A Study of the Criticism of Thomas Rymer with Special Reference to That Criticism's Influence and Place in the Literary History of Criticism

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A STUDY OF THE CRITICISM OF THOMAS RYMER WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO THAT CRITICISM'S INFLUENCE AND PLACE
IN THE LITERARY HISTORY OF CRITICISM
VITA

William J. Shanahan was born in Chicago in 1935. After attendance at St. Rita's Grammar School and De la Salle High School, Mr. Shanahan attended Loyola University of Chicago, where he was graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree with a major in English in June, 1957.

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PREFACE

Thomas Rymer, in Dryden's opinion, wrote the best piece of criticism in English or perhaps in any modern language; Pope spoke of him as one of the best critics we ever had. Later Macaulay mentioned him as the worst critic that ever lived, while kindlier writers called him a literary Don Quixote tilting at windmills. He is now known mainly for a critique of Shakespeare that is patently wrong-headed, yet T. S. Eliot has pointed out that he has never seen a satisfactory answer to it. The inaccessibility of Rymer's works has made him a legend. Only in the last few years has sympathetic attention again been directed to the literary and critical tradition he represents. We are now aware that in his own time he was a critic second only to Dryden, the champion of neoclassical rationalistic criticism, the first to study a Shakespeare play systematically, and one of the first to attempt the writing of English literary history. His specific judgments will not always command assent—indeed, they were deliberately put in a way to provoke dissent. The significance of Rymer may lie much more in the questions he raised than in the answers he gave; at the very least he offers a challenge that cannot be ignored. It is the purpose of this dissertation to illuminate this challenge and to show its significance.

In this paper I would like to acknowledge my grateful in-
debtedness especially to Professor David G. Spencer, who suggested the idea for this dissertation and who always gave willingly and helpfully of his time for a discussion of its problems. I would also like to thank Professor Martin J. Sva\-glic who, although he had little to do directly with this paper, did much to create in its writer an interest in pursuing the problems of criticism. My grateful thanks go also to James Cox, Director of Libraries at Loyola University, and his staff. Without their kind assistance this dissertation could never have been written. Lastly, my enduring thanks to my wife, who suffered through my chameleon changes in character while the manuscript grew slowly.
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INTRODUCTION

A General View of Rymer as a Critic

Rymer's critical work deals principally with tragedy, and in this genre his influence made itself particularly felt. He had in his first work declared his confidence in the English language and the English literary genius. Epic poetry was still unsatisfactory, yet (surprisingly) "for the Drama, the world has nothing to be compared with us."\(^1\) The basic faith in modern literature and the idea of progress Rymer never abandoned, but his estimate of actual accomplishments changed, indeed changed so much that even his contemporaries eventually missed the point and regarded him as a blind partisan of the ancients.

The incidental praise of English drama just quoted came from the Rapin preface (1674), and undoubtedly referred to heroic tragedy; somewhere around this time Rymer was writing Edgar in obvious if inept imitation of Dryden. When he came to examine

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I have found it convenient to note the complete titles of Rymer's works only for the first references. For subsequent references to these works I have used the following abbreviations:

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English tragedy three years later his opinions were changing, though unfortunately not rapidly enough to keep him from publishing his play. English drama had taken a wrong turn: "And, certainly, had our Authors began with Tragedy, as Sophocles and Euripides left it; had they either built on the same foundation or after their model; we might e're this day have seen Poetry in greater perfection, and boasted such Monuments of wit as Greece or Rome never knew in all their glory."² In A Short View this narrows to a rejection of all modern drama and an insistence that we return to Aeschylus and make a fresh start. Nothing could be hoped from such an extreme program, nor can one believe that Rymer seriously expected it.

Tragedies of the Last Age was another matter. The criticism of Beaumont and Fletcher presented a challenge to contemporary playwrights. Dryden immediately recognized its importance and to effect an answer stated the problem as "how far we ought to imitate our own poets, Shakespeare and Fletcher, in their tragedies."³ Dryden's answer in the Troilus and Cressida preface grants more of Rymer's case than we would expect, and more than Dryden himself would have granted in later years. Even Dryden did not have the perspective to see as clearly as we can that English tragedy of his time had inherited a tradition quite at variance with the critical standards it was attempting to use.

French classical drama had no such important heritage. Corneille could reject Hardy and other predecessors and work, albeit uncomfortably, in conformity to the critical standards then developing. Dryden could not reject Shakespeare and Fletcher, whose plays were still acted regularly and whose dramatic techniques could still furnish guidance. In France the greatest drama arose with or after the criticism; in England it preceded. Restoration playwrights in general accepted the premises of the critics (although there might be quarrels about specific application, in England as in France) and combined these with admiration for the drama of the giant age before the flood. Rymer showed that they could not have both.

Tragedies of the Last Age is in the form of an epistle, and Rymer almost apologizes for its informality: "You will find me ty'd to no certain stile, nor laying my reasons together in form and method. . . . I am not cut out for writing a Treatise, nor have a genius to pen anything exactly." Perhaps so, but the principal points of the theory are clearly enough put. The phrase on the title page "examin'd by the practice of the ancients and by the common sense of all ages," gives the central idea. Both criteria are open to some misrepresentation. "Practice of the ancients" will be considered later; first must come "common sense." Common sense, as some of Rymer's judgments apply it, strikes us as so far from common that we may sympathize with one outraged

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Rymer, TLA, pp. 20-21.
protest, "Rymer has been regarded as the upholder of common sense, but this surely is nonsense." On the other hand, we are confused when Spingarn places Rymer among the anti-rationalists and sets up a school of common sense to include Rymer, Buckingham of The Rehearsal, and Samuel Butler as critics who appeal from a system to what seems immediately apparent. Common sense—the phrase itself has not changed greatly in meaning through the centuries—can be applied in two rather different ways. It can refer to those lower flights of reason where conclusions are readily apparent, or it can be an appeal back from the results of reasoning to what is readily apparent. In general, the second use is the more common: Swift used common sense against the scientists of Laputa and their neighbors, and Johnson kicked a stone to refute Berkeley. Today common sense ridicules the theories of Freudian psychology; until very recently it was used to attack relativity and atomic physics. For neoclassicism there was justification for this method in what Lovejoy calls rationalistic ant-intellectualism:

The presumption of the universal accessibility and verifiability of all that it is really needful for men to know implied that all subtle, elaborate, intricate reasonings about abstruse questions beyond the grasp of the majority are certainly unimportant, and probably untrue. Thus any view difficult to understand, or requiring a long and complex exercise of the intellect for its verification, could be legitimately dismissed without examination. . . . A

"system" was a legitimate object of suspicion simply because it was a system. 6

This view will justify an attack on a critic on the grounds that his conclusions are far-fetched or that he is concerned with trivialities, without demanding an attack on his premises. Ridicule is a legitimate weapon, whether used by Rymer against Shakespeare or by Butler against Rymer. Similarly legitimate is the appeal to the consensus gentium, the common sense or common sentiment of all ages, since if a conclusion differs widely from what is generally believed it is almost certainly wrong. Again the weapon is one that can be used by Rymer but can easily be turned against him.

In general, however, Rymer's common sense is not an appeal from ratiocination, but a stress on what is easily apparent or is reasonable without requiring strenuous application of reason or learning:

And certainly there is not requir'd much Learning, or that a man be some Aristotle, and Doctor of Subtilties, to form a right judgment in this particular; common sense suffices; and rarely have I known the Women-judges mistake in these points, when they have the patience to think, and (left to their own heads) they decide with their own sense. 7

This use of common sense may imply a principle that Rymer thinks readily apparent, e.g., that a king in a tragedy can do no wrong. Or, more often, it is a mere appeal to probability—is it likely


7Rymer, TLA, p. 18.
that a king would marry his mistress to a high-spirited warrior who could resent the injury? Is it likely that Arbaces would be kept in ignorance of his true parentage?

By easy steps this use of common sense leads to rules and rules to a system. The system is implied rather than stated, and Rymer treats the more common rules lightly; but his common sense is always used in support of the rules, never to attack them. Common sense provides the axioms from which we derive the rules, or we can take a simpler path and follow the ancients who have already derived them that way:

But the poets were his (Aristotle's) Masters, and what was their practice, he reduced to principles. Nor would the modern Poets blindly resign to this practice of the Ancients, were not the Reasons convincing and clear as any demonstration in Mathematicks. 'Tis only needful that we understand them, for our consent to the truth of them." 8

The rules then are laws discovered, not devised, and their discovery starts with common sense.

Probability is the first requirement of common sense. Probability in French critics and sometimes in Rymer is interpreted as actual deception, or at least is something so like actuality that it can deceive. Rymer does not insist on this narrowest view, and indeed treats its most obvious concomitant, the unities of time and place, lightly. These mechanical parts of tragedy are beauties that we need concern ourselves with only after the essentials are satisfied. When the unities are violated, "Well, the absurdities of this kind break no Bones. They may make Fools of

8Rymer, Preface to Rapin, p. 3.
us; but do not hurt our Morals."⁹ We are grateful for the re-

daxed attitude, but realize that the concession is made by sacri-

ficing logic. If we cannot believe in the action of a play there

seems no point in demanding probability in other matters; and if

we are fools enough to believe that Othello could go from Venice
to Cyprus between acts, we might also be foolish enough to be-

lieve in a character as untypical as Iago. Any theory of drama

which rests on narrow verisimilitude will show some inconsistency

of this sort, and few parts of neoclassical theory are as unsatis-

factory as its attempts to deal with literary illusion. D'Aubig-
nac, who insisted that an audience at a play was completely de-

ceived, and Dr. Johnson, who insisted that there was no deception

at all, were both wide of the truth; still, attack or defense of

the unities was usually conducted solely on this issue.

Rymer passes by the unities because probability has for

him more important aspects. The construction of a play must be

reasonable, and probability is the measure of success here. In

characters probability involves decorum, and decorum leads to mor-

ality. Rymer's emphasis that action must be reasonable and prob-

able needs little illustration. Here he makes his closest ap-

proach to common sense criticism like The Rehearsal, where any ac-

tion or speech that transcends the commonplace can be held up to

ridicule. The standard will vary; in Rymer's earlier work, writ-

ten against the background of heroic tragedy, rhetorical flour-

⁹Rymer, Short View, p. 142.
ishes are almost demanded, while later in the Othello chapter he
time and again feels that merely quoting a speech without analy-
sis will be enough to show its absurdity. So Pope threw a pas-
sage from Macbeth into a footnote as unworthy of Shakespeare:

Nay, this my hand would rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red... 

The premises are about the same, and taste—a concept with which
Rymer has little concern—governs their application.

The insistence on reasonableness troubles much neoclassi-
cal theory of tragedy, since it demands that tragic action be
both exalted and ordinary, that it raise pity, fear, and admira-
tion at the same time that it appeals to our reason. Rymer does
occasionally talk about tragic emotion, but always as something
produced by the poet's ingenuity. To be sure, he does mention
the need for genius (or wit or fancy), almost always in the anti-
thesis of fancy versus judgment. One needs genius and learning,
nature and art, wit and judgment; but no matter how the terms are
chosen, the emphasis always falls on the second member of the an-
tithesis. And in the one passage where Rymer discusses the role
of fancy, not even the antithesis is left; the results of the
poet's fancy are always reasonable, and fancy turns out to be
merely a way of expediting the creative process and anticipating
the conclusions of reason. 10

Probability in characterization demands decorum. The

10 Rymer, TLA, p. 20.
term here is taken in its narrowest sense as conformity or fitness of character. It is perhaps Rymer's most obvious criterion, and certainly the one that most easily lends itself to ridicule. Specific applications of the idea are carried to extremes, but the whole concept requires examination before we too hastily condemn it as mere fantastic etiquette. There are certain characteristics belonging to a nationality, a class, an age group, or a profession; the seventeenth-century revival of the Theophrastan character is helpful but hardly necessary to illustrate the idea. Horace had, as a practical matter, advised his young poets to be observant of such characteristics. Or, as a present-day writer puts it, "And just as behavior should proceed from character so should speech. A Fashionable woman should talk like a fashionable woman, a street walker should talk like a street walker, a soda jerker like a soda jerker and a lawyer like a lawyer." 11

From Aristotle's statement that poetry is more serious and philosophical than history grows easily—we need not now argue how correctly—the idea of poetry as an imitation of the ideal, of the universal free from its accidents. In this particular idea of conformity to nature three ideas are confused: nature as the Platonic ideal, nature as the generic type excluding individual eccentricities, and nature as the average. 12 These notions


12 Lovejoy, p. 71. These three correspond to Lovejoy's meanings three, four, and five.
of course overlap in practice. A king in poetry must conform to the ideal type, that is, he must be just, noble, and heroic, even though actual kings do not attain this ideal. Any shortcomings are specific accidents not belonging to the genus king. We expect a king—the average king—to approximate the type. Here probability, decorum, and morality join. If a king in tragedy is not an ideal king he does not conform to the average or generic type and consequently we find the character unconvincing; also, the picture of a king who is not what he should be decreases our respect for rank and government.

Tragedy, reflecting life as it should be, serves as a school of manners. Therefore we can have no immodest women, no insolent courtiers, no low conversation, no outbursts of passion that would shock us. Here Rymer's more absurd rules enter:

Though it is not necessary that all Heroes should be Kings, yet undoubtedly all crown'd heads by Poetical right are Heroes.

I question whether in Poetry a King can be an accessory to a crime.

In Poetry no woman is to kill a man, except her quality gives her the advantage above him. 13

This side of decorum, the emphasis on ideal rather than typical characters, Rymer has taken from the earlier French formalist critics, and something of the précieuse tradition remains. These critics were primarily interested in tragedy as a school for princes, an interest echoed in Rymer's concern with the con-

13 Rymer, TLA, pp. 42, 65.
duct of kings and the respect due them. The idea is by no means limited to Rymer, and heroic tragedy will show many examples before Rymer started writing. Behind this lie the ideas of instruction and of imitation of ideal nature just mentioned, yet the emphasis is so marked in Rymer, particularly in *Tragedies of the Last Age* and *Edgar*, that it is usually assumed to rest on Rymer's fanatical devotion to kings. What we know of Rymer's life does little to bear this out, and the idea might not have started had not a royalist tract of 1668 been erroneously ascribed to him.14 The probability is that Rymer, like most Englishmen, accepted the restored monarchy without necessarily believing that Charles II was the ideal king, and that he was loyal without fanaticism. When party lines were drawn again during the crisis over the exclusion bill he sided with the Whigs. It is surely safer to look for the source of his ideas of royal decorum in critical theory and the practice of heroic tragedy rather than in a personal fanaticism for which there is little evidence.

