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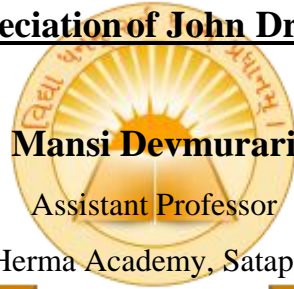
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**Critical Appreciation of John Dryden as a Poet**



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### Introduction:

Dryden is the greatest literary figure of the Restoration period. In his work, we have excellent reflection of both the good and the evil tendencies of the age in which he lived. If we can think for a moment of literature as a canal of water, we may appreciate the figure that Dryden is the "lock by which the waters of English Poetry were let down from the mountains of Shakespeare and Milton to the plain of Pope." Therefore the stands between two very different ages, and serves as a transition from one to the other.

### His early life:

Dryden was the soul of candor, writing with undoubtedly unmatched passion and vigour with an aim for the welfare of his age and nation. Dryden was born in the little village of Aldwincle, Northamptonshire, on 9<sup>th</sup> of August, 1631. John was the son of Erasmus Dryden and Mary Pickering. His family was rich and prosperous, who brought him up in the strict Puritan faith and sent him first in the famous Westminster School and then to Cambridge. He made excellent use of his opportunities and studied eagerly, becoming one of the best educated men of his age, especially in the classics. He became well-known by the "Heroic Stanzas" which he wrote on the death of Cromwell:

*His grandeur he derived from Heaven alone, For he  
was great ere Fortune made him so; And wars, like  
mists that rise against the sun, Made him but greater  
seem, not greater grow.*

The above lines is an extract from the "Heroic Stanzas" which comprises of an epitome of the thought, the preciseness, and polish that make him a well-renowned and genuine poet. The poet fell in love with his charming cousin, Miss Honour Dryden, but the lady did not respond to the youthful passion of the poet. He also wrote "Astra Redux", in happy restoration of Charles II. In 1663 he began to work for the stage, which was then the only profitable field for anyone who had to depend for his livelihood upon pen; and for fifteen years he wrote plays.

In 1670 he was made a poet laureate and in 1681 he wrote his first satire in verse, Absalom and Achitophel. This was followed by two theological poems, ReligioLaici (1682), a defense of the Church



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of England, and The Hind and the Panther (1687), an elaborate argument in favoure of Roman Catholicism, to which in the meantime he had been converted. The revolution of 1688 came upon him as a heavy blow as he lost his position of poet laureate and his hopes of official recognition was destroyed. In his last years he wrote five plays, translation of Juvenal, Persius and Virgil, and a volume of fables. These were published in November 1699; some six months later, in 1700 he died.

### Poetic Works of Dryden:

#### Early Poems:

“Every age has a kind of universal genius”, wrote Dryden in The Essay on Dramatic Poesy. His poems are mostly didactical, oratorical and conversational. In the march towards classicism, he leads and arrives at what there seems to be the promised land; he does not penetrate far into it and does not settle there permanently. Dryden is the last and the greatest transitional poet, who links up the Renaissance with the Classical Age. In his temperament were laid the safest seeds of the literature of reason and order which were slowly evolving: the need for clarity, proportion and rule, architectural instinct, the gift of logic, the demand for a definite rhythm, for symmetrical and distinct cadence.

In the early poems of Dryden, written at the age of eighteen on the death of young Lord Hastings, we have the metaphysical style at its best. The young Lord had died of small-pox and Dryden says:

*Was there no milder way but the small-pox, The very  
filthiness of Pandora's box? So many spots like  
naves on Venus soil, One jewel set off with so many  
a foil.*

Astrea Redux (1660) is written with exultant strains in which the sweetness of Waller blends with his more vigorous and perfect style:

*The star that at your birth shone out so bright, It  
stained the duller's run's meridian light, Did once  
again its potent fires renew, Guilding our eyes to  
find and worship you.*



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To His Sacred Majesty, A Panegyric on the Coronation (1661) followed in the same exalted:

