JOHN DRYDEN

John DRYDEN (1631-1700) was short and plump, "of a fresh color, and a down look—and not very conversible," according to Alexander Pope. Like his spokesman Neander in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, Dryden represented the new man from a new class for a new age: the professional writer who associates primarily with other literary figures and is not regarded by polite society as "very genteel," although he aspires to that condition.

Lacking a title or fortune, Dryden had to earn his living by his pen. By nature a supporter of *de facto* authority, he readily adapted to the shifting taste and temper of his age and was always in accord with his times, accommodating in politics and in poetic fashions.

In Restoration England playwriting was the most lucrative art and the surest road to fame. So Dryden chose to make his way in the world through the theatre. Because his plays pleased the king and the court, he was appointed Poet Laureate in 1668 (the year he published *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*). Enjoying royal favor, but finding himself irregularly paid and infrequently employed, the new laureate sought profitable financial arrangements with London theatres. For ten years three of Dryden's plays were premiered each season at the Theatre Royal by the King's Company with which he had an exclusive contract. In return, the author became a shareholder, receiving one and a quarter shares (as did the three principal actors).

But his life as a playwright embroiled Dryden in controversy and vituperative quarrels. He was frequently attacked in pamphlets and on the stage in a malicious satire, *The Rehearsal.* A nasty dispute with his brother-in-law Sir Robert Howard on theatrical matters finally led to physical violence; late one night in a dark alley, the playwright was waylaid and beaten by three masked thugs.

Longing to be free of the drudgery of playwriting, Dryden had an ambivalent, often hostile attitude towards the theatre. Stage performance, he felt, impeded an audience's ability to understand ideas and appreciate language. "'Tis my ambition to be read," the playwright admitted, "that I am sure is the most lasting and the nobler design." Sharing his literary colleagues' bias

against spectacle as an appeal to the senses, not the imagination, he rejected Italian *commedia* and condemned plays that featured animals, thunder and lightning, and "machines." Towards the end of his career Dryden was happy to renounce the theatre forever and concentrate on work that he preferred: the writing of poetry and essays.

But in the summer of 1665 when Dryden and his wife fled plague-stricken London for the countryside taking along only a few books, the theatres had been re-opened for only a few years and there were exciting new critical ideas from France to be debated. There in a quiet rustic setting Dryden went fishing and wrote theory (*An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*), paraphrasing and quoting directly from Corneille's *Prefaces* that lay open on the desk. Never having been to France, Dryden knew the French dramatist's plays not from theatre, but from the study.

In *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, Dryden created a new kind of theoretical work addressed to a cultivated audience of non-specialists and written in an urbane conversational prose that avoided the technical jargon and arrogant long-windedness of bickering pedants. The dialogue form allowed the author not to commit himself to any single point of view, but to debate the key issues of ancient versus modern, French versus English, and blank verse versus rhyme.

By taking into account the historical and social context in which works of art arose, Dryden discovered the idea of national and cultural relativism and introduced the comparative method into English literary criticism.

"The genius of each age is different," he argued; "Shakespeare and Fletcher have written to the genius of the age and nation in which they lived; for though nature is the same in all places, and reason too the same, yet the climate, the age, the disposition of the people, to which a poet writes, may be so different, that what pleased the Greeks would not satisfy an English audience." One must write for one's own audience was Dryden's pragmatic conclusion.

AN ESSAY OF DRAMATIC POESY (1668)

[...] Lisideius concluded in this manner; and Neander, after a little pause, thus answered him:

"I shall grant Lisideius, without much dispute, a great part of what he has urged against us; for I acknowledge that the French contrive their plots more regularly and observe the laws of comedy and decorum of the stage (to speak generally) with more exactness than the English. Farther, I deny not but he has taxed us justly in some irregularities of ours which he has mentioned; yet, after all, I am of opinion that neither our faults nor their virtues are considerable enough to place them above us.