In *A Short View* there is less stress on the ideal character and more on the typical or average, and consequently more concern with probability than morality in characterization. The Romans in *Julius Caesar* are not representative Romans, nor are the Venetians in *Othello* representative Venetians, and so the plays are false to history and to probability. But by far the

most famous of Rymer's accusations concerns Iago, who is not simple and honest as the typical soldier should be and hence is an improbable and inconsistent character. The charge seems ludicrous, but the cumbersome attempts to answer it suggest that there is an unsolved aesthetic problem and that Rymer, as so often, has pointed out the problem without giving the right answer. One can point out that it is improbable for a soldier to be so coldly calculating a villain, that the very improbability enables Iago to impose on Othello, and that his success depends partly on the idea of the typical soldier that Rymer holds—everyone believes that he has the qualities of simplicity and forthright honesty. So the very idea of decorum that Rymer upholds is actually in the play, and its violation allows the tragic action.

It is in terms of plot rather than of character that Rymer attacks the morality of Othello. And his burlesque statement of possible morals is meant only to prove that the play is amoral, not immoral. But the attempts of later commentators to find a true moral along Rymer's lines, and the quite serious use of this technique to find morals in other plays, again show that Rymer had grasped a problem that other critics have found valid. The moral statement that tragedy makes is not simple, and this much at least Rymer recognized, though his banter here and his insistence on poetic justice have obscured his true belief. He shared with most critics of his time the belief that the plot (the fable or Ἐθος) should have a moral toward which it was directed. But
this moral was not to be an ordinary one. For example, in Rollo.

The sense must be this: He that sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed. And if this be all, where's the Wonder? Have we not every day cried in the streets, instances of God's revenge against murder, more extraordinary, and more poetical than all this comes to? If this be Poetry, Tyburn is a better and more ingenious School of Vertue, than the Theatre. 15

Rymer might not have appreciated Macbeth, but at least he would not have made the mistake of regarding it primarily as a warning against regicide.

Justice is, of course, demanded in the ideal world which tragedy imitates, and Rymer coined the term "poetical justice" to express the idea. This is merely a new term for an old idea and arose naturally from Rymer's contrast between poetry and history. He added one refinement, that this justice had to be so exact that no character could commit more crimes than he could be punished for. The idea of poetical justice was serious enough, though Rymer's initial use of the term was facetious. His real point was that the voluntary criminal was no fit protagonist for tragedy. To reconcile the demands of justice with those of pity was a problem Rymer was at least aware of, and his emphasis on the involuntary crimes and inherited curses of Greek tragedy was one attempt at a solution. His suggestions for redrawing Rollo along classical lines show how little he valued a play in which mere justice was done, and that he sensed something of the problem of reconciling Aristotle's statements about the tragic hero

15 Rymer, TLA, pp 27.
with the demands of decorum. He saw that the practice of the ancients offered some guidance on this point, rather more guidance than heroic tragedy with its idealized heroes could, and he deliberately reduced classical plays to colloquial language to make the comparison easier.

None of these ideas of drama was original with Rymer, though his application of them was individual and fresh to English criticism. His immediate sources were generally recognized by his contemporaries. The critical ideas were all found in French formalism, in the Aristotelian commentaries which in France had followed the Cid controversy and in the more practical discussion of these ideas in the work of Corneille. For Rymer the most important works were Jules de la Mesnardière's Poétique (1640), The Abbé d'Aubignac's La Pratique du Théâtre (1657), and René Rapin's Reflexions sur la poétique (1674), which Rymer himself translated. René le Bossu's Traité du poème épique (1675) was in the same tradition but of less importance since it did not deal directly with tragedy. A belated formalist work, André Dacier's edition of Aristotle's Poetics in 1692, came just in time to influence A Short View. Chapter one shows how deeply Rymer was indebted to these critics and also shows that one need seldom look further for the source of his ideas. He knew some Italian critics at first hand and had at least the usual contact with classical authorities, but his thinking was so directed by the French school that this knowledge had little to do with shaping
his ideas. And while each of Rymer's theories could be found singly elsewhere, only in French formalism does one find them all grouped together and logically interconnected.\textsuperscript{16} And in the critiques and commentaries surrounding this literature one can find some of the sources for the methods Rymer used in his attacks and for the colloquial style, so deliberately unsuited to the gravity of the subject matter.\textsuperscript{17}

Quite naturally Rymer was regarded by his countrymen as a champion of French taste against English and of the ancients against the moderns. But these lines are by no means clear and the statement seriously misrepresents Rymer's real position. He used the critical position of the French formalists not because it was French but because it was universal and the product of reason. He had no liking for the French language and seldom praised French literature, regarding the French as lacking the genius necessary to produce the greatest works. Both the Rapin preface and \textit{A Short View} are arguments to prove that the English had a better language and greater potentiality than other nations. Similar arguments will modify the view that Rymer was a fanatical ancient. If one limits the term to meaning that ancient literature was superior to existing modern literature Rymer would of course be an ancient. But in England this was not the main point;

\textsuperscript{16}Zimansky, p. xxx.

\textsuperscript{17}W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., "Further Comment on Constable and Collier," \textit{PQ}, XXIV (1945), p. 120.
faith in reason, belief in the idea of progress and increased capabilities of mankind belonged to the moderns. There are paradoxes: a rationalist critic who judges by the rules of the ancients is apt to be ranked as a modern, as are the antiquarian and the classical scholar. The gentleman who judges by good taste is among the ancients. Or at least that is the view that Swift and later Pope tried to popularize. And certainly by temperament Rymer was more akin to a scientific "modern" scholar like Bentley than to an "ancient" man of letters like Temple.

Had Rymer been more than occasionally a critic his views here might have been clearer. In his two major books he limits himself largely to what is unsatisfactory in English literature; after all, it is the function of the reformer to point out abuses. And Rymer is always aware, though his reader may in annoyance forget, that the purpose of the attack is to uncover error in judgment in order that English literature may progress. In encomium Rymer is less successful. His claims for the special suitability of the English language for poetry are little more than statements of faith, his argument for the early progress of English literature is based on ignorance of almost everything in medieval literature except Provençal poetry, and his use of five


19 Swift, in "A Digression Concerning Criticks" in Tale of a Tub, places Rymer in a family tree which descends through Zoilus to Bentley and Wotton.
lines of Dryden to prove the excellence of contemporary English poetry will convince only those who badly wish to be convinced. The preface to Rochester's poems is Rymer's only attempt in praise at any length, and while pleasant and sensible it does not reveal any great powers of analysis. Still, it deals with specific poems and points out excellences of diction and compression of thought that are really there, and few seventeenth-century critics had developed any technique for criticizing the lyric.

Criticism and appreciation are not the same thing. Rymer could attack Spenser and Cowley and later refer to them as "names as will ever be sacred to me," and he might, had occasion arisen, have admitted virtues in Beaumont and Fletcher. And he closes his last critical work with the statement, "And yet for modern Comedy, doubtless our English are the best in the World."

One regrets the absence of illustration. Rymer had quoted Aristophanes and Rabelais with gusto and even approved some comedy in Fletcher. His ideas of decorum and even his use of common sense were tools that could have been profitably applied to Restoration comedy. But they were not, and so, while Rymer praised English literature in general, and epic, lyric, and comedy in particular, he is known almost entirely today for his condemnation of tragedy and as a critic who exhibits his blind spots for our examination and only hints at his sounder judgments.

20 Rymer, TLA, p. 21.
CHAPTER I

French Formalistic Influences on Thomas Rymer's Criticism

Various students of literary criticism have perceived that the critical theories of Thomas Rymer parallel in many ways the work of the seventeenth-century French school of rules. But the recognition of general resemblances has not served, apparently, to secure uniformity of opinion in classifying Rymer as a critic, or in determining the extent to which he represented, in English criticism, the French codification of the rules. Professor Saintsbury states that Rymer had a "charcoal burner's faith in the 'rules.'"\(^1\) On the other hand, J. E. Spingarn, who has gone farthest in tracing the parallelisms between Rymer's work and that of preceding critics, regards Rymer's work as rationalistic, or based upon common sense, rather than formalistic, based upon rule and precedent.\(^2\) One would regard Rymer as a partici-

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pant in the French tradition; the other, as primarily a continu­ator of certain previously existing English methods. An analy­sis between Rymer and the French critics of the school of rules, more systematic than has yet been attempted, may aid in deter­mining to what extent the critical standards and methods of the French Aristotelian formalists are approximated in Rymer, and what influence the French school had upon one whose criticism, however it may be regarded now, was of great weight and impor­tance for years after it was written.

In carrying out the investigation certain questions de­mand attention: To what extent do the standards of criticism ad­hered to by the French formalists find their way into the work of Thomas Rymer? Are their methods of applying these standards followed by him? Then, dismissing for the time general resem­blances, is there any evidence that the French critics were known to Rymer? Are there any signs of actual borrowing? Fur­thermore, to what extent could he have gotten his critical appa­ratus from any other source? If these questions can be answered satisfactorily, the material will be at hand for forming a con­clusion to the main problem of this investigation.

At this point it should be noted that the work of the French school of rules was chiefly concerned with two main liter­ary types: the epic and the drama. Rymer as a critic is con­cerned largely, although not entirely, with the drama. Conse­quently it is chiefly the dramatic criticism of the Frenchmen that one should expect to find mirrored in Rymer's work, if any
is mirrored, although of course in certain respects the French utterances in regard to the epic may find significant analogies in the Englishman's criticism.

If the work of the French critics belonging to the school of rules is analyzed, certain critical standards are seen to guide them all. All alike require that the plot be strictly probable in all of its details, and that the outcome be in strict accord with the demands of poetic justice. All insist that the artificial code of decorum formulated by this school shall be observed in the handling of characters. In regard to the drama, all give their allegiance to the rules of the three unities and especially to that rule regarding unity of time. These doctrines, developed into a code of minute and systemized rules, characterize the work of the French school. They are formulated and followed by the earliest critics to be members of the group: Chapelain, La Mesnardière, Mambrun, and Hédelin. They are accepted in large part by Corneille, whose critical work shows certain marks of their influence. And they are in general adhered to by the latest members of the school at the end of the century: Rapin, Le Bossu, and Dacier.

It is necessary to examine these standards in detail, and see how the French critics formulate them, and how closely Rymer adheres to them.

As might be expected in any system of rules based upon Aristotle, the plot is regarded as of fundamental importance, and in the choosing and developing that go to make up the plot,
the requirements of probability must never be forgotten. Aristotle had said that an impossible probability is to be preferred to an improbable possibility, and on this basis was built up by the French formalists a theory of strictly rational verisimilitude, a doctrine of probability to conform not so much to actuality as to the demands of logic.

One of the earliest documents of the school, the judgment of the French Academy upon the Cid, a critical document which is generally credited in large part to Chapelain, and which undoubtedly commanded his thorough sympathy, voices this doctrine in no uncertain way. Time and again the play is condemned on the score of improbability, and the rule is laid down that all episodes must appear so probable to the spectators that they unhesitatingly accept them as true. History may assert the truth of certain improbabilities, but in this case history is not to be followed, for such events are in the nature of Aristotle's improbable possibilities, which are to be shunned in creative literature. This is echoed by Rymer in his criticism of Fletcher's Duke in Rollo: "History may have known the like. But Aristotle cries shame." Of course Chapelain's remark and

4 Marty-Laveaux, XII, p. 468.
5 Ibid., pp. 468, 471.
Rymer's may be traced ultimately back to one of the principles laid down in the Poetics of Aristotle, but the principle has hardened into a rule.

Logical verisimilitude is a doctrine that finds utterance in the works of the other French formalists also. La Mesnardière, for example, takes up the doctrine and expands it into a definite set of rules. A distinction is made between ordinary verisimilitude and extraordinary verisimilitude; both are defined and copiously illustrated by examples. The discussion of these matters is concluded by the statement that the chief fault of writers lies in employing actions which are unreasonable, unbelievable, contradictory, and impossible. Mambrun, too, places great stress upon the need for logical verisimilitude, and recommends that the poet strip the action of its names, in order to test its probability according to general conditions. In particular he attacks the medieval romances because they lack probability. Hédelin's La Pratique du Théâtre follows the others; probability is a prime requisite. The dramatist must take particular care to guard "la vraisemblance del choses." All through the sixth chapter of the first book the need of verisim-

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7 Jules de la Mesnardière, La Poétique (Paris, 1640), 36.
8 Ibid., p. 51.
10 Ibid., p. 173.
11 M. Hédelin, La Pratique du Théâtre (Amsterdam, 1715), p. 31.
ility is especially stressed; and in the second chapter of the second book, a chapter entitled "De la Vraisemblance," the first words are, "Voici le fondement de toutes les Pièces du Théâtre." Corneille, on the other hand, is not, in his critical utterance, so thoroughly devoted to the doctrine as the other critics previously mentioned. As between probability and the unities, he prefers to hold fast to the unities. Probability must sometimes be stretched a little to permit the observance of the rules of time and place. Yet in general he accepts the doctrine of logical verisimilitude. It is perhaps unnecessary to multiply examples from the later French formalists. In any event, it is clear from what has been cited that the rule of logical verisimilitude is one of the fundamental rules of this school.

And how does Rymer stand in regard to this rule? He, too, holds it to be fundamental. In the preface of his translation of Rapin's Réflexions sur la Poétique d'Aristote, a preface which marks Rymer's entrance into the field of criticism, he constantly appeals to this rule. Spenser is condemned because "he

12 Ibid., p. 65.
13 Marty-Laveaux, I, p. 84.
14 If other citations are desired, cf. Rapin, Réflexions sur la Poétique, Oeuvres (Amsterdam, 1709), II, pp. 113, 149; Le Bossu, Traité du Poème Epique (Paris, 1677), p. 9; Andre Dacier, La Poétique d'Aristote avec de Remarques Critiques (Amsterdam, 1692), passim.
makes no Conscience of Probability."\textsuperscript{15} Cowley's \textit{Davideis} is censured on the same score; and Rymer adds, "Poetry has no life, nor can have any operation, without probability."\textsuperscript{16} Again, in the \textit{Tragedies of the Last Age}, the same rule is stressed. The plot of \textit{Rollo} is condemned for lacking verisimilitude.\textsuperscript{17} Of \textit{A King and No King} he writes, "What sets this fable below History, are many improbabilities."\textsuperscript{18} He has a similar opinion of \textit{The Maid's Tragedy}: "Nothing in History was ever so unnatural, nothing in Nature was ever so improbable, as we find the whole conduct of this Tragedy."\textsuperscript{19} This question of rational probability, it should be noted, is the first which Rymer raises as he takes up each play in turn, and during the course of his examination he subjects the various contributory episodes to this same test. Finally, the \textit{Short View of Tragedy} exemplifies the application of this rule just as rigidly as either of the preceding pieces of criticism. "Nothing," Rymer writes, "is more odious in Nature than an improbable lye; and, certainly, never was any Play fraught, like this of \textit{Othello}, with improbabilities."\textsuperscript{20} With

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\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 16.

\textsuperscript{17}Rymer, \textit{TLA}, p. 19.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 59.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., p. 107.