*Marie herself is lost; in vain she brings Her  
choicest notes to praise the best of Kings.*

In 1667 appeared Annus Mirabilis, a narrative poem describing the terrors of the great fire in London and some events of the disgraceful war in Holland. The poem is full of masculine spirit and vigor showing youthfulness of the poet. The poem has a strong dignified tone combined with the impetus force of Dryden as follows:

*The daring flame peeped in and sour after, The  
awful beauties of the sacred quire; But since it  
was profend by Civil War.  
Heaven thought it fit to have it purged by fire.*

### Didactic and Religious poems:

Among the satirical religious poems of Dryden, Religio Laici (1682) stands great among the great political satires. The poem is about Religion of Layman, defending the Anglican Church against all other sects, especially the Catholics and the Presbyterians. It was a reasoned defense of the Anglican Church against the Roman Church.

Three years later, when James II came to the throne with schemes to re-establish the Roman faith, Dryden turned Catholic and wrote his most famous religious poem The Hind and the Panther in defense of Roman Catholicism. The poem is divided in three parts:

1. Description of the various religious sects under the guise of different beasts. The Church of Rome as the 'milk-white Hind, immortal and unchanged' and the Church of England as 'fierce and inexorable Panther.'
2. The second part is concerned with arguments between the two churches.
3. The third passes from the logical controversy to a satirical discussion of temporal and political matters.

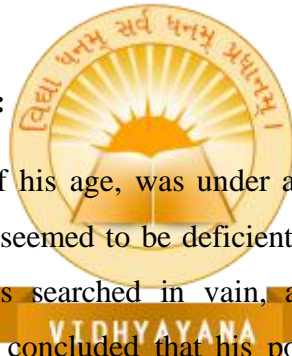
Comparing Religio Laici with Browne's prose work Riligio Medici George Sampson in The



Concise Cambridge History of English Literature remarks, *“The prose work is on exultation in the mysteries of religion; the poem is the common-sense of a layman weary of the varying theologians. Religio Laici represents a half way house on the road which Dryden was following and which led him, like the writer of a later Apologia to Rome.”*

Dryden’s second religious poem The Hind and The Panther (1687) is a long allegorical fable, and was designed as an effort to draw the Churches together, and restore their union. Emile Legouis remarks in A History of English Literature, *“The clearness of the thought, the directed energy of the expression, the smooth movement, the robust quality of the maxims coined by the poet in his effortless manner, the rhythm, regular but not monotonous, graceful or pleasing episodes, as fresh as it were, powerfully native sincerity, a nervous and subtle argumentative skill, which the poetic cadence sustains and does not appear in any way to hamper, all make of this unequal work (The Hind and the Panther) one of the eminent expressions of Dryden’s genius.”*

### Dryden as a poet to 19<sup>th</sup> Century Critics:



John Dryden, the greatest poet of his age, was under a cloud during the nineteenth century. To nineteenth century critics, his poetry seemed to be deficient in elevation, profundity, and an element of pure beauty. The romantic poets searched in vain, a charm, a mystery, and a transporting power in the poetry of Dryden and concluded that his poetry was puerile and trivial. But a poet should be judged in the light of canons of poetry that prevailed during his age; in consequence to this Dryden has come back to his own place in the present century. The age of Dryden was characterized by intellectual qualities, and we shall do injustice to Dryden if we exclude intelligence and workmanship from our main conception of his aims.

Nineteenth century critics levelled a number of charges against the poetry of Dryden.

1. The material of the poetry was mostly borrowed from the other writers.
2. Subject-matter of his original poetry, the affairs of church and state is remote from what is vulgarly regarded as poetic.

We must remember that in his long labours of translation and adaptation, Dryden was fulfilling the requirements of his age. In the days of Charles II men were weary of revolution. To



them the kingship and the Church, Anglican or Catholic, were interesting and beautiful, because they represent for the mass of the nation an ideal of the individual restraint. Dryden had also discovered that if a poet craved for recognition and patronage of the court, he should take an active part in the political affairs of the time.