"For the lively imitation of nature being in the definition of a play, those which best fulfill that law ought to be esteemed superior to the others. 'Tis true, those beauties of the French poesy are such as will raise perfection higher where it is, but are not sufficient to give it where it is not; they are indeed the beauties of a statue but not of a man, because not animated with the soul of poesy, which is imitation of humor and passions; and this Lisideius himself or any other, however biased to their party, cannot but acknowledge, if he will either compare the humors of our comedies or the characters of our serious plays with theirs. He who will look upon theirs which have been written till these last ten years, or thereabouts, will find it a hard matter to pick out two or three passable humors amongst them. Corneille himself their arch-poet, what has he produced except *The Liar?* and you know how it was cried up in France; but when it came upon the English stage, though well translated and that part of Dorant acted to so much advantage as I am confident it never received in its own country, the most favorable to it would not put it in competition with many of Fletcher's or Ben Jonson's. In the rest of Corneille's comedies you have little humor; he tells you himself his way is first to show two lovers in good intelligence with each other; in the working up of the play to embroil them by some mistake and in the latter end to clear it and reconcile them.

"But of late years Molière, the younger Corneille, Quinault, and some others have been imitating afar off the quick turns and graces of the English

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stage. They have mixed their serious plays with mirth, like our tragicomedies, since the death of Cardinal Richelieu; which Lisideius and many others not observing have commended that in them for a virtue which they themselves no longer practice. Most of their new plays are, like some of ours, derived from the Spanish novels. There is scarce one of them without a veil, and a trusty Diego who drolls much after the rate of *The Adventures*. But their humors, if I may grace them with that name, are so thin-sown that never above one of them comes up in any play. I dare take upon me to find more variety of them in some one play of Ben Jonson's than in all theirs together; as he who has seen *The Alchemist*, *The Silent Woman*, or *Bartholomew Fair* cannot but acknowledge with me.

"I grant the French have performed what was possible on the groundwork of the Spanish plays; what was pleasant before, they have made regular; but there is not above one good play to be writ on all those plots; they are too much alike to please often; which we need not the experience of our own stage to justify. As for their new way of mingling mirth with serious plot, I do not, with Lisideius, condemn the thing, though I cannot approve their manner of doing it. He tells us we cannot so speedily recollect ourselves after a scene of great passion and concernment as to pass to another of mirth and humor and to enjoy it with any relish; but why should he imagine the soul of man more heavy than his senses? Does not the eye pass from an unpleasant object to a pleasant in a much shorter time than is required to this? and does not the unpleasantness of the first commend the beauty of the latter? The old rule of logic might have convinced him that contraries, when placed near, set off each other. A continued gravity keeps the spirit too much bent; we must refresh it sometimes, as we bait in a journey that we may go on with greater ease. A scene of mirth, mixed with tragedy, has the same effect upon us which our music has between the acts; which we find a relief to us from the best plots and language of the stage, if the discourses have been long. I must therefore have stronger arguments ere I am convinced that compassion and mirth in the same subject destroy each other; and in the meantime cannot but conclude, to the honor of our nation, that we 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.

"And this leads me to wonder why Lisideius and many others should cry up the barrenness of the French plots above the variety and copiousness of the English. Their plots are single; they carry on one design which is pushed forward by all the actors, every scene in the play contributing and moving towards it. Our plays, besides the main design, have under-plots or by-concernments of less considerable persons and intrigues, which are carried on with the motion of the main plot: as they say the orb of the fixed stars and those of the planets, though they have motions of their own, are whirled about by the motion of the *primum mobile*, in which they are contained. That simil-

itude expresses much of the English stage; for if contrary motions may be found in nature to agree, if a planet can go east and west at the same time—one way by virtue of his own motion, the other by the force of the first mover—it will not be difficult to imagine how the under-plot, which is only different, not contrary to the great design, may naturally be conducted along with it.

"Eugenius has already shown us, from the confession of the French poets, that the unity of action is sufficiently preserved if all the imperfect actions of the play are conducing to the main design; but when those petty intrigues of a play are so ill ordered that they have no coherence with the other, I must grant that Lisideius has reason to tax that want of due connection; for co-ordination in a play is as dangerous and unnatural as in a state. In the meantime he must acknowledge our variety, if well ordered, will afford a greater pleasure to the audience.