\textsuperscript{20}Thomas Rymer, \textit{A Short View of Tragedy} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 92.
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this standard in mind Rymer examines the design of the play carefully, and he finds many features which seem to him not in accordance with the demands of logical verisimilitude. It is improbable that the Venetians would make a man of Othello's race their general; it is opposed to human nature that Desdemona would love him; it is not reasonable that Roderigo should so soon have spent the proceeds of the sale of his lands; and so on indefinitely.

Is this rationalistic criticism? Is it merely the application of common sense? In the light thrown upon the case by the French formalists one is forced to the conclusion that it is the rigid application of one of the most fundamental of the rules. However unenlightened one may regard the method of application, one must conclude that what Rymer is doing is to adopt for his own critical work that same rule of rational probability that the French critics before him so greatly emphasized.

But before deciding, finally, whether in this matter Rymer is formalist or rationalist, one must examine some of the other rules and observe Rymer's attitude toward them. For example, the principle of poetic justice received considerable attention at the hands of the formalists. This doctrine, as a phase of the didactic theory of poetry, naturally appealed to them. If the primary purpose of poetry is to instruct rather than to amuse, then what is more desirable than that its instruction should be moralistic? The moral interpretation of the principle of Katharsis led to this conclusion. And if this end is to be
accomplished, episodes must be so managed as to enforce a moral lesson. Virtue must be rewarded, and vice must be punished.

In view of the fundamental nature of the doctrine, it is not surprising to find the school of rules emphasizing it, formulating it as a definite rule whereby to guide its criticism. Thus in the commentary on the Cid, it is asserted that what seems to be wickedness on the part of Chimène should at the end of the play be punished, not rewarded.\(^{21}\) This early piece of formalistic criticism feels the need of observing poetic justice. Hédelin even goes so far as to hold that the chief rule of the dramatic poem is that virtue be rewarded and vice be punished.\(^{22}\) Corneille himself, although his play was held open to criticism on this score by the Academy, was on the whole a supporter of the rule. The first Discours recognizes the desirability of observing poetic justice, the better to carry out the purpose of didactic poetry.\(^{23}\) In the work of Le Bossu this didacticism receives its greatest emphasis, although the writer applies the theory to epic rather than to dramatic poetry. The end of the epic poem, he maintains, is to lay down moral instructions.\(^{24}\) In constructing a plot, the poet must first select the moral he wishes to enforce.\(^{25}\) Around that he is to build his poem.

\(^{21}\) Marty-Laveaux, XII, p. 472.

\(^{22}\) Hédelin, p. 5.


\(^{24}\) Le Bossu, p. 19.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 37.
Dacier echoes the others in teaching that the purpose of poetry is didactic.26

Turning to Rymer, one finds that the doctrine of poetic justice is one of the fundamentals of his critical creed. Rymer, no more than the French Academy, would have seen the wickedness of a Chimène go unpunished. Poetic justice "would require that the satisfaction be compleat and full, ere the Malefactor goes off the Stage, and nothing left to God Almighty, and another World."27 It is unnecessary, perhaps, to quote numerous instances of Rymer's application of this rule. Incident after incident is examined in its light, only to be condemned. The application is not implied but expressed.28 The murder by Iago of his benefactor Roderigo is condemned, in common with Shakespeare's disposition of other characters in Othello, because it is against all justice and reason.29 The play as a whole is damned because the audience can carry home with themselves nothing "for their use and edification."30 Evidently, a play which does not inculcate a plain moral lesson by means of obvious poetic justice is, as Rymer puts it, "without salt or savour."

A third principle systemized into rules by the French

26 Dacier, Preface, p. xiv.


28 Ibid., pp. 23, 26, 35, 37, 42, 126.

29 Rymer, Short View, pp. 139, 144.

30 Ibid., p. 146.
formalists is that concerned with the unities. This, it should be noted, is, however, a principle much more emphasized by the French critics than by the English critic Rymer. The critics of the *Cid* would restrict the action of a play to twelve hours. 31

Corneille, as has been observed, is in his criticism loyal to the doctrine of the unities, particularly the unities of time and place. The rules enforcing them must be followed in order that stage conditions may approximate actual conditions in the world at large. Dacier holds the same opinion, and he is most explicit in enforcing it. For him the duration of the action in a tragedy ought to be, not twelve hours, but just equal to the time of representation. Unity of action, it would seem, received less attention from critics; superficially, at least, it was observed by the dramatists.

Although Rymer does not flout the unities, he seems to regard them as of minor importance. Yet if in his criticism he is disposed to slight them, his practice, in his only play *Edgar*, proves his acceptance of their demands. There he definitely announces that the duration of the action is ten hours. The rule in regard to unity of time, which was the center of conflict between critics and dramatists, he thus accepts. Unity of place is also observed in the play. Nor does Rymer utterly disregard the unities in his critical works. In the opening chapter of the *Tragedies of the Last Age* he alludes to the rules of unity with

31 Marty-Laveaux, XII, p. 471.
approval, and in the Short View, Othello is condemned for not observing unity of place; yet "absurdities of this kind break no Bones. They may make Fools of us; but do not hurt our Morals." This represents his general attitude toward the unities; they ought to be observed, but after all they are of secondary importance. As compared with the criticism of the French formalists, Rymer's work shows in this respect a difference in degree, not in kind.

Passing from considerations of plot to those of characterization, one enters upon a topic of absorbing interest to the school of rules: the principle of decorum. To observe this principle a code of minute rules was drawn up, governing the actions of the characters in every detail.

These rules, however, did not attain definiteness for some time. The critics of the Cid, for example, merely state that characters should behave in accordance with time, place, age, contemporary customs, and so forth. But the matter is not further elaborated, although there are one or two references to breaches of decorum in the detailed criticism of the play.

La Mesnardièreme, however, is more explicit. He gives numerous rules. He prescribes the qualities with which a poet ought to endow a benevolent king, a tyrant, a queen, a prince, a

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32 Rymer, TLA, p. 106.
33 Marty-Laveaux, XII, pp. 467-468.
chancellor, and others. He outlines characteristics according to age, sex, fortune, rank, and individuality. It is significant that he is driven to the conclusion that a tragic poet ought to be acquainted with court etiquette. He gives the whole matter definiteness and system. Conformity to types is prescribed; the characteristics of each type are laid down; and general conformity to the rules of behavior in royal courts is insisted upon. The Aristotelian idea that a character ought to act consistently is developed into a series of hard and fast rules. To be sure, Horace, centuries before, had made a beginning of the business, but minuteness and rigidity were added to the rules of decorum by the French formalists.

The method of La Mesnardière is followed by Mambrun, who in some respects even surpasses the earlier writer. For example, a hero may weep but not howl. In Hédelin's work similar minutiae appear. A king should speak like a king, and nothing ought to be done to offend his dignity. Rapin and Le Bossu enunciate like rules. Dacier in general does not go into such great detail, but his grave discussion whether it is proper in tragedy for a king to come out from his palace to the scene of action,

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34 Le Mesnardière, p. 120.
35 Ibid., p. 119.
36 Ibid., p. 239.
37 Mambrun, p. 206.
38 Ibid., p. 68.
shows that this critic, like the others, made decorum more or less a matter of court etiquette. 39

When one turns to Rymer's critical utterances, one finds that Rymer also has the formalistic attitude toward characterization, and makes use of the same rules of etiquette in discussing character. In his earliest critical work certain characters are condemned because they have "but little of the Heroick in them," and dogs are reproved for barking in an heroic poem, unless "they bark Heroically." 40 And in his later work other minute rules are applied. Kings must be of a heroic mold and must combine in their dispositions greatness of mind and generosity. 41 "Far from decorum is it, that we find the King drolling and quibbling," he writes of one of Fletcher's characters. 42 That would constitute a breach of court etiquette. All feminine characters must possess the trait of modesty, for modesty is a typical feminine characteristic. 43 No woman is to kill a man, no servant a master, no private subject a king. "Poetical decency will not suffer death to be dealt to each other by such persons, whom the Laws of Duel allow not to enter the lists together." 44 Again this is a matter of etiquette.

39 Dacier, p. 293.
40 Rymer, Preface to Rapin, pp. 11, 22.
41 Rymer, TLA, p. 63.
42 Ibid., p. 64.
43 Ibid., p. 113.
44 Ibid., p. 117.
That phase of decorum concerned with the traits of types finds application again in the *Short View*. Othello and Iago have not the traits ascribed to soldiers by the rules. Of Iago one reads that Shakespeare "would pass upon us a close, dissembling, false, insinuating rascal, instead of an open-hearted, frank, plain-dealing Souldier, a character constantly worn by them for some thousands of years in the World."\(^{45}\) As in the French critics, a character must be endowed with traits prescribed by calling, age, sex, and so forth, and must act in conformity with the laws of etiquette. Rymer's criticism of characterization is a sweeping application of the rules laid down by the French formalists.

Thus in fundamental doctrines Rymer's criticism conforms to the criticism of the French school of rules. And this analysis might be extended to include other rules than those considered. A great number of other dicta codified into rules by the French formalists find expressions likewise in Rymer's work. The representation of scenes of bloodshed is frowned upon. Mixture of genres is condemned. The comic should not be mixed with the tragic. Judgment is a more necessary quality than fancy in a creative work. The subject of tragedy should be some great and noble action. Characters in tragedy must be of noble or royal birth. Fuller multiplication of instances is perhaps needless. It is clear that Rymer accepts the code of minute rules.

promulgated by the French Aristotelian formalists and applies them in his own work. That many of the critical ideas here considered had been held by critics other than the formalists is undoubtedly true. But the French formalists were the ones who codified these critical principles into an elaborate system of minute and definite rules; and these minute and definite rules are the ones taken up and applied by Thomas Rymer. In respect to the rules, then, he is one with the French Aristotelian formalists.

Aside from this similarity in substance, other and more general points of resemblance may be noted, points of resemblance which at least give additional plausibility to the theory that all these men belong to the same school of thought.

The analogies between Chapelain and Rymer are especially significant in this respect. Both men were considered by their contemporaries exceedingly erudite, and in the case of each the erudition was particularly displayed in the field of medieval French literature. Of Chapelain Saintsbury remarks that he "almost alone of his time knew Old French literature," and discusses his dialogue, De la Lecture des vieux Romans, wherein this knowledge is displayed. Rymer likewise was regarded as an authority of Old French and what he terms "Provencial" literature, and his eminence in this respect was likewise lonely. Of course, there is little likelihood that Rymer was indebted to Chapelain for his interest in Old French; yet the resemblance is not with-

46 Saintsbury, II, pp. 258, 260.
out significance. It illustrates parallel mentalities. Both Chapelain and Rymer were regarded as men of sound learning. Moreover, the same general statement may be made of the other members of the school of rules.

Although in craftsmanship Chapelain was decidedly the more finished, in critical temperament there are significant points of contact between the two men. The opening paragraph of the judgment of the Academy upon the Cid furnishes an instance of this. One sentence in particular is significant. "C'est une vérité reconnue," the passage runs, "que la louange a moins de force pour nous faire avancer dans le chemin de la vertu, que le blame pour nous retirer de celui du vice." So the criticism frankly sets out to find faults, while professing at the same time—and here it differs from the general run of Rymer's work—not to withhold praise for what seems praiseworthy. The sentence quoted, however, might well have served the English critic as a motto in his crusade against the evils of his native tragedy.

One other trait is shared by Rymer with Chapelain, and in this instance, not only with Chapelain, but also with other critics of the school of rules. That is a firm faith in the efficacy of the rules for stimulating and guiding creative work—a faith which several of these critics manifested by writing original poems or plays based on their rules. Thus Chapelain wrote La Pucelle, an epic which Boileau irrevocably damned. La Mesnarl

47 Marty-Laveaux, XII, p. 463.
Mambrun wrote his epic on Constantine, and Rymer wrote his play Edgar. These works could hardly be called shining successes. They show the inadequacy of the rules rather than their efficiency. But they do make manifest the faith of their writers, and it is not without significance to find Thomas Rymer following the example of the French formalists in this respect.

Thus we find various analogies between the interests and beliefs of Rymer and the interests and beliefs of the French school of rules. But it may be objected, despite this testimony, that Rymer has definitely stated that his criticism is based on common sense, on the use of ordinary reason, and that, therefore, although the parallels with the French writers may be numerous, they are accidental; that his criticism is fundamentally rationalistic, not formalistic. Perhaps it is necessary to examine this objection for a moment.

The passage that seems to give most basis for the rationalistic theory is found in The Tragedies of the Last Age. Rymer has just stated that a plot must conform to the requirements of reason. Then he notes what are the qualities necessary to judge of the reasonableness of a plot.

And certainly there is not requir'd much Learning, or that a man must be some Aristotle, and Doctor of Subtilties, to form a right judgment in this particular; common sense suffices; and rarely have I known the Women-judges mistake in these points, when they have the patience to think, and (left to their own heads) they decide with their own sense. 48

48 Rymer, TLA, pp. 4-5.
Is one to conclude from this passage that Rymer bases his criticism upon "common sense," that he is fundamentally rationalistic in his critical method? Far from it. The statement, it should be noted in the first place, is confined to a consideration of plot. "Common sense" is the faculty to be used in judging of the reasonableness of a plot; it confers the ability to discern marked inconsistencies. And the examination of a plot to condemn contradictions and inconsistencies is, as previously noted, nothing in the world but an application of the formalistic rule of logical verisimilitude. All that the passage really conveys is a declaration that knowledge of the rules is not necessary in order to judge of the reasonableness of a plot; ordinary mental equipment is sufficient. "Common sense suffices." But the very process which involves this use of common sense is that in which is applied one of the chief rules of formalistic criticism: the rule demanding logical verisimilitude. Common sense, everyday reason, is but the servant of the rules.

Of course the rules themselves are not in conflict with reason. Indeed, they demand our allegiance just because they are rational. In one passage Rymer states that the rules are based on reasons as "convincing and clear as any demonstration in Mathematicks." But to hold that is not to make oneself a rationalistic critic. Indeed, the statement only links Rymer with the French formalists more closely. In the criticism of the Cid

49 Rymer, Preface to Rapin, p. 4.
one finds that common sense (bons sens) bears out the teaching of the rules. Hédelin announces that the rules are founded upon reason and common sense—"depend de la raison et du sens commun." Rapin echoes this sentiment almost exactly, and Dacier also follows the example of the others. In short, it is a cardinal characteristic of the school of rules to hold that the rules are reasonable, and Rymer is one with the school in this respect as in so many others.

Rymer, then, is not fundamentally a rationalistic critic. He does not bar reason from criticism, but he holds that the demands of reason are formulated in the rules, and he exercises his own reason, not independently, but in the process of applying the rules. In all of this he is doing just what the French formalists advocated before him.

One difference in practice between Rymer and the typical French formalist should, however, be noted. The typical French formalist was a codifier of the rules. He analyzed various Aristotelian dicta in the light of the Italian commentaries, and he wrought them into rules and built them up into definite systems. This is the kind of work done by La Mesnardière, for example, and by Hédelin. Rymer did not continue the work of codification; rather, he took the results of the codification and applied them in his own criticism. To this extent he differs from most of the French critics. However, the difference is not essential. He

50 Marty-Laveaux, XII, p. 475.
bases his criticism upon rules formulated by the Frenchmen, and by virtue of that practice he is fundamentally a formalist critic.

