Title of the Unit:

**An Essay of Dramatic Poesy**

**John Dryden**

**Unit Structure:**

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1.3. Introduction- John Dryden: Life and Works; Context of the essay.

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**1. 1. Relevance of the Unit:**

*An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* had the Horatian motto prominently displayed on the title page. The translation is as follows: “I’ll play a whetstone’s part which makes steels sharp, but of itself cannot cut”. This motto announces, in unmistakable terms, what the general public can and should expect. Practical issues along with theoretical ones should be pondered over and so Dryden’s aim was to stimulate thought about them. Dryden’s *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* is concerned with some of the major controversies of the day.

Differences in the literary taste in the different nations should be accepted at all costs. This was the contention of Dryden because the genius of the people differs. What is literary and aesthetic food for one nation may prove to be literary and aesthetic poison for another nation. Dryden never exhibited the weakness of blindly following established critics like Aristotle. So, this text is a relevant document, as it inspires the readers to think about how alternative aesthetic values may have different viewpoints.

**1.2 Objectives/ Learning Outcomes:**

The objectives of writing this unit on Dryden’s An Essay of Dramatic Poesy are manifold.

1. To know Dryden’s contribution to defend the state of the 17th-century English theatre, the use of rhyme (“poesy”) in dramatic plays, and the work of English writers in general.
2. To delve deep into Dryden's essay which argued for the merits of English drama and its unique qualities.
3. To analyse the observations of Dryden on the works of Shakespeare, Jonson, Fletcher, and other English playwrights, highlighting their creativity, wit, and ability to capture the essence of human nature.
4. Acquainting the learners with the critical ethos of Dryden’s age.

**1.3 Introduction - John Dryden: Life and Works; Context of the Drama:**

John Dryden was born on August 9, 1631, at Aldwinkle in Northamptonshire. He was educated at Westminster School under the headmaster Richard Busby. He later went to Trinity College, Cambridge. He became friendly with Sir Robert Howard after the Restoration, and married Howard’s sister in 1663. The marriage was not a happy one. By 1660, he had gained command over his poetical powers. His literary career can be roughly divided into three periods—(i) the dramatic period lasting till 1680; (ii) the period of his greatest works going up to 1699; (iii) the period of translations and miscellaneous production. Dryden was made Poet Laureate in 1670. With the accession of James II to the English throne, Dryden became a Catholic. The sudden conversion is a clear indication of Dryden’s opportunism. After the Glorious Revolution, however, his popularity declined. His honours were taken away and Shadwell was made Poet Laureate. Dryden died in 1700, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. Dryden was the literary dictator of his time.

Dryden established English norms for proper criticism. Rules and regulations should be taken as general guides and not as strict disciplinarians. In his plays his aim was to delight the audience who flocked to the theatre for a full night’s entertainment. He fully appreciated and made full use of the variety in his patrons at the theatre to introduce an immense variety in his plays. Discarding arbitrary rules and regulations, he could make his plays more loyal to life and nature. If the majority of the people show tendencies to deviate from prudish adherence to virtue, chastity, morality, etc. within the four walls of matrimonial establishment and if he depicts that tendency on the stage, it is not his fault. His political and religious opportunism, the fact that he stooped to the grossest flattery of the persons at the top, and other weaknesses he was guilty of should not make us blind to his achievements as a pioneer in a literary criticism of great versatility and as a champion of liberal classicism.

The period between June 1665 and December 1666 was spent by Dryden out of London because of the Great Plague. He was then at Charlton Park, the manor house of the Earl of Berkshire, his father-in-law. As Dryden himself says in the note to the Reader: “The drift of the ensuing discourse was chiefly to vindicate the honour of our English writers, from the censure of those who unjustly prefer the French before them”.

The most elaborate and one of the most attractive and lively of Dryden’s critical works is *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*. It was first published in 1668 but written three years earlier. In this work he reveals, once again, his unsettled views regarding the drama. The method he adopts for voicing his perplexities is that of the dialogue, a device obviously suggested by earlier conventional discussions in several Continental writers. It was a form which permitted a full discussion of conflicting views, without requiring any definite conclusion. The reader may draw his own conclusion. Thus, Dryden’s purpose is to debate, not to dogmatize. The discussion takes place against a pleasant setting. Four characters, namely, Crites (Sir Robert Howard), Lisideius (Sir Charles Sedley), Eugenius (Lord Buckhurst), and Neander (Dryden himself) contribute their views on drama. The main theme is to vindicate English plays. The case for the ancients is presented by Crites, the modern playwrights are supported by Eugenius and the respective merits of French and English plays are argued by Lisideius and Neander. *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* is a landmark in the history of English criticism for its liveliness, shrewd reasoning and urbanity, and for the acute and masterly appreciations of Shakespeare and Jonson it contains.

