

John Dryden's criticism of Shakespeare

Not only had Dryden the poetic brilliance, but he also had sharp critical acumen. One of the few early voices to recognise the brilliance of Shakespeare, Dryden remains discerning yet sympathetic in his critique of 'The Bard'. Commenting on the sheer magnanimity of Shakespeare and his understanding of human nature, Dryden poignantly remarks, "He was the man who of all Modern, and perhaps Ancient Poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul." Answering to critics who criticise Shakespeare saying he wanted (lacked) learning, Dryden says the poet was 'naturally learned.' "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."

Shakespeare made great distinctive Characters because 'he understood the nature of Passions'. Dryden, however, discerningly points out to Shakespeare's failings: his style 'as in his manner of expression'. His sheer brilliance of blank verse was sometimes blown into bombast rendering his meanings unintelligible. Dryden while admitting the need of metaphors in expressing emotions, critiques Shakespeare for overdoing it. He remarks, "... to use 'em at every word, to say nothing without a Metaphor, a Simile, an Image or description, is I doubt to smell a little too strongly of the Buskin." Dryden, still praising the master bard, agrees that if Shakespeare's writings were to be shorn off all the bombast, the beauty of his thoughts would remain. Dryden, however, accounts his failings to his Age, the period in which Shakespeare wrote and his successors who are attempting to critique Shakespeare should know that theirs is a refined age. Dryden also acknowledges Shakespeare's contribution to the English language. He says, "It is almost a miracle that much of his language remains so pure".

Dryden criticised Shakespeare indeed, yet at the same time, he found in Shakespeare elements of enduring value. Dryden's love for Shakespeare cannot be better expressed but in these words of his. "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."