Since, then, it seems clear that Rymer belongs to the school of La Mesnardière and Mambrun, of Hédelin and Dacier, the question of his indebtedness to them individually arises. Was Rymer acquainted with the work of the Frenchmen? Did he owe his rules to them? Is there any evidence of indebtedness?

That Rymer was in some measure acquainted with the work of the French school of rules seems clear. The mere fact that the Englishman's first venture into literary criticism was his translation of Rapin's book indicates his familiarity with the work of one member of the school and may well suggest an acquaintance with the works of some of the other members. Indeed, there is positive evidence that he knew about the criticism of La Mesnardière, for in the Preface to the translation of Rapin he notes his indebtedness to the earlier French critic for the observation that the French language is "a very Infant." The language is also unsuited for use in the conduct of love affairs. As Spingarn points out, this is a reference to La Mesnardière's statement on the "Rudesse de la langue Francoise dans les expressions amoureuses." One is justified in suspecting that Rymer had read the work of the French critic with care, since he noted

51 Rymer, Preface to Rapin, p. 7.
52 La Mesnardière, p. 371.
a remark of such comparatively small importance in general dramatic theory.

Again, Rymer knew the poetical work of Chapelain. He was also acquainted with the history of the founding of the Academy. Consequently it is probable that he had read the *Sentiments de l'Académie sur le Cid*, and from it he may have taken some hints as to methods of applying the rules to concrete criticism. Corneille is another whom Rymer cites by name, although not in connection with any very important rule. In the account of the French drama a passage from the *examen* of Théodore is quoted—in translation—as testimony to that aversion to immoral or questionable plays which was then characteristic of French audiences. And near the close of the *Short View* there is cited Corneille's avowal, in the *examen* of Mélioré, that when he began to write plays, he was ignorant of the rules, but common sense and the example of Hardy led him to observe unity of action and of place. That is, Corneille is here cited as a witness to the essential reasonableness of the rules. The avowed indebtedness is for minor points, but the avowal is important as further indication that Rymer was interested in French criticism and was reading it.

54 Rymer, *Short View*, p. 59.
Rymer knew of the existence of the works of Le Bossu and Dacier, for he mentions them in the dedication of the Short View, and there is good reason to believe that he read their works.

It is obvious, then, that Rymer, in addition to accepting critical rules identical with those codified by the French Aristotelian formalists, was to some extent acquainted with their work. That there was actual indebtedness seems highly probable, and this probability is greatly increased by the similarities in details between Rymer's work and the work of the French writers. Some of these similarities remain to be pointed out.

Certain parallelisms with Mambrun appear. The clerical critic attacks Soaliger for regarding as the material of poetry verses, syllables, "and all that grammatical matter. To pay so much attention to minute poetical detail is the shipwreck of poetry." 57 One is reminded of Rymer's remark in the course of his Preface to Rapin that "what has been noted rather concerns the Niceties of Poetry than any of the little trifles of Grammar," and of his statement at the beginning of the Tragedies of the Last Age that he has not bothered himself with the "eternal triflings of the French Grammaticasters." 58

Other remarks in Rymer may be echoes of Mambrun or of some other members of his school. Thus when Rymer accuses Spenser, with Ariosto, of "blindly rambling on marvellous Adventures,"

57Mambrun, p. 20.

he may have been thinking of Mambrun's stricture on the Orlando Furioso, "a mere chaos of romantic adventure." Similarly, the censure of Lucan's Pharsalia because it has a historical subject is one not confined to Mambrun and Rymer. But there is a distinct flavor of Mambrun in Rymer's remark in regard to Davenant's Gondibert: "And the Emerald he gives to Birtha has a stronger tang of the Old Woman, and is a greater improbability than all the enchantments in Tasso." Could he have had in mind Mambrun's criticism of a medieval romance, because it lacked verisimilitude: "Here again is a wonderful adventure, but one suited for old women's tales"?

Indeed, Rymer's ideas and phrases sometimes have a "tang" characteristic of what is known of Mambrun. In any event, since Mambrun was concerned chiefly with epic poetry, and Rymer chiefly with the drama, the influence which it seems probable did exist must have been confined to Rymer's attitude toward the nature and function of criticism and to a few details concerning poetry in general. In La Mesnardière one finds a critic whose work would be more likely to influence Rymer in the larger part of his criticism, since both are primarily concerned with the drama.

Certain passages on poetic justice in the earlier work are to a considerable extent paralleled in Rymer. For example, Rymer's remarks on the difference between historical truth and

\[59\] Mambrun, p. 67.

\[60\] Rymer, Preface to Rapin, p. 12.
universal truth in exhibiting poetic justice seem an echo of La Mesnardière's utterances. The following passage is from La Mesnardière:

Or encore que dans le Monde les bons soient souvent affligez, et que les meschans prospèrent, il faut néantmoins comprendre que le Poème tragique donnant beaucoup a l'exemple, et plus encore à la Raison, et qu'étant toujours oblige de récompenser les vertus, et de chastier les vices.... 61

The next passage occurs just after La Mesnardière has quoted Aristotle to the effect that a good man should not be represented as persecuted:

La raison du Philosophe est Que cette espece de Fables représentant des injustices, ne peut jamais exciter que le dépit et le blasphème dans l'ame des Auditeurs, qui murmurent contre le Ciel, quand il souffre que la Vertu soit traitée cruellement, et que les mauvais triomphent tandis que les justes patissent. 62

Here is Rymer's passage from The Tragedies of the Last Age:

And, finding in History, the same end happen to the righteous and to the unjust, vertue often opprest, and wickedness on the Throne: they saw these particular yesterday-truths were imperfect and unproper to illustrate the universal and eternal truths by them intended. Finding also that this unequal distribution of rewards and punishments did perplex the wisest, and by the Atheist was made a scandal to the Divine Providence. They concluded, that a Poet must of necessity see justice exactly administered, if he intended to please. 63

In these passages both critics use the same arguments in favor of poetic justice, and there is even some similarity in phrasing.

61 La Mesnardière, p. 107.
62 Ibid., p. 167.
When we find Rymer, in suggesting changes and improvements in the plot of Rollo, carefully providing that the two brothers who are to be involved in tragic doom shall neither be exceedingly wicked nor perfectly virtuous, we are apt to attribute his attitude to the influence of Aristotle. But La Mesnardière deals with the same problem, and it is not without significance that both Rymer and the French critic have in mind the bearing of poetic justice on the matter, which is a factor absent from Aristotle's discussion.

However, it is the rules of decorum rather than the provisions for poetic justice that are most likely to furnish points of resemblance between Rymer and La Mesnardière. The French critic's conclusion, previously cited, that a poet ought to be acquainted with court etiquette in order to apply the rules of dramatic decorum intelligently, seems to find echo in Rymer's statement, "Tragedy requires...what is great in Nature, and such thoughts as quality and Court-education might inspire."64 To be sure, Rymer is here referring to the sentiments expressed by stage characters rather than to their manners; but how is the dramatist to know what thoughts a court-education inspires unless he is familiar with the court? Rymer's requirement implies La Mesnardière's. Again, La Mesnardière holds that stage kings should be endowed with virtue, wisdom, courage, and generosity; Rymer says that "all crown'd heads" should possess the qualities

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64 Ibid., p. 43.
of heroes. Rymer's question, "Whether in Poetry a King can be an accessory to a crime," may be related to the same passage in the French critic. If a king is to be a model of virtue, naturally he is not to be charged with the commission of crimes. In another place La Mesnardièrè enjoins the playwright, "Il ne permettra jamais que la plus juste colère emporte si fort son Héros, qu'il en perde et le jugement et le respect qui est deu aux Potentats de la terre." Under this injunction would come Rymer's rule that a subject must not kill a king.

A knowledge of the Frenchman's rules is also revealed by Rymer in many of his concrete criticisms. His effort to make out that the king in the Maid's Tragedy ought to have been but slightly or not at all blamed for Amintor's desertion of Aspatia is only an application of the precept in the Poétique that a writer ought to hide the faults of princes ("on doit cacher leurs défauts"). And when one finds the king of Fletcher's A King and No King rebuked for "drolling and quibbling with Bessus and his Buffoons," one is reminded of the injunction in the Poétique that characters ought not to indulge in "sentiments abjetst," "unworthy of the glory and pride of a great soul." Melantius of the

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65 La Mesnardièrè, p. 120. Cf. also Rymer, TLA, p. 61.
66 Rymer, TLA, p. 115.
67 La Mesnardièrè, p. 104.
68 Ibid., p. 102.
69 Rymer, TLA, p. 64. Cf. also La Mesnardièrè, p. 304.
Maid's Tragedy is reproved for his violent and irreverent conduct to the new king, and his conduct breaks the rule that subjects should not outrage their sovereigns, or courtiers fail in the observances which are a part of their profession. Clearly, these are examples of agreement between Rymer's censures and La Mesnardière's rules, sufficient to illustrate the parallelism between the two authors in regard to the principle of decorum.

In addition, rules on various minor matters, promulgated in the French work, are applied by the English critic. For example, in the Poétique one finds that the title of a dramatic poem ought to be the name of the hero, or some phrase which will express in a few syllables the principle action. Patly enough comes Rymer, writing of the Maid's Tragedy, "Amintor therefore i.e., because the action centers around him should have named the Tragedy, and some additional title should have hinted the Poet's design." In accord with the same rule are the remarks about Othello: "So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief! Why was not this call'd the Tragedy of the Handkerchief?" La Mesnardière's opinion in regard to historical characters is "La principale des Règles qu'il doit observer en ceci, est de n'introduire jamais un Héros ou une

70 Ibid., p. 122. Cf. also La Mesnardière, p. 294.
71 La Mesnardière, p. 47. Cf. also Spingarn, II, p. 345.
72 Rymer, TLA, p. 105.
73 Rymer, Short View, p. 135.
Héroïne avec d'autres inclinations que celles que les Histoires ont jadis remarquées en eux."74

In this connection note Rymer's complaint about the characters in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, that the dramatist might write over them, "This is Brutus; this is Cicero; this is Caesar. But generally his History flies in his Face; And comes in flat contradiction to the Poet's imagination."75

It is clear that the points of contact are numerous. And since Rymer vows acquaintance with La Mesnardièrè's work, it seems highly probable that he is indebted to the French critic for many of his ideas.

Although La Mesnardièrè is more closely akin to Rymer than Rapin is, it is not surprising that the English writer also borrowed details of criticism more or less freely from the critic with whom he, as translator, had come into such close contact.

Of course the preface to Rymer's translation of the Réflexions is full of echoes of Rapin. The brief account of criticism follows Rapin closely. Other resemblances appear. The French writer exclaims, "Dans quelles fautes ne sone pas tombez la plupart des Poëtes Espagnols et Italiens pour les avoir ignorées?"76 Likewise Rymer calls upon his readers to "examine how unhappy the greatest English Poets have been through their ignor-

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74 La Mesnardièrè, p. 114.
75 Rymer, *Short View*, p. 135.
76 Rapin, *Oeuvres*, II (Amsterdam, 1709), p. 91
ance or negligence of these fundamental Rules and Laws of Aristotle." Rymer several times cites the opinions of the man whose work he is translating; as, for instance, the belief that the English "have a Genius for Tragedy above all other people," and the related remark on the delight which that nation takes in cruel spectacles. Other echoes are heard—as in the condemnation of Petrarch's Africa and of the "chimerical" nature of the Orlando Furioso. In short, as one might expect, Rymer in his preface borrows many ideas from the man whose work he is translating.

It is more significant to find traces of similarity to Rapin's views in Rymer's other pieces of criticism. Thus the English critic's remarks on the necessity of regulating "fancy" by reason, may well have been based upon a recollection of the passage in the Réflexions, "La raison doit être encore plus forte que le génie, pour savoir jusqu'où l'emportement doit aller"—which Rymer translates, "Reason ought to be much stronger than the Fancy, to discern how far the Transports may be carried." Again, as Spingarn points out, Rapin's censure of Angelica in Ariosto's poem and Armida in Tasso's as too immodest is paralleled by Rymer's criticism of Evadne in the Maid's Tragedy. Rapin concludes his remarks thus: "Ces deux Poètes ontent aux femmes leur caractère, qui est le pudeur." Rymer declares that "Na-

77 Rymer, Preface to Rapin, p. 8.
78 Ibid., pp. 5-6.
ture knows nothing in the manners which so properly and particu-
larly distinguishes woman as doth her modesty."80

Similar resemblances are found in the Short View of Tragedy. Rapin states that comedy has a moral aim, and he commends Aristophanes for his evident didactic purpose in one of his plays, Lysistrata.81 The English critic remarks of Aristophanes, "This Author appears in his Function, a man of wonderful zeal for Vertue."82 Moreover, Rymer's remarks on the function and place of love in tragedy seem distinctly reminiscent of passages in the Réflexions. He praises the Greeks because in their drama love did not "come whining on the Stage to Effeminate the Majesty of their Tragedy." Rapin states, "c'est dégrader la Tragedie de cet air de Majesté qui luy est propre, que d'y meler de l'amour." A little later, Rymer significantly translates, "Nothing to me shews so mean and senseless, as for one to amuse himself with whining about frivolous kindesses."83

From the above indications it seems clear that Rymer throughout his career in criticism had in mind the injunctions of the man whose work he had translated at the beginning of that career. It is worth noting, however, that the similarities to Rapin are not of the same nature as those to La Mesnardière or

80Spingarn, II, p. 346.
81Rapin, II, p. 103.
82Rymer, Short View, p. 22.
as those to Mambrun. In the last-mentioned cases the similari-
ties occurred in the use of numerous minute rules which are es-
pecially characteristic of Aristotelian formalism. In the case
of Rapin the borrowings are of a less distinctive nature.

The similarities in detail between Rymer and the remain-
ing French critics of the group are less weighty and may be dis-
missed more briefly.

The critique of the Cid, with its civilities and its
courtesies, is quite different from Rymer's bluff fault-finding;
nevertheless there are certain anticipations of Rymer's method,
as in the condemnation of Chimène because, contrary to what de-
corum assigns to her sex, she is too sentimental a lover and too
unnatural a daughter. The play is also condemned because of the
improbability of Rodrigue's movements after he has killed the
Count. And it may be worthy of note that Chimène is upbraided
for forgetting her modesty in the fifth act. However, it seems
likely that these features are not of great significance.