**1.4 Subject Matter/ Themes and Issues:**

The very title of *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* embraces three different forms of literary endeavour viz. prose, poetry and drama in all of which Dryden has distinguished himself. It will be necessary for us to take stock of his achievements in every one of these literary forms.

Criticism flourished in England during the restoration of Stuarts. *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* deals with the views of major critics and the tastes of men and women of the time of Dryden. The work is in the form of semi-drama thus making abstract theories interesting. In the late 17th century, Shakespeare was severely criticised for his careless attitude towards the mixing of genres. It was Dryden who elevated Shakespeare to height for his natural genius. The narrative of *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* has four debaters among whom, Neander is the one who holds the views of Dryden. Unlike other characters, Neander does not diminish the arguments that are on contrary to his views. Though he himself favours modern drama, he does not blame others.

Dryden’s *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* is concerned with some of the major controversies of the day. The main themes or critical issues discussed by Dryden in the text are:

1. The comparative worth of the ancients and the moderns.
2. The relative merits of the contemporary French and English Schools of Drama.
3. Whether the Elizabethan dramatists were in all respects superior to the dramatists of Dryden’s age.
4. The extent to which the worth of a play depends upon its conformity to the dramatic rules laid down by the ancients.
5. The comparative merits and demerits of blank verse and rhyme in serious plays.

These issues are discussed in the form of a debate among four speakers. They may stand for real individuals of the poet's time. Speakers are more important for the ideas they represent.

**1.5 Summary and Analysis:**

Dryden gives his dialogue a picturesque setting reminiscent of the Platonic tradition. The scene is placed on the Thames, with swallows darting around. Dutch guns could be heard engaged in the battle of 1665. As the thunder of battle fades, the dialogue is carried on by the four characters. The light gossip about lost glories, ‘the levellers of poetry’, and bad verses composed to celebrate national events can be seen moving on to more serious things. The interlocutors decide to confine their discussion to the drama. Lisideius defines drama as “the lively and just image of human nature representing its passions and humour and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind”—a description which the others are ready to accept.

The beginning of the narrative in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* or “Of Dramatick Poesie” is quite dramatic. A battle was on between England and the Netherlands. Four gentlemen namely Crites, Eugenius, Lisideius and Neander were sailing by boat to witness the battle and started a discussion on modern drama.

Crites opens the discussion by saying that none of his contemporaries (i.e. moderns) can equal the standards and the rules set by ancient Greeks and Romans. Eugenius restrains him from wasting time on finding demerits. He asks him to find relative merit in Greeks and Moderns.

*Characters:* 1. Crites, 2. Eugenius, 3. Lisideius, 4. Neander

*Views of Crites:*

Crites favours classical drama i.e., the drama of Aristotle who believed that drama is“imitation of life”. Crites holds that drama of such ancients is successful because it depicts life. He says that both classical and neoclassical playwrights favour rules and unities (time, place and action). According to Crites, modern dramatists are shadows of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Seneca and Terence. For example, Elizabethan dramatist Ben Jonson borrowed from classics and felt proud to call himself modern Horace.  The classical playwrights were more skilful in language than their successors. With this, he concludes his conversation.

*Views of Eugenius:*

Eugenius favours modern dramatists. However, instead of talking about the virtues of moderns, he criticizes the faults of classical playwrights. According to him, the classical drama is not divided into acts and also lacks originality. The dramatists disregard poetic justice. Instead of punishing vice and rewarding virtue, they have often shown prosperous wickedness and an unhappy devotion.  The classical drama also lacks affection. The heroes of Homer were lovers of appetite, food etc, while the modern characters of French drama gave up everything (sleep, water and food) for the sake of love.