"As for his other argument, that by pursuing one single theme they gain an advantage to express and work up the passions, I wish any example he could bring from them would make it good; for I confess their verses are to me the coldest I have ever read. Neither, indeed, is it possible for them, in the way they take, so to express passion as that the effects of it should appear in the concernment of an audience, their speeches being so many declamations which tire us with the length; so that instead of persuading us to grieve for their imaginary heroes, we are concerned for our own trouble, as we are in tedious visits of bad company; we are in pain till they are gone. [. . .] But to speak generally, it cannot be denied that short speeches and replies are more apt to move the passions and beget concernment in us than the other; for it is unnatural for any one in a gust of passion to speak long together, or for another in the same condition to suffer him without interruption. Grief and passion are like floods raised in little brooks by a sudden rain; they are quickly up; and if the concernment be poured unexpectedly in upon us, it overflows us; but a long sober shower gives them leisure to run out as they came in, without troubling the ordinary current. As for comedy, repartee is one of its chiefest graces; the greatest pleasure of the audience is a chase of wit, kept up on both sides and swiftly managed. And this our forefathers, if not we, have had in Fletcher's plays to a much higher degree of perfection than the French poets can reasonably hope to reach.

"There is another part of Lisideius's discourse in which he has rather excused our neighbors than commended them; that is, for aiming only to make one person considerable in their plays. 'Tis very true what he has urged, that one character in all plays, even without the poet's care, will have advantage of all the others, and that the design of the whole drama will chiefly depend on it. But this hinders not that there may be more shining characters in the play, many persons of a second magnitude, nay, some so very near, so almost equal to the first that greatness may be opposed to greatness and all the persons be made considerable, not only by their quality but their action. 'Tis evident that the more the persons are, the greater will be the variety of the plot. If then the parts are managed so regularly that the beauty of the whole be kept entire and that the variety become not a perplexed and confused mass of accidents, you will find it infinitely pleasing to be led in a labyrinth of design where you see some of your way before you, yet discern not the end till you arrive at it. And that all this is practicable I can produce for examples many of our English plays, *The Maid's Tragedy*, *The Alchemist*, *The Silent Woman;* I was going to have named *The Fox*, but that the unity of design seems not exactly observed in it, for there appear two actions in the play, the first naturally ending with the fourth act, the second forced from it in the fifth; which yet is the less to be condemned in him because the disguise of Volpone, though it suited not with his character as a crafty or covetous person, agreed well enough with that of a voluptuary; and by it the poet gained the end at which he aimed, the punishment of vice and the reward of virtue, both which that disguise produced. So that to judge equally of it, it was an excellent fifth act but not so naturally proceeding from the former

"But to leave this and pass to the latter part of Lisideius's discourse, which concerns relations: I must acknowledge with him that the French have reason to hide that part of the action which would occasion too much tumult on the stage, and to choose rather to have it made known by narration to the audience. Farther, I think it very convenient, for the reasons he has given, that all incredible actions were removed; but whether custom has so insinuated itself into our countrymen or nature has so formed them to fierceness, I know not; but they will scarcely suffer combats and other objects of horror to be taken from them. And indeed, the indecency of tumults is all which can be objected against fighting; for why may not our imagination as well suffer itself to be deluded with the probability of it as with any other thing in the play? For my part, I can with as great ease persuade myself that the blows are given in good earnest, as I can that they who strike them are kings or princes or those persons which they represent. For objects of incredibility, I would be satisfied from Lisideius whether we have any so removed from all appearance of truth as are those of Corneille's *Andromède*, a play which has been frequented the most of any he has writ. If the Perseus, or the son of an heathen god, the Pegasus, and the Monster were not capable to choke a strong belief, let him blame any representation of ours hereafter. Those indeed were objects of delight; yet the reason is the same as to the probability, for he makes it not a ballet or masque but a play, which is to resemble truth. But for death, that it ought not to be represented, I have, besides the arguments alleged by Lisideius, the authority of Ben Jonson, who has forborne it in his tragedies, for both the death of Sejanus and Catiline are related; though in the latter I cannot but observe one irregularity of that great poet: he has removed the scene in the same act from Rome to Catiline's army, and from thence again to

Rome; and besides, has allowed a very inconsiderable time after Catiline's speech for the striking of the battle and the return of Petreius, who is to relate the event of it to the senate; which I should not animadvert on him, who was otherwise a painful observer of [...] the *decorum* of the stage, if he had not used extreme severity in his judgment on the incomparable Shakespeare for the same fault. To conclude on this subject of relations; if we are to be blamed for showing too much of the action, the French are as faulty for discovering too little of it; a mean betwixt both should be observed by every judicious writer, so as the audience may neither be left unsatisfied by not seeing what is beautiful, or shocked by beholding what is either incredible or undecent.