Hédelin's Pratique du Théâtre furnishes parallelisms
which are rather more indicative of Rymer's actual acquaintance
with the work. It seems quite probable that the English writer
in the general content of his account of the ancient drama, found
in the Short View of Tragedy, is following the Abbe'. The latter
goes into the matter in some detail and gives most of the facts
which Rymer uses. And Rymer's anecdote in The Tragedies of the

84 Marty-Laveaux, XII, pp. 472, 476.
85 Hédelin, p. 153.
Last Age in regard to the priests of Bacchus probably came from Hédelin. Hédelin writes the following:

Aussi quand dans la suite du temps Phrynicus Disciple de Thespis, Aeschylé, et quelques autres à l'exemple de leur Maître insérerent dans leurs Tragédies des Acteurs récitans des vers touchant quelque histoire qui ne faisoit point partie des louanges to Bacchus, les Prêtres de ce Dieu le trouvèrent alors fort mauvais et s'en plaignirent tout haut, disans, Que dans ces Episodes il n'y avoit rien qui pût s'approprier, ni aux actions, ni aux bienfaits, ni aux mystères de leur Dieu: ce qui donna lieu à ce Proverbe, En tout cela rien de Bacchus. 86

Rymer puts it, in his vigorous way, that the priests "mutini'd" against the insertion of these episodes, "thought it ran off from the Text," and finally "roar'd out, Nothing to Dionisus, nothing to Dionisus." 87

Again, Rymer's statement, "Some have remark'd, that Athens being a Democracy, the Poets, in favour of their Government, expos'd Kings, and made them unfortunate," may refer to Hédelin's comment that the Athenians delighted to see the misfortune of kings shown upon the stage. 88

Although it seems probable that Rymer was chiefly influenced by Dacier, as will be seen shortly, in his advocacy of the chorus, nevertheless he is in this matter not without points of contact with the author of the Pratique. For example, Hédelin urges, after advancing various other arguments for the use of the

86 Ibid., p. 161.
87 Rymer, TLA, p. 12.
chorus, that it would insure continuity of action, unity of scene, and unity of time—for how could the chorus be supposed to stay on the scene of action days and weeks without eating or drinking or sleeping? Rymer likewise contends that the chorus is a valuable aid in preserving the unities, "Because the Chorus is not to be trusted out of sight, is not to eat or drink until they have given up their Verdict, and the Plaudite is over." It would seem that Rymer must have been acquainted with La Pratique du Théâtre.

It has been shown that Corneille's critical utterances were known to Rymer. The detailed indebtedness, however, may have been rather slight. Spingarn points out the resemblance between Rymer's belief in the didactic purpose of poetry, and Corneille's. But the similarity is confined to the general tenor of the statements, and the same doctrine was held by other critics, so it is possible that there is no specific indebtedness. Another point of contact concerns the care for the royal prerogative evinced by the two critics. Rymer holds that in poetry a king may not be an accessory to a crime. Corneille forbids the dramatist to portray a king in a secondary role.

89 Hedelin, p. 190.
90 Rymer, Short View, p. 69.
91 Spingarn, II, p. 347.
92 Rymer, TLA, p. 115.
Here the resemblance is in the minute care for the royal welfare and reputation to which court decorum leads. As already noted, Rymer's inspiration for his remarks here more probably came from La Mesnardière.

There are other uncertain echoes. But whereas it seems clear that Rymer knew Corneille's criticism, it does not seem probable that he was much influenced by it. Nor is this strange. Corneille was only in part a formalist. Rymer was thoroughly one, and could obtain elsewhere critical doctrines more fully in accord with his views than Corneille's were.

Le Bossu's work appeared in 1675, but there is nothing to indicate that Rymer made use of it in the *Tragedies of the Last Age*, which appeared two years later. There are a few parallel passages, but these may best be accounted for by assuming a common indebtedness to earlier critics. Thus the idea that the poet's judgment should always control his fancy is found in Le Bossu's book and likewise in Rymer's. But it also appears in the latter's Preface to *Rapin*, published before Le Bossu's book, and its probable source is Rapin. The most striking points of similarity between the *Short View* and the French treatise on the epic are such as may well be explained by the theory of a common origin. Le Bossu gives a brief account of the origin of tragedy, and at first it seems probable that Rymer used this in preparing his treatment of the same topic, but Hédelin's account, already mentioned, furnishes closer parallels, and is a more likely source. It is also worth noting that Le Bossu acknowledges his
In general, it is altogether more probable that Rymer, concerned with the drama, should have reinforced his ideas from French treatises on the drama than it is that he should have been influenced by stray remarks on the drama in Le Bossu's *Traité du Poème Épique*. The formalistic resemblances exist; the evidences of indebtedness are doubtful.

The most important feature of Dacier's commentary on Aristotle, indicating its influence on the *Short View of Tragedy*, is his advocacy of the chorus. Dacier recommends the use of the chorus because, for one reason, it compels the dramatist to preserve unity of place. In addition, it prevents him from placing the action of his tragedy in "chambers and cabinets," because the chorus, which must always be on the stage, cannot reasonably be supposed to witness the private transactions of kings and princes. And it is desirable to prevent the appearance of such actions on the stage, because it must be remembered that the audience, too, is always present, and it is essentially improbable that they should be admitted to the cabinets of princes; the dramatist is apt to forget this improbability, but the presence of a chorus would force it upon his attention. So the chorus ought to be re-established, "qui seul peut redonner à la Tragédie son premier lustre, et forcer les Poètes à faire un choix plus des actions qu'ils prennent pour sujet." 94

94 Dacier, p. 330.
Rymer, like Dacier, looks to the chorus to reform tragedy. Like Dacier he holds that the chorus "is not to be drawn through a Keyhole,...nor stow'd in a garret,...so must of necessity keep the Poet to unity of place." And of Jonson's Catiline he asks, "how comes the Chorus into Catilin's Cabinet?" Moreover, if the chorus is employed "the Spectators are thereby secured, that their Poet shall not juggle, or put upon them in the matter of Place, and Time, other than is just and reasonable for the representation." 

In another place Dacier advances another argument in support of the chorus which Rymer also uses. Dacier writes that in barring the chorus from tragedy, modern writers have deprived themselves of a great advantage:

...car toute la Musique qu'on peut placer dans les intermedes de nos pieces et les balets qu'on peut y ajouter ne font nullement le même effet, parce qu'ils ne peuvent être considerez comme parties de la Tragédie, ce sont des membres étrangers qui la corrompent et qui la rendent monstreuse.

Echoes Rymer, "And the Poet has this benefit; the Chorus is a goodly Show; so that he need not ramble from his subject out of his Wits for some foreign Toy or Hobby-horse, to humor the Multi-

95 Rymer, Short View, p. 1.
96 Ibid., p. 161.
97 Ibid., p. 160.
98 Ibid., p. 2.
99 Dacier, pp. 516-517.
With all this similarity, extending even to phraseology, it is quite clear that Rymer derived his arguments for the chorus from Dacier.

It should be remembered, of course, that this does not preclude the possibility of his having also referred to Hédelin's arguments on the same subject; it is even probable that he did consult Hédelin. But the great bulk of his indebtedness in this matter is to Dacier, and, from a consideration of chronological data, it seems certain that Dacier, and not Hédelin, furnished the initial impulse for Rymer's advocacy of the chorus. For Hédelin's book had appeared in 1657; had Rymer been much impressed by its arguments in favor of the chorus, he could have introduced the matter in his *Tragedies of the Last Age*, which came out in 1677. But not until Dacier's book appeared, in 1692, is Rymer interesting himself in this question.

Aside from the discussion of the chorus, there is little to show that Dacier had much influence upon the English critic. As in the case of Le Bossu, there is resemblance in the formalism of the critical ideas, but the important critical details seem to have been supplied to Rymer by the earlier members of the school.

From the foregoing survey of the points of contact between Rymer and the members of the French school of rules it is evident that he agrees with them not only in general critical attitude but also in a great number of detailed rules. It also seems

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100 Rymer, *Short View*, p. 2.
clear that Rymer was familiar with the writings of this group and derived the most important and essential features of his critical theory from its members.

That he could have derived them from any other school of criticism is impossible, because he resembles no other school so closely as he does the French school of rules. That he could have formulated his method for himself, basing his rules directly upon Aristotle and Horace, is highly improbable. To be sure, his references to those two authorities are constant. Aristotle in particular is cited as the law-giver of literary criticism. But the Aristotelian dicta that Rymer emphasizes are the dicta emphasized by his formalistic predecessors, and he interprets those dicta as they did. Aristotle's demand for probability was for Rymer a demand for strictly formalistic verisimilitude, and Aristotle's demand for decorum was for Rymer a demand for the observance of court etiquette. The English critic may have been acquainted with the Poetics, but through French sources.

Rymer was probably more directly indebted to Horace than to Aristotle, for Horace tends to enunciate rules rather than principles and is something of a formalist himself. Yet the Englishman's relations to Horace resemble those to Aristotle. When Rymer compares those qualities Shakespeare has given Iago with those Horace set down as typical of the soldier, the indebtedness may be direct.101 But one doubts whether Rymer would

101 Ibid., p. 93. Cf. also Ars Poetica, 1. 121.
have been so insistent on the matter had not decorum been so strongly emphasized by the French. Of course the bulk of Rymer's rules regarding decorum came from La Mesnardière. It is significant that Rymer cites Horace as prescribing the use of the chorus; yet he himself is not won to its use until 1692, when Dacier's book appears. Horace does not move Rymer to action. The English critic emphasizes in Horace, as in Aristotle, only what the French critics have emphasized.

The examination of Rymer's relations with the critics he cites most frequently corroborates the previous conclusion that his chief indebtedness is to the French Aristotelians. Rymer himself was not a codifier of the rules, but he did apply the rules codified by the French formalists. He is predominantly a follower of the French rules.

There is reason to believe, therefore, that not only is Rymer an English representative of the French formalists, owing his critical ideas to them, but that he may have been in large part instrumental in introducing into English literary criticism the rigid system of the French school of rules.
Prefatory Note to Chapter II

Chapter Two deals with the interplay of Dryden and Rymer, concentrating on the factors that establish Dryden's high place in literary criticism. The first part of the chapter offers as much direct evidence as I have been able to find for a personal relationship between the two men. The second part treats of Dryden's theory of poetry and elaborates on what I consider the nature and sources of its divergence from Rymer's. In the third part of the chapter, I have studied Dryden's use of Rymer's rules of tragedy and have endeavored to explain their applications in practical criticism. Mine is not the claim that Rymer "influenced" Dryden in the vague but familiar sense of the term. I merely suggest that certain neoclassical principles for which Rymer is the most articulate and consistent spokesman played an important, but by no means exclusive, role in the development of Dryden's critical thinking. Both critics, that is to say, are operating in the same culture and with the same literary traditions; the interesting thing is that out of materials so similar Rymer and Dryden can come to represent two different kinds of critical approach.
Rymer stands as virtually the only English critic after Ben Jonson to whom Dryden turns with admiration. This fact is significant in itself, for Dryden was a vigorous and independent critic who seldom abstained from battle with his contemporaries; often these battles were punctuated with abuse. Dryden's reception of Rymer, however, is almost uniformly favorable, and one may conclude that much of Dryden's critical activity probably arises out of a deliberate effort to meet Rymer's standards.

Dryden, it would appear, first mentions Rymer in a letter to the Earl of Dorset written in the autumn of 1677. Dryden had recently received a complimentary copy of *The Tragedies of the Last Age*; he explains his satisfaction with that work:

> Mr. Rymer sent me his booke which has been my best entertainment hitherto: 'tis certainly very learned, & the best piece of criticism in the English tongue: perhaps in any other of the modern. If I am not altogether of his opinion, I am so in most of what he sayes: and think myselfe happy that he has not fallen upon me, as severely and wittily as he has put upon Shakespeare and Fletcher. For he is the only man I know capable of finding out a poet's blind sides: and if he can hold here without ex-

I shall abbreviate all references to specific works of Dryden except for the first occasion the work is mentioned. Works invariably refers to the Scott-Saintsbury edition; Essays means the edition of W. P. Ker; Letters always has reference to the Charles E. Ward edition; Poems refers, in all cases, to the Oxford edition, brought out under the supervision of John Sargeant.

1One need only read his Prologues and Epilogues in order to get a notion of Dryden's stormy career. The Rehearsal, of course, represents the organized efforts of some of his enemies. Sir Robert Howard may also be mentioned in connections with his critical battles for the reason that the Essay of Dramatic Poesy, as well as its later Defence, came out of Howard's controversy with Dryden. See the beginning of the Examen Poeticum for Dryden's most vicious blast at contemporary critics.
poseing his Edgar to be censur'd by his Enemyes; I thinke there is no man will dare to answer him, or can. 2

In the Preface to All for Love, written at about the same time, he observes that he is in this play trying to follow the practice of the ancients, "who as Mr. Rymer has judiciously observed, are and ought to be our masters." 3

And in the well-known "Heads of an Answer to Rymer," also composed shortly after his reading of Rymer's book, Dryden grants considerable merit to his opponent's cause:

He who undertakes to answer this excellent critique of Mr. Rymer, in behalf of our English poets against the Greek... first must yield to him the greatest part of what he contends for. 4

In fact, a good part of the "Heads" is taken up with Dryden's somewhat slender modifications of Rymer's position rather than with any basic disagreement with the position itself.

In 1679, when Dryden, together with most of his fellow critics, was most obviously under Rymer's influence, Dryden discusses some of the virtues he perceives in the Iphigenia of Euripides and begins to cite for special praise the scene between Agamemnon and Menelaus. Dryden withdraws, however, in favor of Rymer: "But my friend Mr. Rymer has so largely and with so much

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In the same essay Dryden goes on to praise Rymer for discovering defects in the structure of Elizabethan dramatic plots and notes approvingly that Rymer had justly criticized Fletcher for portraying a vicious king in The Maid's Tragedy. Again, as late as 1692, Dryden curtails his own discussion of Milton because he eagerly awaits Rymer's promised remarks on Paradise Lost. It seems plain, therefore, that in the beginning Dryden felt considerable respect for Rymer's criticism.

As for Rymer's early attitude toward Dryden, there is only one clue, and it indicates admiration. Comparing several descriptions of night from various works, Rymer selects as the best example some lines from Dryden's Conquest of Mexico:

In this description, four lines yield greater variety of matter, and more choice thoughts than twice the number of any other Language. Here is something more fortunate than the boldest fancy has yet reached, and something more just than the severest reason has observed.