### Dryden as a satirist:

Dryden was the supreme satirist in verse of the age. Satire was consonant with his literary genius. Satiric verse was composed before Dryden but he was the first satirist to discard the heresy of the metre. He showed that it was possible to write satiric verse without being harsh and thus he was the first to convince the world of this possibility. His satires were not marred by the errors present in the poetry of Donne, Cleveland and Oldham which were full of violence with strength. He produced satires with his effects through wit and humour. Hugh Walker says, *“It is this combination- smoothness of verse, lucidity of style, urbanity of manner- which make Dryden’s satires so strikingly original. In English there had hitherto been nothing comparable to it.”*

Like other satirists, Dryden did not assume garb of moralist whose business is to dart the evils present in the armor of the society. His attitude towards the rascals was that of a cool and not ill-humoured scorn. Dryden’s figures are always at once types and individuals. *“Zimri is worth the whole of my poem Absolam and Achitophel.”* Zimri is at once Buckingham and the idle grand feudal lord who plays at politics. Theme of Dryden’s first satire is not original. In 1680, a prose Absolam’s Conspiracy gave Dryden a hint for his most successful satire – Absolam and Achitophel (1681), which is undoubtedly the most powerful political satire in English language. Taking the biblical story of King David and Absolam, he uses it to ridicule the Whig Party and also to revenge himself upon his enemies. Charles II appeared as King David; his legitimate son, the Duke of Monmouth who was mixed up in the Rye House Plot, paraded as Absolam. Shaftesbury was Achitophel, the evil counselor; the Duke of Buckingham satirised as Zimri. This poem had an enormous political influence, and raised Dryden, to the front rank of English poets in the opinion of his contemporaries. Two extracts from the powerful characterizations of Achitophel and Zimri are given here to show the style and spirit of the whole work.



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1. Shaftesbury as Achitophel:

*Of these the false Achitophel was first; A  
name to all succeeding ages cursed:  
For close designs and crooked  
counsels fit; Sagacious, bold, and turbulent of  
wit.*

2. The Duke of Buckingham as Zimri:

*Some of their chiefs were princes of the land; in  
the first rank of these did Zimri stand,  
A man so warious, that he seemed to be.  
Not one, but all mankind's epitom.*

Shaftesbury was acquitted from the charge of treason and a medal was struck to commemorate the event. Thereupon Dryden wrote *The Medal* which was published in March, 1682. It is a much shorter and graver poem than *Absolam and Achitophel*. J. Sutherland remarks, "in the *Medal* he seems to be an angry man, and it is possible that he is angry because he is alarmed. Dryden's charge against Shaftesbury is that he has 'cut down the banks that made the bar' and the seas of popular rebellion are now flooding through the beach." In Dryden's eyes Shaftesbury had become 'a public menace.'"

His next poem *Mac Flecknoe* (1682), described a highly developed lampoon than a satire makes fun of Shadwell, the Whig poet. In *Mac Flecknoe*, we have good natured contempt. It is redeemed and enlivened by its humour.

**Dryden's Literary Craftsmanship:**

Dryden is known as a great artist in verse as well as in prose and his reputation as a poet lies in his artistic excellence. As an artist, Dryden always endeavoured to find better literary forms, a better



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vocabulary, better metres, better constructions and better style. T. S. Eliot says.

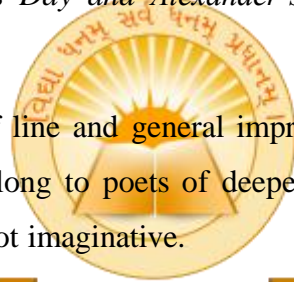
*"Much of Dryden's unique art consists in his ability to make the small into the great, the prosaic into the poetic, the trivial into the magnificent."*

He treated even the prosaic subjects poetically and improved the language especially the poetry of his century. He handed with dexterity the heroic couplet, the blank verse, and the lyric measure. His contribution to the perfection of the heroic couplet demands our attention. Sainsbury says that the heroic couplet was undoubtedly his great title to fame. Following the school of Waller, he rejected blank verse for time for both dramatic and non-dramatic purposes and produced a form of couplet which was well united for argument and for narrative.