"I hope I have already proved in this discourse that though we are not altogether so punctual as the French in observing the laws of comedy, yet our errors are so few and little and those things wherein we excel them so considerable that we ought of right to be preferred before them. But what will Lisideius say if they themselves acknowledge they are too strictly bounded by those laws for which he has blamed the English? I will allege Corneille's words as I find them in the end of his Discourse of the Three Unities: *Il est facile aux spéculatifs d'être sévères etc.*" 'Tis easy for speculative persons to judge severely; but if they would produce to public view ten or twelve pieces of this nature, they would perhaps give more latitude to the rules than I have done, when by experience they had known how much we are limited and constrained by them and how many beauties of the stage they banished from it." To illustrate a little what he has said: by their servile observations of the unities of time and place and integrity of scenes, they have brought on themselves that dearth 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 cannot arrive with any probability in the compass of twenty-four hours? There is time to be allowed also for maturity of design, which amongst great and prudent persons such as are often represented in tragedy cannot, with any likelihood of truth, be brought to pass at so short a warning. Farther, by tying themselves strictly to the unity of place and unbroken scenes, they are forced many times to omit some beauties which cannot be shown where the act began; but might, if the scene were interrupted and the stage cleared for the persons to enter in another place; and therefore the French poets are often forced upon absurdities; for if the act begins in a chamber, all the persons in the play must have some business or other to come thither or else they are not to be shown that act; and sometimes their characters are very unfitting to appear there. As suppose it were the king's bed-chamber; yet the meanest man in the tragedy must come and dispatch his business there rather than in the lobby or courtyard (which is fitter for him), for fear the stage should be cleared and the scenes broken. Many times they fall by it in a greater inconvenience; for they keep their scenes unbroken and yet change the place, as in one of their newest plays where the act begins in the street. There a gentleman is to

meet his friend; he sees him with his man, coming out from his father's house; they talk together, and the first goes out; the second, who is a lover, has made an appointment with his mistress; she appears at the window, and then we are to imagine the scene lies under it. This gentleman is called away and leaves his servant with his mistress; presently her father is heard from within; the young lady is afraid the serving-man should be discovered and thrusts him into a place of safety, which is supposed to be her closet. After this the father enters to the daughter, and now the scene is in a house, for he is seeking from one room to another for this poor Philipin, or French Diego, who is heard from within, drolling and breaking many a miserable conceit on the subject of his sad condition. In this ridiculous manner the play goes forward, the stage being never empty all the while; so that the street, the window, the houses, and the closet are made to walk about and the persons to stand still. Now what, I beseech you, is more easy than to write a regular French play, or more difficult than to write an irregular English one, like those of Fletcher, or of Shakespeare?