It is impossible to tell how close a friendship existed between the two critics; it is certain, however, that in 1693

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5 Dryden, Essays, I, p. 206.
6 Ibid., I, p. 211.
7 Ibid., I, p. 218.
8 Ibid., II, p. 29.
this friendship was, for a time, disrupted. There is not enough evidence to build a complete case, but there are factors which help explain the new hostility. In 1693 Rymer became Royal Historiographer (a position formerly held by Dryden); the man Rymer succeeded was none other than Thomas Shadwell. It is quite possible that this fact—together with his own fallen estate—accentuated Dryden's general dissatisfaction with the government and produced a brief and bitter rebellion against all authority, political and literary. Rymer became for Dryden the current synthesis of these two realms of authority. Then, too, in the Short View (1693) Rymer had made references to Mr. Bayes and The Rehearsal and had ironically suggested that Dryden write the "model tragedy" dealing with the defeat of the Armada. 10

The first indication of Dryden's changed feelings toward Rymer occurs in a letter to Walsh written in 1693. Dryden urges his friend to enter the lists, "though not against Rymer; yet as a champion of our cause, who defy the Chorus of the Ancients." 11 Dryden may have wanted to save Rymer for himself; in the same year he published the Examen Poeticum in which he launches a violent attack on hypocrisy and ignorance in both government and criticism. Of critics in general, and of Rymer in particular, Dryden writes the justly famous lines:

11 Dryden, Letters, p. 54.
Ill writers are usually the sharpest censors; for they, as the best poet and the best patron said,

When in the full perfection of decay,
Turn vinegar, and come again in play.
Thus the corruption of a poet is the generation of a critic. 12

At one time, of course, Rymer had been an unsuccessful poet.

Then, on August 30, 1693, in a letter to Tonson, Dryden repeats a rumour to the effect that Rymer was preparing to attack him. According to Dryden's "friend," the Queen had taken offense at Dryden's caustic remarks in the Examen Poeticum about a "government of blockheads." The Queen consequently planned some sort of action against Dryden, including an attack on his plays. Dryden complains bitterly to Tonson:

...and that therupon she had commanded her Historiographer Rymer to fall upon my plays: which he assures me is now doing. I doubt not his malice from a former hint you gave me: & if he be employ'd, I am confident 'tis of his own seeking; who you know has spoken slightly of me in his last Critique: & that gave me occasion to snarl a-gaine. 13

But Rymer's attack was not forthcoming, and by 1694 or so, much of Dryden's feeling against him had been dissipated. Dryden, however, still found opportunity for an occasional satiric thrust. For example, in the Prologue to Love Triumphant, Dryden's last play, he makes imaginary bequests to various members of his audience—and especially to his critics. Among the legatees is Rymer:

12Dryden, Essays, II, p. 2.
To Shakespear's Critique he bequeaths the Curse,
To find his faults; and yet himself make worse;
A precious Reader in Poetique Schools,
Who by his own Examples damns his Rules. 14 (ll. 47-50)

The "Epistle to Congreve" (1694) hides another barb.

Discussing the pitiful state of English poetry, Dryden expresses

deep regret that Shadwell and not Congreve had succeeded him as
Poet Laureate, for Shadwell was in turn succeeded by Rymer:

But now, not I, but Poetry is curst;
For Tom the Second reigns like Tom the First. 15 (ll. 47-48)

And in a letter to Dennis, written about the same time, Dryden
writes as follows:

After I have confess'd thus much of our Modern Hero­

ick Poetry, I cannot but conclude with Mr. Rym[er], that our

English Comedy is far beyond anything of the Ancients.

And notwithstanding our irregularities, so is our Tragedy.
Shakespeare had a Genius for it; and we know, in spite of

Mr. R---- that Genius alone is a greater Virtue than all
other Qualifications put together. You see with what suc­

cess this Learned Critick has found in the World, after
his blaspheming Shakespear. Almost all the Faults he has
discovered are truly there; yet who will read Mr. Rym--
or not read Shakespear? 16 For my own part I reverence

Mr. Rym--'s Learning, but I detest his Ill Nature and
his Arrogance. I indeed, and such as I, have reason to
be afraid of him, but Shakespear has not. 17

It is apparent in this letter that Dryden's attitude--still un­

friendly--is nevertheless returning to a more normal state.

Near the end of his life Dryden seems thoroughly to have

15 Ibid., p. 167.
16 Dryden makes a similar comment regarding Homer and Scaliger. This is treated later in the present chapter.
made peace with Rymer. Dryden had no occasion "to snarl againe," and Rymer, as has been indicated, did not make his attack. In the Preface to the Fables, his last work, Dryden reaffirms his admiration for Rymer's learning and ability:

Chaucer (as you have formerly been told by our learned Mr. Rymer) first adorned and amplified our barren tongue from the Provencal, which was then the most polished of all the modern languages; but this subject has been copiously treated by that great critic, who deserves no little commendation from us his countrymen. 18

Unfortunately, these few facts do not provide a complete picture of the role Rymer may have played in the evolution of Dryden's critical thought; it is clear, however, that Dryden's awareness of Rymer's system was both serious and enthusiastic. Though it may be difficult to say for certain that Dryden accepted or rejected this or that portion of Rymer's creed, one can investigate the ways in which specific elements of that creed reacted upon Dryden and were employed by him. Accordingly, Dryden's theory of poetry will be analyzed, with particular attention paid to the ways in which it compares with Rymer's. One ought also to explore the way Dryden reshapes the neoclassic rules of tragedy as Rymer developed them; this will clarify the important similarities in and differences between the two critical approaches. Obviously, the extent to which Rymer influenced Dryden is, in a sense, the measure of Rymer's influence and excellence as a critic.

18 Dryden, Essays, II, p. 249.
Throughout their careers both Rymer and Dryden insisted on the moral nature of poetry; both took an exalted view of the poet's scope and purpose. In the Defence of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy (1668), for example, Dryden urges that the poet be a man of philosophic mind and great moral insight:

...I am of opinion, that they cannot be good poets, who are not accustomed to argue well. False reasonings and colours of speech are the certain marks of one who does not understand the stage; for moral truth is the mistress of the poet as much as of the philosopher; Poesy must resemble natural truth, but it must be ethical....Therefore that is not the best poesy which resembles things that are not, to things that are: though the fancy may be great and the words flowing, yet the soul is but half satisfied when there is not truth in the foundation. 19

The renaissance conception of the poet as orator and inspired teacher Dryden is never totally to relinquish, and in 1677, shortly before the appearance of Rymer's critique, Dryden repeats his conviction that poetry must be closely allied with philosophy: "those springs of human nature are not so easily discovered by every superficial judge; it requires Philosophy, as well as Poetry, to sound the depth of all the passions."20

In the crucial years following his initial exposure to Rymer, Dryden understandably becomes more of a pedant and, in appropriately Rymerian fashion, sets down as the first rule of poetic invention the finding of the moral precept, for, "'Tis the moral that directs the whole action of the play to one centre."21 In the same work, moreover, urging that the poet know

19Ibid., I, p. 121.
20Ibid., I, p. 183.
21Ibid., I, p. 213.
thoroughly the manners of men, Dryden is careful to specify the
many sources from which this knowledge is to be obtained:

They are likewise to be gathered from the several vir-
tues, vices, or passions, and many other commonplaces,
which a poet must be supposed to have learned from natur-
al Philosophy, Ethics, and History; of all which, whoso-
ever is ignorant, does not deserve the name of poet. 22

By virtue of an extraordinary understanding of men and things,
the poet, as Dryden conceives him, can best realize the explicit
function of tragedy. Still didactic, Dryden describes that func-
tion as the destruction, through the effects of pity and terror,
of mankind's two predominant vices, "pride and want of commisera-
tion."23 Rymer himself would scarcely have phrased the idea dif-
ferently.

Even during the period of his hostility to Rymer, there
is virtually no change in Dryden's broad concept of poetry. When
in 1693, he discusses the necessary qualities superior poets must
have, Dryden, as a matter of fact, actually seems to go farther
than Rymer in the breadth of his demands. Dryden's poet resides
in the celebrated tradition of Sidney and Jonson:

...a man who, being conversant in the philosophy of Pla-
to...who, to his natural endowments, of a large invention,
a ripe judgment, and a strong memory, has joined the know-
ledge of the liberal arts and sciences, and particularly
moral philosophy, the mathematics, geography, and history,
and with all these qualifications is born a poet: knows
and can practise the variety of numbers, and is master
of the language in which he writes....24

22 Ibid., I, p. 214.
23 Ibid., I, p. 210. Dryden is quoting Rapin and agreeing
with his analysis of pity and terror.
24 Ibid., II, p. 36.
There is in this outlook a comprehensiveness which Rymer only faintly approximates.

In 1697 Dryden reiterates what he generally believes the aim of poetry to be, paying special attention to tragedy and the heroic poem, two forms very much alike in method and intent. Their joint design, for Dryden, is to stir the mind to heroic virtue by example; tragedy has its own special way of accomplishing this objective:

To raise, and afterwards to calm the passions—to purge the soul from pride, by the examples of human miseries, which befall the greatest—in few words, to expel arrogance, and introduce compassion, are the greatest effects of tragedy. 25

Although this theory is like Rymer's, Dryden, it would seem, penetrates deeper than Rymer into the sources and motives of human experience. Whereas Rymer speaks somewhat dryly of the poet as a learned and sensible man who methodically selects materials he deems proper for the inculcation of a stern and approved moral lesson, Dryden envisions his poet in the exciting act of painting large human passions and miseries on a grand scale, teaching imprecisely though unforgettably.

When Dryden begins to discuss poetry in terms of its intrinsic pleasure, he plainly parts company with Rymer. As a professional poet, Dryden had to regard earnestly the whims of the audience for whom he wrote; but Rymer, who was in literary matters for the most part, a theoretician, feels no such responsibility.

25 Ibid., II, p. 158.
to public taste. It is true, of course, that Rymer grudgingly admits delight as a desirable help in the teaching of virtue, but Dryden assigns to it an active and vital role in the educational process. Delight, for Dryden, occupies a position in poetry fully equal to that held by instruction and, in fact, may be even more crucial. Dryden would please first, and only then worry about how much moral instruction he is effecting.

This second aspect of Dryden's aesthetic attitude is illustrated early in his career in the Defence of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy (1668), where he states his immediate objectives: "For I confess my chief endeavours are to delight the age in which I live. If the humour of this be for low comedy, small accidents and raillery, I will force my genius to obey it." Delight, Dryden had maintained only a few paragraphs earlier, is the chief, if not the only, end of poetry, and he had recognized instruction only as a secondary aim. Success on the stage meant, as he was to assert four years later in a famous Epilogue, conforming one's genius to the age in which one happens to be writing.

In 1693, when Dryden was rebelling--personally and ideologically--

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26 Ibid., I, p. 116. It should be remembered that Rymer asserts that the end of all poetry is to please, adding that, if poetry profits, it is guaranteed to please. Conversely, if poetry is known to please, then it follows that it is profiting. See the chapter on Rymer's critical system, n. 20.

27 Ibid., I, p. 113.

28 Ibid., I, p. 160.
logically—against Rymer, Dryden, during the course of the *Examen Poeticum*, discussed what sort of plots may or may not please particular audiences. It is then that Dryden's interest in pleasing reaches almost to the point of defiance: "However it be, I dare to establish it for a rule of Practice on the stage, that we are bound to please those whom we pretend to entertain: and that at any price, religion and good manners only excepted." 29

The most significant enunciation of this attitude, however, occurs in *A Parallel of Poetry and Painting* (1695). Referring to Du Fresnoy's *De Arte Graphica*, Dryden is able to distill into a few observations much of his rich experience as a creative artist. It is precisely the kind of enunciation Rymer could not have made, for he lacked that first-hand experience:

He tells you almost in the first lines of it, that "the chief end of Painting is, to please the eyes: and 'tis one great end of Poetry to please the mind." Thus far the parallel of the arts holds true; with this difference, that the principal end of Painting is to please, and the chief design of Poetry is to instruct. In this the latter seems to have the advantage of the former; but if we consider the artists themselves on both sides, certainly their aims are the very same; they would both make sure of pleasing, and that in preference to instruction. 30

Dryden knew "artists themselves on both sides," a knowledge Rymer unfortunately did not have.

There is, then, the first great difference between Rymer and Dryden: whereas Rymer needs only to recognize a single obligation, to the poetic ideal, Dryden, dependent upon public good

29 Ibid., II, p. 7.
30 Ibid., II, p. 128.
will, has to serve two masters. He must, on one hand, keep faith in himself; on the other, he must meet a responsibility to the people for whom his art is intended. He must satisfy an obligation to ideal poetry and, at the same time, earn his bread as a practicing poet in a realistic age. This duality of obligation is a vital key to Dryden's critical thought; for that reason it requires the extended treatment that follows.

Because the practical poet cannot always travel the road of the idealist, Dryden's life often becomes one of intense disillusion and even, perhaps, tragedy. To assume, as some critics have done, that Dryden is happy adding his own fat pollutions to the adulterate age is to minimize the importance of a vast body of crucial statements which, throughout the course of his long career, he finds necessary to formulate again and again. These statements amount to painful confessions, and the man who makes them speaks out of a profound and fearful cynicism.31 Rymer, it appears, retains an ultimate faith in man's innate goodness and reasonableness, and even when for the sake of argument he grants that nature can be corrupted, it is generally with the optimistic conviction that the corruption will in time be expelled. But Dryden, in the spirit of Hobbes, looks on depravity as constituting man's normal state and despises the necessity which compels him to cater to that depravity.

Dryden is at first only mildly aware of the conflict that

will divide him. As Neander, he remarks that the judgment of the people is "a mere lottery," that it does not matter what the mob thinks about a particular work of art. This attitude is expanded in the Defense of the Essay of Dramatic Poesy, where Dryden observes that there may be a discrepancy between what is good and what succeeds with the people. Though he feels obligated to please his audience, he recognizes the limitations of concentrating upon so narrow an objective:

The liking or disliking of the people gives the play the denomination of good or bad, but does not really make or constitute it such. To please the people ought to be the poet's aim, because plays are made for their delight; but it does not follow that they are always pleased with good plays, or that the plays which please them are always good.

About the same time, however, Dryden begins to speak in more somber tones. The mild observations give way to a kind of bitterness. Who, for example, can read the Prologue to the new version of The Wild Gallant without sensing the poet's contempt for the mobs that applaud his bawdy plays? In this Prologue Dryden sees himself and his hero as a young farmboy who comes to the big city hoping to set it reeling with what, for him, is wanton behaviour. To his disappointment, however, he learns that the townspeople, according to their own standards, simply do not think him wicked enough. In order to satisfy the demands of his public, therefore, Dryden finds it necessary to make his hero

33 Ibid., I, pp. 120-121.
34 See Dryden, Poems, p. 208.
more obscene and accordingly gives him bigger and better vices to commit. Although one may urge that the Prologue should be regarded as merely an attempt at wit, it is extremely difficult to account completely for the harshness of its flavor except as an expression of Dryden's dissatisfaction with his public's degraded appetite.

The complaint voiced in the Preface to An Evening's Love (1671) is more specific. Protesting that a true poet often misses applause "because he cannot debase himself to write so ill as to please his audience," Dryden weakly defends his successful play while, at the same time, apologizing for its excesses:

I accuse myself as well as others: and this very play would rise up in judgment against me, if I would defend all things I have written to be natural: but I confess I have given too much to the people in it, and am ashamed for them as well as for myself, that I have pleased them at so cheap a rate.... Yet I think it no vanity to say that this comedy has as much of entertainment in it, as many others which have been lately written: and, if I find my own errors in it, I am able, at the same time, to arraign my contemporaries for greater.