He had a sense for other melodies and he composed remarkable odes and lyrical poems. Moddy and Lovett remark,

*"The two odes song for Saint Cesilia's Day and Alexander's Feast illustrate his skill in making his lines march to the measure of thought."*

Even in his lyrics Dryden's charm is of line and general improvement than of phrase or word. He has little of the magic and glamour that belong to poets of deeper, though perhaps less ample inspiration. His best quality is artistic and literary, not imaginative.



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### **His influence:**

John Dryden exercised a potent influence on the poet of the nineteenth century. Dryden's 'lofty line' was adopted by Alexander Pope, Thomas Gray, Johnson, Churchill, and Canning. Dryden was, undoubtedly, the outstanding literary artist of his age. No doubt, he was insensible to the beauty of nature; he possessed little creative imagination and no pathos. In spite of these short-comings in his poetry, if we judge him in his own line, that of argument, satire and exclamation, we would unhesitatingly accord him the highest place in English literature. Dryden's satirical and didactic poems are among the most successful attempts ever made to conduct arguments and deliver attacks in polished metrical form. He at no time made any pretence. What he did, he did with the whole strength of the most vigorous intellects given to any poet, ancient or modern.

Dr. Johnson's famous dictum that "*by him we were taught sapere et fari, to think naturally and*





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*express forcibly*” appears to be a standard critical opinion. The “chief work” of his long patiently arduous life consisted in creating a language fit for the civilized Englishmen to use. Dryden found the English speechless, and he gave it speech. No one, in the whole history of English literature has dominated over literature so long, or so completely. And even in the nineteenth century the language was still the language of Dryden, as it is today.

### Conclusion:

During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries English vocabulary had been enlarged, improved and enriched by the writers and scholars who had borrowed widely from different sources. By 1650, it was felt that such a process was not proper for the healthy growth of the language. Dryden who had studied Shakespeare’s richness of metaphor and image, his grand style and linguistic inventiveness with characteristic interest could not lag behind in contributing his mite towards the refinement of the English language. Dryden, on the other hand, aimed at bringing the language of poetry nearer to that of the ordinary conversation of educated men, and relating the style of poetry to the syntax and diction of a current standard English. Moreover, Dryden aimed at the **‘purity of the English language.’** His first critical essay was the Epistle Dedicatory of *The Rival Ladies*. He has also written Preface to the *Fables* which was very famous. Both **‘sound and significance’** dazzle in the opening lines of *Absalom and Achitophel*:

*In pious times, ere priest craft did begin, Before  
poligamy was made a sin; Ere man on many  
multiplied his kind, Ere one to one was cursedly  
confined:*

*When nature prompted and no law denied  
Promiscuous use of con-cubine and bride.*

He was equally excellent in verse as in prose. His prose has all the clearness of imagination, together with all the nobleness of expression, grace, ornaments proper, without deviating into the language or diction of poetry. His natural inclination is always towards directness and simplicity. He has also written a famous essay named, *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*. No one has paid a greater tribute to Shakespeare than Dryden. Distinguishing between Shakespeare and Ben Jonson he writes:



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“Shakespeare was the Homer, or father of our dramatic poets; Jonson was the Virgil, the pattern of elaborate writing.”

As Johnson said, “he found English of brick and left it marble.”

Thus, Dryden gave purity and new wealth to the English language.

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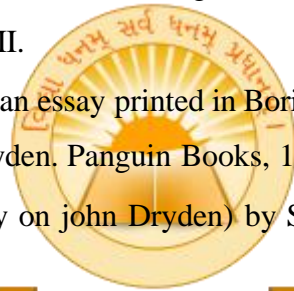
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