

Reconciling Neoclassical Ideals in An Essay of Dramatic Poesy

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John Dryden, a prominent figure in the English literary scene of the late 17th century, is widely regarded as a champion of neoclassical ideals in literature. In his seminal work, *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, Dryden expounds on the principles of neoclassical drama, advocating for a return to the classical models of antiquity. This essay will explore the concept of neoclassical ideals as articulated by Dryden in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, examining the ways in which he seeks to reconcile classical aesthetics with the demands of the contemporary theatrical landscape.

One of the central tenets of neoclassical aesthetics, as articulated by Dryden, is the principle of decorum. Decorum refers to the idea that literary works should adhere to certain standards of propriety and appropriateness, in terms of both subject matter and style. In *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, Dryden argues that the violation of decorum leads to a breakdown of the natural order, resulting in confusion and chaos. He writes, "Nothing can be so arbitrary, or so foolish, which does not seem natural, if it be easie; and the great work of wit is to make easie things seem natural" (Dryden, 1668). By emphasizing the importance of naturalness and simplicity in art, Dryden underscores the neoclassical belief in the harmony between nature and art.

Another key principle of neoclassical aesthetics is the notion of verisimilitude, or the semblance of truth. In *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, Dryden argues that dramatic works

should strive to imitate reality as closely as possible, in order to produce a sense of verisimilitude that engages the audience's emotions and intellect. He writes, "They [the ancients] concluded it impossible to imitate him [nature] truly, so it was necessary to make her more perfect in her representation" (Dryden, 1668). By advocating for a heightened representation of reality in literature, Dryden aligns himself with the neoclassical belief in the power of art to elevate and ennoble human experience.

Dryden's emphasis on the classical unities of time, place, and action further highlights his commitment to neoclassical ideals. In *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, Dryden argues that adherence to the unities leads to a more compact and coherent dramatic structure, conducive to the effective representation of human experience. He writes, "I mean the unity of time, place, and action: that is in one place, and in one day, and that day should be employed from the rising to the setting of the sun; which will more naturally comprise both parts of the action, and the reason of the suddenness of the transformation" (Dryden, 1668). By advocating for the unities, Dryden seeks to impose a sense of order and regularity on the chaotic world of the stage, in keeping with neoclassical ideals of harmony and balance.

John Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* serves as a testament to the enduring influence of neoclassical aesthetics on English literature. Through his articulation of the principles of decorum, verisimilitude, and the classical unities, Dryden seeks to reconcile classical ideals with the demands of the contemporary theatrical landscape, offering a vision of literature that is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally engaging. Ultimately, *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* stands as a testament to the power of neoclassical aesthetics to shape and inform the artistic endeavors of subsequent generations.