The defense is shallow and half-hearted. The argument that others are worse can scarcely hold its own against the poet's full-scale acknowledgment of shame. But, despite the shame, Dryden continues to please, and in the Preface to All for Love he offers


36 Ibid., I, p. 137. The Prologue to An Evening's Love is also flavored with disgust. Dryden develops an incredibly obscene figure to the most ingenious heights possible. The poet's relation to his audience is compared to a bridegroom faced night after night with the task of pleasing a lusty wife who, when he has ceased to entertain her, will be quick to cuckold him. See Poems, pp. 211-212.
a somewhat stronger defense. This time he pleads that, whatever his faults, people should remember that he writes "for a poor subsistence" and consequently cannot help himself.\(^{37}\) Similarly, he observes in the "Heads" that a poet must aim first to please, "for his immediate reputation depends on it."\(^{38}\) He concedes to Rymer, however, that the poet ought not run with the stream of public opinion, but should try to reform the people's judgment.\(^{39}\)

Dryden reveals a good deal about himself and his position when, in 1681, he writes the Dedication of The Spanish Friar, and what he tells helps to reinforce the notion that he is far from satisfied with his work. Like Rymer he speaks of the elaborate deceptions of the theatre, the false beauties which "are no more lasting than a rainbow," vanishing the moment "the actor ceases to shine upon them."\(^{40}\) Of his own bad passages which, amid the glitter and pageantry go undetected, Dryden caustically says, "I knew they were bad enough to please, even when I writ them."\(^{41}\) More spiteful is his statement regarding a purple passage in Sylvester's Du Bartas—a passage which, as a youth, he admired. Now that his judgment is ripe, he wonders how he could have been

\(^{37}\) Ibid., I, p. 196. Dryden also complains that the crowd cannot judge competently because it "cannot be presumed to have more than a gross instinct of what pleases or displeases them." See Essays, I, p. 195.

\(^{38}\) Dryden, Works, XV, p. 391.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., XV, p. 385.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., Essays, I, pp. 245-246.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., I, p. 246.
fooled by its superficial virtues:

I am much deceived if this be not abominable fustian, that is, thoughts and words ill-sorted, and without the least relation to each other; yet I dare not answer for an audience, that they would not clap it on the stage; so little value there is to be given to the common cry, that nothing but madness can please madmen, and a poet must be of a piece with the spectators, to gain a reputation with them. 42

He perceives a vast difference between a "present liking" and a "lasting admiration," and though the former brings immediate acclaim, it is the latter sort of reputation towards which he would ultimately aspire. 43

Dryden's bitterness is not restricted to artistic matters, but pervades his whole view of human nature. This is corroborated by some remarks he sees fit to make in the Preface to the *Sylva* (1685) concerning the immortality of the soul. The thought of being nothing after death Dryden finds insupportable. The present life is cruel and ugly; human nature, essentially rotten:

> We naturally aim at happiness, and cannot bear to have it confined to the shortness of our present being; especially when we consider, that virtue is generally unhappy in this world, and vice fortunate. So that 'tis hope of futurity alone, that makes this life tolerable in expectation of a better. Who would not commit all the excesses, to which he is prompted by his natural inclinations, if he may do them with security while he is alive, and be incapable of punishment after he is dead? If he be cunning and secret enough to avoid the laws, there is no band of morality to restrain him: for fame and reputation are weak

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43 *Ibid.*, I, p. 248. "But, as 'tis my interest to please my audience," he says, "so 'tis my ambition to be read: that I am sure is the more lasting and the nobler design."
ties; many men have not the least sense of them; powerful men are only awed by them, as they conduce to their interest, and that not always, when a passion is predominant; and no man will be contained within the bounds of duty, when he may safely transgress them. 44

Once again Hobbes is speaking through Dryden as he never speaks through Rymer. While Rymer looks at man as a creature essentially good, Dryden sees him as something gross and detestable. In evolving principles of poetry, therefore, Rymer can ignore man's perverted taste for the irrational because his view of human nature excludes the irrational. Dryden, on the other hand, in thinking about poetry, has to think largely in terms of his own view of the sordid nature of man and cannot conceive of an aesthetic which fails to take into account the crude, unthinking elements of human nature.

Shortly after the Sylvaecomes what is perhaps the most poetic expression of Dryden's dissatisfaction with the state of poetry and morals. In the celebrated lines from the "Ode to the Memory of Mrs. Anne Killigrew" (1686), Dryden magnificently upbraidshimself and his fellows for having defiled poetry:

O gracious God! how far have we
Prophan'd thy Heavenly Gift of Poesy!
Made prostitute and profligate the Muse,
Debas'd to each obscene and impious use,
Whose Harmony was first ordain'd Above,
For Tongues of Angels and for Hymns of Love!
Oh wretched We! why were we hurry'd down
This lubrique and adult'rate age.
(Nay, added fat Pollutions of our own)
T'increase the steaming Ordurers of the Stage?45

44 Ibid., I, pp. 260-261.
45 Dryden, Poems, p. 179. The concluding stanza of this great ode also contains evidence for Dryden's high opinion of
To this eloquent contempt for cheap success, Dryden, during the last several years of his life, adds a strain of weariness which tends to make his plight seem even more unfortunate. He confesses, in 1694, to Congreve that he is already "worn with cares and age,/ And just abandoning the ungrateful stage."46

In an effort to explain the faults of his Spanish Friar, Dryden meekly suggests that this play was given to the people, that he never wrote anything for himself but Antony and Cleopatra.47

More poignant is the "Epistle of Sir Godfrey Kneller" (1694) consoling the painter for not yet having achieved true artistic heights. Kneller cannot arrive at the level of Rome and Venice because he shares with Dryden the curse of being born in a mean age where grandeur is unimaginable:

\[
\text{That yet thou hast not reach'd their high Degree,} \\
\text{Seems only wanting to this Age, not thee.} \\
\text{Thy Genius, bounded by the Times, like mine,} \\
\text{Drudges on petty Draughts, nor dare design} \\
\text{A more exalted Work, and more Divine.} \quad 48
\]

Dryden goes on to explain to Kneller that artists have to eat and so must sometimes sacrifice their artistic standards in order to comply with the will of the public that feeds them.

If further evidence of Dryden's sense of futility is re-

poetry. Speaking of the great resurrection, Dryden has the poet emerge first from burial. He is, for Dryden, less heavily buried than ordinary men, and, hence quick to spring up and regain his position as leader of mankind. See Poems, p. 181.

46 Ibid., p. 167.
47 Dryden, Essays, II, p. 152.
48 Dryden, Poems, p. 169.
quired, one needs only to glance at his reactions to Jeremy Collier's famous attack on the immorality of the stage. Gone is the nimble wit with which a younger Dryden would have struck. Instead of a new "MacFlecknoe" there is merely a tired admission that Collier has, in many things, censured him justly. Despite a mild thrust at the parson's bad manners and extraordinary nose for smut, Dryden feels compelled to plead guilty and to retract. "Perhaps the Parson stretch'd a point too far," Dryden listlessly observes, but adds that the poetry is symptomatic of a totally debauched age. Poets simply take their cue from the depraved court, for it is in the court that they find patronage:

The Poets, who must live by Courts or starve,
Were proud, so good a Government to serve;
And, mixing with Buffoons and Pimps profane,
Tainted the Stage for some small Snip of Gain;
For they, like Harlots, under Bawds profess't,
Took all the ungodly pains, and got the least.
Thus did the thriving Malady prevail;
The Court its head, the Poets but the Tail.
(11. 11-18)

Whatever ideals the poet may have, he has to play the harlot if he wants to survive. Moreover, the "thriving malady" has taken so firm a grip that the patients are never to be mended; and one finds Dryden, in December, 1699, writing very skeptically to his close friend, Mrs. Steward, concerning the royal decree against lewdness: "The King's Proclamation against vice and profaneness

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50 Dryden, Poems, p. 262.
51 Ibid.
is issued out in print; but a deep disease is not to be cur'd with a slight Medicine." ⁵²

Only a month before Dryden had written to Elizabeth Thomas censuring Mrs. Behn for loose writing, but he had found it necessary to qualify the accusation out of the sad consciousness of his own transgressions:

I confess, I am the last Man who ought in Justice to arraign her, who have been myself too much a Libertine in most of my Poems, which I should be well contented I had time either to purge or to see them fairly burned. ⁵³

One is aware of having gone into considerable detail in order to show how Dryden's artistic purpose was frequently split by contradictory obligations. But because so much emphasis has been placed on his smugness and opportunism, it is necessary that Dryden be rescued from an approach which distorts his critical position and bars entrance into the exciting and perceptive activity of his mind. The division of purpose underlying Dryden's critical attitude drove him into many compromises; it is precisely these compromises that makes his criticism real and meaningful in a way that Rymer's is not. Had Dryden seen artistic problems with a single vision, simply and cheerfully, he probably would have written a criticism so enmeshed in theory as to be unreal, or else so involved with box-office receipts as to be devastating. What he has given us is a critical approach rooted in idealism.

⁵² Dryden, Letters, p. 131.
⁵³ Ibid., p. 127.
but, at the same time, enriched by first-hand experience with
the practical problems of the artist in society. If he is too
much a sensible man of the world to become lost in moralistic
day-dreams, Dryden is still too deeply conscious of the poetic
ideal to abandon himself unquestioningly to a sordid and unaspir-
ing commercialism.

Rymer, as has been seen, regarded criticism as a process
of fault-finding and had introduced his early Preface to Rapin
with a declaration of the critic's function in relation to the
work of art:

The Artist would not take pains to polish a diamond,
if none besides himself were quick-sighted enough to dis-
cern the flaw; and Poets would grow negligent, if the
Critics had not a strict eye over their miscarriages. 54

Dryden, regarding the identical problem, has this to say:

They wholly mistake the nature of criticism who think
its business is principally to find fault. Criticism, as
it was first instituted by Aristotle, was meant a standard
of judging well; the chiefest part of which is to observe
those excellencies which should delight a reasonable rea-
der. 55

The difference is fundamental because it is as a result of their
disagreement on the issue of flawlessness as a requirement for
poetry that the two critics arrive at completely opposite evalu-
ations of Elizabethan drama.

Longinus accounts in part for the difference. Both Rymer
and Dryden had read On the Sublime and, in different degrees,

55Dryden, Essays, I, p. 179.
have favorable things to say about its author. But while Rymer indifferently acknowledges "the admirable fragments of Longinus" as having been in large measure derived from Aristotle,\textsuperscript{56} Dryden regards \textit{On the Sublime} as undoubtedly the greatest piece of criticism among the Greeks since the \textit{Poetics}\textsuperscript{57} and is proud to consider himself a champion of the tradition of Longinus.

Longinus had transcended didacticism, maintaining that great poetry should command and overpower, not request and convince. It is "sublimity" that raises great poetry above ordinary verse, and this sublimity cannot be achieved through the mere filling of a safe prescription:

The effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport. At every time and in every way imposing speech with the spell it throws over us, prevails over that which aims at persuasion and gratification. Our persuasions we can usually control, but the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over every hearer. Similarly, we see skill in invention, and due order and arrangement of matter, emerging as the hard-won result not of one thing nor of two, but of the whole texture of the composition, whereas sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the power of the orator in all its plenitude.\textsuperscript{58}(I,4)

If a poet aims at great heights, he will unavoidably go

\textsuperscript{56}Rymer, \textit{An Essay Concerning Critical and Curious Learning}, p. 284.

\textsuperscript{57}Dryden, \textit{Essays}, I, p. 179. Again and again Dryden expresses his indebtedness to Longinus, one of the authors to whom he owes his lights. (See \textit{Essays}, I, p. 207). In fact the passage from Longinus on Apollonius and Homer Dryden deliberately paraphrases. (See \textit{Essays}, I, pp. 179-180). For Dryden's attitude towards Longinus, see \textit{Essays}, I, pp. 179, 181, 186, 202, 206, 220 221, 224, II, p. 253.

to extremes and, in a number of cases, produce mere bombast. This raises for Longinus a question that was to concern Dryden as it had concerned poets and critics of all ages: If it comes to a choice between a grandeur that is faulty and a moderate success that is errorless, what is the reader, or critic, to do? To be invariably accurate incurs the risk of being petty. In aiming at the sublime, on the other hand, the poet is bound to overlook some faults that will blemish his work. Average natures are safer because, not aiming at too much, they can never fall too far. Then, too, errors are long remembered; excellences are soon forgotten. In the face of this dilemma, what road is the poet and critic to choose?

After weighing the problem and seeing that the errors of a Homer--regrettable though they may be--are really the heedless, random errors of genius, Longinus decides in favor of sublimity. Excellences are to be assessed, not according to their number, but in terms of the loftiness to which they attain:

Consequently I do not waver in my view that excellences higher in quality, even if not sustained throughout, should always on a comparison be voted the first place because of their sheer elevation of spirit if for no other reason. Granted that Apollonius in his Argonautica shows himself a poet who does not trip, and that in his pastorals Theocritus is, except in a few externals, most happy, would you not, for all that, choose to be Homer rather than Apollonius? 59 (XXXIII,4)

Interestingly enough, one of Dryden's comments is strikingly

59 Ibid., p. 129.
Julius Scaliger would needs turn down Homer, and abdicate him after the possession of three thousand years: has he succeeded in his attempt? He has indeed shown us some of those imperfections in him, which are incident to human-kind; but who had not rather be that Homer than this Scaliger? 60

There is also the passage on Rymer and his criticisms of Shakespeare, occurring in Dryden's letter to Dennis:

You see with what success this Learned Critick has found in the World, after his blaspheming Shakespear. Almost all the Faults he has discover'd are truly there; yet who will read Mr. Rym-- or not read Shakespear? 61

Both Longinus and Dryden freely concede the imperfections observed by the critics; yet they share in the conviction that occasional sublimity more than compensates for a poet's mistakes. Longinus, in fact, feels that a supreme author "often redeems all his failures by a single, sublime and happy touch." 62

It is the sublime touch that, for Longinus, elevates Demosthenes above the more correct Hyperides. Although the latter has many good qualities, he lacks grandeur. The words of Hyperides are "the staid utterances of a sober-hearted man," and they leave the hearer virtually unmoved. 63 Demosthenes has, on the other hand, superhuman vision (as do Sophocles and Plato):

Though writers of this magnitude are far removed from faultlessness, they none the less all rise above what is

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60 Dryden, Essays, II, pp. 3-4.
63 Ibid., p. 133. (XXXIV, 4).
mortal; that all other qualities prove their possessors to be men, but sublimity raises them near the majesty of God; and while immunity from errors relieves from censure, it is grandeur that excites admiration. 64 (XXXVI, 1)

Out of the Longinian notion of the sublime—with its emphasis on transport rather than correctness—Dryden develops a set of reasonable literary appreciations which, again, are the products of a kind of compromise. He is, for example, able to include Milton among the first-ranked poets, a thing Rymer could never do. 65 Dryden sees Milton as a great genius in whom can be found "lofty thoughts" and "a true sublimity." 66 In recognizing, moreover, that Milton is not perfect, Dryden rebels against hero-worship in literature:

There are few poets who deserve to be models in all they write. Milton's Paradise Lost is admirable; but am I bound therefore to maintain, that there are no flats among his elevations, when 'tis evident he creeps along sometimes for above an hundred lines together? Cannot I admire the height of his invention, and the strength of his expression, without defending his antiquated words, and the perpetual harshness of their sound? It is as much commendation as a man can bear, to own him excellent; all beyond it is idolatry. 67

64 Ibid., pp. 135-136.
65 Rymer speaks contemptuously of Paradise Lost "which some are pleased to call a poem," and intends to subject it to the same treatment he gave Elizabethan tragedy. See Rymer, The Tragedies of the Last Age, p. 76. He indicates that he will, in his reflections on that work, "assert Rime against the slender Sophistry wherewith he attacques it." It was, for Rymer, unthinkable that a heroic poem could be written in unrhymed verse. Unfortunately, however, his attack on Milton never was carried out, and Dryden waited in vain for the critique Rymer promised. See Dryden, Essays, II, p. 29.
67 Ibid., I, p. 268.
But the most important example of where Longinus enters into the shaping of Dryden's reasoned appreciations is to be found, of course, in the case of Shakespeare. Even while snobbishly disparaging Elizabethan verse and manners for lacking polish, Dryden finds it imperative that he do justice to "that divine poet." That Shakespeare had certain faults, Dryden would be the first to admit. This admission, however, does not alter his famous belief that Shakespeare, "of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul." 68 Such praise, however extravagant, is not irrational, for Dryden knows as well as anyone else the nature of Shakespeare's limitations. Like all poets of the very highest order, Shakespeare is often uneven. He is, for Dryden, a very Janus because, aiming at immortal heights, he sometimes fails:

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 the poets, Quantum lenta solent inter viburna cupressi. 69

When he uses the phrase, "great occasion," Dryden is getting at the same concept of sublimity that Longinus, centuries before, had so eloquently described as flashing forth at the proper moment, scattering "everything before it like a thunderbolt."