"If they content themselves, as Corneille did, with some flat design which, like an ill riddle, is found out ere it be half proposed, such plots we can make every way regular, as easily as they; but whenever they endeavor to rise to any quick turns and counterturns of plot, as some of them have attempted since Corneille's plays have been less in vogue, you see they write as irregularly as we, though they cover it more speciously. Hence the reason is perspicuous why no French plays, when translated, have or ever can succeed on the English stage. For if you consider the plots, our own are fuller of variety; if the writing, ours are more quick and fuller of spirit; and therefore 'tis a strange mistake in those who decry the way of writing plays in verse, as if the English therein imitated the French. We have borrowed nothing from them; our plots are weaved in English looms; we endeavor therein to follow the variety and greatness of characters which are derived to us from Shakespeare and Fletcher; the copiousness and well-knitting of the intrigues we have from Jonson; and for the verse itself we have English precedents of elder date than any of Corneille's plays. Not to name our old comedies before Shakespeare, which were all writ in verse of six feet or Alexandrines, such as the French now use, I can show in Shakespeare many scenes of rhyme together, and the like in Ben Jonson's tragedies; in *Catiline* and *Sejanus* sometimes thirty or forty lines—I mean besides the chorus or the monologues; which, by the way, showed Ben no enemy to this way of writing, especially if you read his *Sad Shepherd*, which goes sometimes on rhyme, sometimes on blank verse, like an horse who eases himself on trot and amble. You find him likewise commending Fletcher's pastoral of *The Faithful Shepherdess*, which is for the most part rhyme, though not refined to that purity to which it hath since been brought. And these examples are enough to clear us from a servile imitation of the French.

"But to return whence I have digressed, I dare boldly affirm these two things of the English drama: First, that we have many plays of ours as regular as any of theirs, and which besides have more variety of plot and characters; and secondly, that in most of the irregular plays of Shakespeare or Fletcher (for Ben Jonson's are for the most part regular) there is a more masculine fancy and greater spirit in the writing than there is in any of the French. I could produce, even in Shakespeare's and Fletcher's works some plays which are almost exactly formed, as *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *The Scornful Lady;* but because (generally speaking) Shakespeare, who writ first, did not perfectly observe the laws of comedy and Fletcher, who came nearer to perfection, yet through carelessness made many faults, I will take the pattern of a perfect play from Ben Jonson, who was a careful and learned observer of the dramatic laws, and from all his comedies I shall select *The Silent Woman*, of which I will make a short examen, according to those rules which the French observe."

As Neander was beginning to examine *The Silent Woman*, Eugenius, earnestly regarding him: "I beseech you, Neander," said he, "gratify the company and me in particular so far as, before you speak of the play, to give us a character of the author; and tell us frankly your opinion, whether you do not think all writers, both French and English, ought to give place to him." "I fear," replied Neander," that in obeying your commands I shall draw some envy on myself. Besides, in performing them, it will be first necessary to speak somewhat of Shakespeare and Fletcher, his rivals in poesy; and one of them in my opinion at least his equal, perhaps his superior.

"To begin, then, with Shakespeare. He was the man who of all modern and perhaps ancient poets had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the images of nature were still present to him, and he drew them not laboriously but luckily; when he describes anything, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning give him the greater commendation; he was naturally learned; he needed not the spectacles of books to read nature; he looked inwards and found her there. I cannot say he is everywhere alike; were he so, I should do him injury to compare him with the greatest of mankind. He is many times flat, insipid; his comic wit degenerating into clenches, his serious swelling into bombast. But he is always great when some great occasion is presented to him; no man can say he ever had a fit subject for his wit and did not then raise himself as high above the rest of poets,

Quantum lenta solent inter viburna cupressi.

The consideration of this made Mr. Hales of Eton say that there was no subject of which any poet ever writ but he would produce it much better done in Shakespeare; and however others are now generally preferred before him, yet the age wherein he lived, which had contemporaries with him Fletcher and Jonson, never equaled them to him in their esteem; and in the last king's court, when Ben's reputation was at highest, Sir John Suckling and with him the greater part of the courtiers set our Shakespeare far above him.

"Beaumont and Fletcher, of whom I am next to speak, had, with the advantage of Shakespeare's wit, which was their precedent, great natural gifts improved by study, Beaumont especially being so accurate a judge of plays that Ben Jonson, while he lived, submitted all his writings to his censure, and 'tis thought used his judgment in correcting, if not contriving, all his plots. What value he had for him appears by the verses he writ to him; and therefore I need speak no farther of it. The first play that brought Fletcher and him in esteem was their *Philaster*, for before that they had written two or three very unsuccessfully, as the like is reported of Ben Jonson before he writ *Every Man in His Humor*. Their plots were generally more regular than Shakespeare's, especially those which were made before Beaumont's death, and they understood and imitated the conversation of gentlemen much better, whose wild debaucheries and quickness of wit in repartees no poet before them could paint as they have done. Humor, which Ben Jonson derived from particular persons, they made it not their business to describe; they represented all the passions very lively, but above all love. I am apt to believe the English language in them arrived to its highest perfection; what words have since been taken in are rather superfluous than ornamental. Their plays are now the most pleasant and frequent entertainments of the stage, two of theirs being acted through the year for one of Shakespeare's or Jonson's; the reason is because there is a certain gaiety in their comedies and pathos in their more serious plays which suits generally with all men's humors. Shakespeare's language is likewise a little obsolete, and Ben Jonson's wit comes short of theirs.