*Views of Lisideius:*

Lisideius favours French drama of earlier 17th century. French drama led by Pierre Corneille strictly follows unities of time, place and action.  The French dramatists never blend tragedy and comedy. They strictly adhere to poetic justice i.e., rewarding virtue and punishing vice. For this, they were even ready to alter the original situation. The French dramatists amalgamated truth with fiction to make it interesting and borrowed stories from history to reward the virtuous which they were earlier deprived of.  They preferred emotions over plots. Violent actions took place off stage and were told by messengers, instead of showing them on real stage.

*Views of Neander:*

Neander contradicts Lisideius’ arguments favouring the superiority of French drama. He talks about the greatness of Elizabethans. For him, Elizabethans fulfil the drama’s requirement i.e. imitation of life. French drama raises perfection but has no soul or emotions as it primarily focuses on the plot.  For Neander, tragicomedy is the best form of drama. Both joy and sorrow are set side by side as in real life. Hence it is closest to life. He believes that subplots enrich the drama. French drama having a single plot lacks vividness.  Further, Samuel Johnson (who defended Shakespeare’s disregard of unities) believes that adherence to unities prevents depth. According to him, deviation from set rules and unities offers diverse themes to drama.  Neander rejects the argument that change of place and time diminishes dramatic credibility. For him, human actions will seem more natural if they get enough time to develop. He also argues that Shakespeare is the man who of all the modern and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. The dramas of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher are rich in wit and have smoothness and polish in their language. Neander says, “I am apt to believe the English language in them arrived at its highest perfection”. If Ben Jonson is a genius for correctness, Shakespeare excels him in wit.  His arguments end with a very familiar comparison, “Shakespeare was the Homer, or father of our dramatic poets; Jonson was the Virgil, the pattern of elaborate writing; I admire him, but I love Shakespeare.”  Thus for him, Elizabethans are superior because they have a variety of themes, emotions, innovations and wit. They do not adhere to rules as well. Thus, their drama is really an imitation of life.

*Views on Rhyme in Drama:*

At the end of the discussion, there is an argument between Crites and Neander over rhyme in plays. Crites believes that blank verse, as the poetic form nearest to prose, is most suitable for drama.  On the other hand, Neander defends rhyme as it briefly and clearly explains everything.  The boat on which they all were riding reaches its destination, the stairs at Somerset House and the discussion ends without any conclusion being made.

**1.6. Glossary:**

***Amphitryon*** is an English language [comedy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comedy) by John Dryden which is based on [Molière](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moli%C3%A8re)'s [1668 play of the same name](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amphitryon_(Moli%C3%A8re)). It was in turn based on the story of the Greek mythological character Amphitryon as told by [Plautus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plautus) in [his play from ca. 190-185 B.C](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amphitryon_(Plautus_play)).

**Blank verse** is [poetry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poetry) written with regular [metrical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metre_(poetry)) but [unrhymed](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhyme) lines, almost always in [iambic pentameter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iambic_pentameter). It has been described as "probably the most common and influential form that [English poetry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_poetry) has taken since the 16th century",and Paul Fussell has estimated that "about three quarters of all [English poetry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_poetry) is in blank verse"

**Boccaccio**, (born 1313, Tuscany—died Dec. 21, 1375, Certaldo, Tuscany), [Italian](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) poet and scholar, best remembered as the [author](https://www.britannica.com/art/author) of the earthy tales in the [Decameron](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Decameron). With [Petrarch](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Petrarch), he laid the foundations for the [humanism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/humanism) of the [Renaissance](https://www.britannica.com/event/Renaissance) and raised [vernacular](https://www.britannica.com/topic/vernacular) [literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/literature) to the level and status of the [classics of antiquity](https://www.britannica.com/event/Classical-antiquity).

***Deus ex machina*** Latin plural: *dei ex machina*; English "god from the machine" is a [plot device](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plot_device) whereby a seemingly unsolvable problem in a story is suddenly or abruptly resolved by an unexpected and unlikely occurrence. Its function is to resolve an otherwise irresolvable plot situation, to surprise the audience, to bring the tale to a [happy ending](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happy_ending) or act as a comedic device.

***Don Sebastian, King Of Portugal*** is a 1689 [tragedy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragedy) by the English writer [John Dryden](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dryden). It is based on the reign of [Sebastian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sebastian_of_Portugal) of [Portugal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Portugal) leading up to his defeat and death at the *Battle of Alcacer Quibir* in 1578. An [Elizabethan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabethan) play, *The Battle of Alcazar,* also portrays the events.

