Comedy. In the "chase of wit" the English have reached perfection, and are superior to the French.

The more characters in a play the greater will be the variety. The English dramatists follow this rule. As regards the preference to violent scenes and battles, the English are fierce by nature and prefer action on the stage. As regards incredibility, if the audience can imagine an actor to be a king, they can also imagine three soldiers to be any army. If the English are blamed for showing too much of the action, the French can be blamed for showing too little of it. Therefore a middle path should be followed, but what is beautiful must be acted on the stage.

Next, he point out that the French dramatists too strict an observance of the rules was itself fatal to artistic effects. By their servile observations of the unities of time and place, and

integrity of scenes, they have brought on themselves that death of plot and narrowness of imagination, which may be observed in all their plays. How many beautiful accidents might naturally happen in two or three days, which can not arrive with any probability in the compass of 24 hours? In fact, their too much adherence to the unities has banished many artistic beauties from their stage. The French dramatist Corneille himself admitted that the unities have a cramming effect. Violation of unities by the English dramatists had added to greater variety of plots.

As for rhyme, the English used it as well as blank verse, before it was adopted by the French. Neander boldly affirms, to prove the superiority of English plays over the French, that many English plays are as regular as French drama, and that they have more variety of plot and character.

Thus Dryden through Neander asserts that English dramatists have far surpassed all the ancients and modern writers of other countries. In the irregular plays of Shakespeare and Fletcher there is greater spirit and more masculine fancy than in any of the French. Ben Jonson's plays are as 'correct' as those of the French. That is why he praises Shakespeare and Ben Jonson and calls them Homer and Virgil of England respectively.