"As for Jonson, to whose character I am now arrived, if we look upon him while he was himself (for his last plays were but his dotages), I think him the most learned and judicious writer which any theater ever had. He was a most severe judge of himself as well as others. One cannot say he wanted wit, but rather that he was frugal of it. In his works you find little to retrench or alter. Wit and language and humor also in some measure we had before him; but something of art was wanting to the drama till he came. He managed his strength to more advantage than any who preceded him. You seldom find him making love in any of his scenes, or endeavoring to move the passions; his genius was too sullen and saturnine to do it gracefully, especially when he knew he came after those who had performed both to such a height. Humor was his proper sphere; and in that he was delighted most to represent mechanic people. He was deeply conversant in the ancients, both Greek and Latin, and he borrowed boldly from them; there is scarce a poet or historian among the Roman authors of those times whom he has not translated in *Sejanus* and *Catiline*. But he has done his robberies so openly that one may see he fears not to be taxed by any law. He invades authors like a monarch; and what would be theft in other poets is only victory in him. With the spoils of these writers he so represents old Rome to us, in its rites, ceremonies, and customs, that if one

of their poets had written either of his tragedies, we had seen less of it than in him. If there was any fault in his language, 'twas that he weaved it too closely and laboriously, in his comedies especially; perhaps too, he did a little too much Romanize our tongue, leaving the words which he translated almost as much Latin as he found them; wherein, though he learnedly followed their language, he did not enough comply with the idiom of ours. If I would compare him with Shakespeare, I must acknowledge him the more correct poet but Shakespeare the greater wit. 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. To conclude of him; as he has given us the most correct plays, so in the precepts which he has laid down in his *Discoveries* we have as many and profitable rules for perfecting the stage as any wherewith the French can furnish us." [...]

LI YU

LI YU (1611-1680) went by many names, calling himself "The leaf-hatted old man on the lake," "The old man with the bamboo rain-hat," and "The fisherman of the lake." Li had a dozen or more personae—as poet, novelist, essayist, pornographer, inventor, garden designer, conversationalist, comedian, publisher, bookseller, and as playwright, manager, producer, and director for his own company of actresses, with whom he toured throughout China.

By the mid-seventeenth century China had entered into an era of aggressive profit-making and pleasure-seeking that fostered a new eating culture, the wearing of extravagant clothes, and the growth of an entertainment industry.

The product of this new age of materialism, rationalism, and skepticism, Li Yu represented a modern breed of professional writer. As a highly educated entrepreneur and business man, he knew how to join commerce to art and dared criticize the great literary playwrights of the past and advance a novel theory of theatre to justify his own innovative practices.

From the start Li Yu has been a controversial figure, attacked for his crass hucksterism and dismissed as a roaming stage impresario preying on wealthy patrons, from whom he begged money in wheedling letters predicting his imminent starvation. The Confucian code condemned as acquisitive business ventures like Li's troupe of sing-song girls, and prejudice against the theatrical profession kept such a popular entertainer from being accepted as a serious writer and even led to his works being proscribed in later periods.

Although trained in classical poetry and prose, Li could not pass the requisite examinations for an academic or government career. Caught in the social turmoil and warfare during the Manchu conquest (as the Qing Dynasty replaced the Ming), the writer was forced to abandon his home and flee for his life. His townhouse, library, and writings were burned.

Having neither inherited fortune nor bureaucratic position, he was obliged to earn his own living, but proved incapable of subsisting within his means, displaying a weakness for elegant houses, fancy clothes, and extravagant entertaining. He became a printer and started a publishing house and