**Eunuch**: A eunuch is a [male](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Male) who has been [castrated](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Castration). Throughout history, castration often served a specific social function. The earliest records for intentional castration to produce eunuchs are from the [Sumerian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumer) city of [Lagash](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lagash) in the 2nd millennium BCE. Eunuchs would usually be servants or [slaves](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery) who had been castrated to make them less threatening servants of a [royal court](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_court) where physical access to the ruler could wield great influence.

**Fables, Ancient and Modern**: John Dryden’s Fables Ancient and Modern (1700), consisted mainly verse adaptations from the works of Ovid, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Giovanni Boccaccio, introduced with a critical preface.

***King Arthur, or The British Worthy*** (Z. 628), is a [semi-opera](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semi-opera) in five acts with music by [Henry Purcell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Purcell) and a [libretto](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libretto) by [John Dryden](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dryden). It was first performed at the [Queen's Theatre, Dorset Garden](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorset_Garden_Theatre), London, in late May or early June 1691.

A **libretto** (lit. 'booklet') is the text used in, or intended for, an extended musical work such as an [opera](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opera), [operetta](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operetta), [masque](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masque), [oratorio](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oratorio), [cantata](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cantata) or theatre of music. The term ‘libretto’ is also sometimes used to refer to the text of major liturgical works, such as the [Mass](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass_(liturgy)), [requiem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Requiem) and sacred cantata, or the story line of a ballet.

***Mac Flecknoe*** (full title: *Mac Flecknoe; or, A satyr upon the True-Blue-Protestant Poet, T.S.*) is a verse [mock-heroic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mock-heroic) [satire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satire) written by [John Dryden](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dryden). It is a direct attack on [Thomas Shadwell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Shadwell), another prominent poet of the time.

**Suspension of disbelief** is the avoidance—often described as willing—of [critical thinking](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_thinking) and [logic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Logic) in understanding something that is unreal or impossible in reality, such as something in a work of [speculative fiction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speculative_fiction), in order to believe it for the sake of enjoying its narrative. Historically, the concept originates in the [Greco-Roman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greco-Roman_world) principles of theatre, wherein the audience ignores the unreality of fiction to experience [catharsis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catharsis) from the actions and experiences of characters.

***The Scornful Lady*** is a [Jacobean](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literature_in_English#Jacobean_literature) era stage play, a [comedy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comedy) written by [Francis Beaumont](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Beaumont) and [John Fletcher](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Fletcher_(playwright)), and first published in [1616](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1616_in_literature), the year of Beaumont's death. It was one of the pair's most popular, often revived, and frequently reprinted works.

***The Silent Woman***, also known as *Epicene*, is a [comedy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comedy) by [Renaissance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_Renaissance_theatre) playwright [Ben Jonson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Jonson). The play is about a man named Dauphine, who creates a scheme to get his inheritance from his uncle Morose. The plan involves setting Morose up to marry Epicoene, a boy disguised as a woman. It was originally performed by the [Blackfriars Children](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children_of_the_Chapel), or Children of the Queen's Revels, a group of [boy players](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boy_player), in [1609](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1609_in_literature). Excluding its two [prologues](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prologue), the play is written entirely in prose.

***The State of Innocence*** is a dramatic work by John Dryden, originally intended as the libretto to an [opera](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opera). It was written around 1673–4, and first published in 1677. The work is a rhymed adaption of John Milton 's epic poem *Paradise Lost* and retells the Biblical story of the [fall of man](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_man).

**1.7.** **Self-Assessment Questions**

1. Bring out the significance of Dryden as a literary critic in the Restoration era.

2. What is the major theme of the first debate that Dryden includes in his essay? Give a brief description of the arguments and counter-arguments put forward by the debaters.

3. Who spoke in favour of 17th century French drama in Dryden’s essay? Why does he hold French drama superior to contemporary English drama?

4. Who defends the greatness of early 17th century English drama? How does he defend the use of tragi-comedy and sub-plot in Elizabethan drama?

5. Critically analyse the debate over the use of rhyme and blank verse in drama.

6. Comment on the following:

a) Role of Neander

b) Context of Dryden’s essay

c) Lisideius’s definition of drama

d) Neander’s comparison of Ben Jonson and Shakespeare

e) The ending of the essay

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