68 Ibid., I, p. 79.
69 Ibid., I, p. 180.
Shakespeare's faults, says Dryden, are the faults of a god and stem primarily from too much strength:

He often obscures his meanings by his words, and sometimes makes it unintelligible. I will not say of so great a poet, that he distinguished not the blown puffy style from true sublimity; but I may venture to maintain, that the fury of his fancy often transported him beyond the bounds of judgment. 70

Dryden regards Shakespeare as the Homer, or father, of our dramatic poets. 71 Like Homer, he may sometimes nod but, despite his shortcomings, "Shakespeare had an universal mind, which comprehended all characters and passions." 72

Not even Ben Jonson can equal him. Dryden recognizes Jonson as the more correct and learned artist, but with simple exactness he evaluates the two poets. It is an evaluation Rymer could not have made, for he failed to possess the large responses of a Longinus or a Dryden. "I admire him," Dryden can say of Ben Jonson, "but I love Shakespeare." 73

Just as he sees fit to modify certain features of Rymer's poetic theory, so Dryden finds it necessary to qualify the neoclassic rules of tragedy. To say that Dryden is completely liberated from the past is to rob him of his most valid claim to a permanent place in the annals of criticism. Intelligent compromise is often more difficult than single-minded idealism. Torn

70 Ibid., I, p. 224.
71 Ibid., I, p. 82.
72 Ibid., I, p. 228.
73 Ibid., I, pp. 82-83.
between a classical authoritarianism on one hand and an aesthetic anarchy on the other, Dryden had sufficient pase to sift evidence for himself and to arrive at the kind of balance seldom achieved by men in any field of endeavor.

Dryden, as well as Rymer, places a very high value on the contributions of Aristotle to learning in general and to criticism in particular. He repeats Rymer's argument that Aristotle, through thoughtful observation of the techniques of successful Greek dramatists, derived rules that poets of all ages may profitably follow. As a most profound student of Nature, Aristotle commands Dryden's respect:

Aristotle raised the fabric of his Poetry from observation of those things in which Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus pleased: he considered how they raised the passions, and thence has drawn rules for our imitation. Thus, I grant you, that the knowledge of Nature was the original rule; and that all poets ought to study her, as well as Aristotle and Horace, her interpreters. 74

Those things, adds Dryden, which delight all ages must have been an imitation of Nature. There is no need to resent the rules, for they are grounded not on authority but on sound reason. At the height of Rymer's influence Dryden speaks as Rymer had spoken and even quotes and endorses the words of Rapin:

If the rules be well considered, we shall find them to be made only to reduce Nature into method, to trace her step by step, and not to suffer the least mark of her to escape us....They are founded upon good sense, and sound reason, rather than on authority; for though Aristotle and Horace are produced, yet no man must argue that what they write is true, because they write it; but 'tis evident, by the ridiculous mistakes and gross absurdities which have

74 Ibid., I, p. 183.
been made by those poets who have taken their fancy only for their guide, that if this fancy be not regulated, it is a mere caprice, and utterly incapable to produce a judicious poem. 75

It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that the phrase "to reduce Nature into a method" is the source of Pope's "nature methodized." Dryden knew and accepted the phrase from Rapin; Rymer, as Rapin's translator and admirer, certainly understood it and shared in its implications. To create a work of art without rules is, for Dryden, like building a house without a door to conduct you into it. 76 Lope de Vega made a mistake in attempting to devise new rules when he should have been content to follow our masters, "who understood Nature better than we." 77 This nature, says Dryden, is the same in all ages "and can never be contrary to herself." 78 Because he understood these things, Aristotle, for Dryden, occupies the uppermost position in the development of what we call literary criticism.

Now all of this was said by Rymer as well as by Dryden. But the latter again demonstrates that he is a sensible man of the world who finds it impossible to rely exclusively upon the authority of the ancients. With Ben Jonson, Dryden sees Aristotle as a guide, not a commander, and often challenges the notion that the Greeks were infallible. Very early in his career, in

75 Ibid., I, pp. 228-229.
76 Ibid., II, p. 138.
77 Ibid., II, p. 139.
78 Ibid., II, p. 134.
the "Epistle to Dr. Charleton," he praises such men as Gilbert, Boyle, and Bacon for having enriched the possibilities of human life. Had they been content to accept everything Aristotle said, then progress would have stopped. The worship of Aristotle, says Dryden, came to replace independent and unfettered thinking:

The longest Tyranny that ever sway'd
Was that wherein our Ancestors betray'd
Their free-born Reason to the Stagirite,
And made his Torch their Universal Light.

Had we still paid that homage to a Name,
Which only God and Nature justly claim,
The Western Seas had been our utmost bound,
Where Poets still might dream the Sun was drown'd. 79

(11. 1-18)

Dryden sees the impossibility of turning back. Extremely sensitive to the continuing demands for a living literature, he deplores any dogma that may stultify the creative activity of his age. In the Defence of the Epilogue, therefore, he announces that poetry must keep pace with science:

For we live in an age so sceptical, that as it determines little, so it takes nothing from antiquity on trust; and I profess to have no other ambition in this Essay than that poetry may not go backward, when all other arts and sciences are advancing. 80

79 Dryden, Poems, p. 160. Dryden's interest in the Royal Society may be recalled at this point.

80 Dryden, Essays, I, p. 163. I have treated only indirectly the influence of scepticism on Dryden's thought. Readers are urged to consult Louis I. Bredvold's The Intellectual Milieu of John Dryden (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1934) for the best statement involving Dryden's intellectual atmosphere. Professor Bredvold makes a strong and convincing case for the importance of the traditions of scepticism in shaping Dryden's political, religious, and critical opinions. This scepticism, as opposed to Rymer's dogmatizing, certainly helps to explain the reservations Dryden felt concerning Aristotle, the authority of the ancients, and the rules.
Not only, then, must poets unshackle themselves from an unreasoning loyalty to antiquity, but must determine far-reaching principles that will enable poetry to strike out in new directions. Nature and Reason may, for the most part, remain unchanged through the years, but each generation produces its own values. Shakespeare and Fletcher, for example, wrote to satisfy the needs of their own people and their own culture; and Dryden feels that poets of the Restoration must do likewise: "Yet the climate, the age, the disposition of the people to whom a poet writes, may be so different, that what pleased the Greeks would not satisfy an English audience."81

As a matter of fact, Dryden challenges the traditional theory that pity and terror are the only ends of tragedy on the simple grounds that the English have succeeded in raising new emotions. Specifically answering Rymer, Dryden argues that Aristotle himself probably would have been receptive to English drama had he been acquainted with its techniques. Because Aristotle theorized only from his own experience, Dryden can very neatly summarize his attitude towards him—an attitude respectful, but sensible: "It is not enough that A. has said so, for A. drew his models of tragedy from Soph. and Eurip.; and if he had seen ours, might have changed his mind."82 And valuable though the rules may be, Dryden will always sacrifice them when the occasion de-

81 Dryden, Works, XV, p. 385.
82 Ibid., XV, p. 390.
mands it. "Better a mechanic rule were stretched or broken," he
insists, "than a great beauty were omitted." 83

It is by virtue of this undervalued gift for reasonable
compromise that Dryden breathes new life into dead theory; and
although he sometimes differs only slightly from Rymer, the dif-
ference is almost always the dividing line between criticism that
is dry and criticism that is exciting, between partial literary
insights that are merely quaint and those richer insights that
are eternally and humanly true.

Dryden's sense of reasonable compromise operates also
where his theory of ideal imitation is concerned. Ideal imita-
tion, for Dryden, means essentially what it meant for Rymer. Ne-
ander, in distinguishing between comedy and tragedy, points out
that Tragedy represents "Nature wrought up to an higher pitch," 84
and proceeds to explain how events on the Stage are to be elevat-
ed above those of ordinary life:

A play, as I have said, to be like Nature, is to be
set above it; as statues which are placed on high are
made greater than the life, that they may descend to the
sight in their just proportion. 85

Dryden ranks Lucan as an historian in verse, not a poet, because
in tying himself too severely to the laws of history, he "walks
soberly afoot, when he might fly." 86 Criticizing Shakespeare's

83 Dryden, Essays, II, p. 158.
84 Ibid., I, p. 100.
85 Ibid., I, p. 102.
86 Ibid., I, p. 152. See also Essays, I, p. 11.
histories, moreover, Lisideius—who may or may not be speaking in part for Dryden—observes the poet's failure to represent Nature properly:

On the other side, if you consider the historical plays of Shakespeare's, they are rather so many chronicles of kings, or the business many times of thirty or forty years, cramped into a representation of two hours and a half; which is not to imitate or paint Nature, but rather to draw her in miniature, to take her in little; to look upon her through the wrong end of a perspective, and receive her images not only much less, but infinitely more imperfect than the life. 87

Imitating Nature, then, involves a conception of the ideal state of man, and the poet cannot therefore pattern his work after historical models.

The most elaborate discussion of imitation, however, is to be found in the Parallel of Poetry and Painting. In this essay Dryden identifies himself with Platonism as he shows how the artist is to translate into the work of art the "idea of perfect nature," elevating his materials above the commonplace. Through this striving after the perfect idea, the poet—or painter—corrects Nature "from what actually she is in individuals, to what she ought to be, and what she was created." 88 Like Rymer, Dryden urges that the figures be noble but not perfect. Nor can the characters be portrayed as excessively ugly or unpleasant. Restating Neander's case, Dryden enters into a detailed analysis of the psychological basis for our pleasure in imitation:

87 Ibid., I, p. 59.
88 Ibid., II, p. 125.
Truth is the object of our understanding, as good is of our will; and the understanding can no more be delighted with a lie, than the will can choose an apparent evil. As truth is the end of all our speculations, so the discovery of it is the pleasure of them; and since a true knowledge of Nature gives us pleasure, a lively imitation of it, either in Poetry or Painting, must of necessity produce a much greater: for both these arts, as I said before, are not only true imitations of Nature, but of the best nature, of that which is wrought up to a nobler pitch. They present us with images more perfect than the life in any individual; and we have the pleasure to see all the scattered beauties of Nature united by a happy chemistry, without its deformities or faults. 89

It may be noted in passing that Dryden's theory of imitation differs from Aristotle's. Since he has just stated that he cannot accept Aristotle's conclusions regarding the psychology of imitation, Dryden may again be significantly demonstrating an unwillingness to take for granted a notion merely because it is to be found in the Poetics. In any case, it is reasonable to point out that, while agreeing with Rymer on the general principle of imitation, Dryden seems to go much deeper into its psychological roots. Rymer may be repeating mechanically a well-learned lesson from Sir Philip Sidney or Aristotle, or particularly from Bacon; Dryden, on the other hand, is thinking for himself.

But there are one or two more important qualifications which Dryden sees fit to make in the theory of ideal imitation. Even as early as 1664, for example, he discusses the poet's reaching at Nature and arrives at a definition of Nature that would be strange to Rymer: "[Nature is] a thing so almost infinite and

89 Ibid., II, p. 137.
boundless as can never be fully comprehended, but where the images of all things are always present."\(^{90}\) Dryden is thus claiming for Nature a vastness and complexity that Rymer's over-simplifications could not have included; and in so doing Dryden opens up for poetry possibilities of a much broader range. He does not attempt—as Rymer attempts—to fence in a particular segment of human experience and say, "This is Nature." For the more sensitive Dryden, Nature is a large and loose concept that refuses to be narrowly confined. It is neither one single thing nor two things and there is no simple pattern or group of patterns in which it can be held. Nature is all things at all times, and her resources are therefore infinite. In the hands of a great artist any subject-matter is permissible, for Nature is boundless. Of course, Dryden speaks of a pattern of truth in Nature and regards that truth as more or less universal. But in a way that Rymer did not, Dryden feels a sense of awe at the intricacies of Nature, and ideal imitation becomes, for Dryden, merely an exhortation to portray all aspects of life—bad as well as good—in the grand manner. In the very act, moreover, of censuring Lope de Vega for trying to discover new rules for imitating Nature, Dryden sees fit to make crucial exceptions. We should, he says, follow our masters who understood Nature so thoroughly, but Nature takes on new meanings for each age: "But if the story we treat be modern, we are to vary the customs, according to the

\(^{90}\text{Ibid., I, p. 3.}\)
time and the country where the scene of action lies; for this is still to imitate Nature, which is always the same, though in a different dress.\textsuperscript{91} When one sees an old friend in "different dress," he may discover new things about the wearer, but the wearer has not undergone, really, a radical change. Dryden is saying that Nature does not change either; but the best poets bring us closer to her and, through the originality of their colors and combinations, allow us to find new beauties in her—beauties of which we have previously been unaware.

Having seen in the case of Rymer on \textit{Othello} what can happen when a man with little imagination applies a rational principle too rigidly to a work of great imagination, one finds in Dryden's interpretation of probability an unexpected freshness and flexibility. In Dryden's hands the rule becomes something vital and, in some ways, even liberating.

Dryden makes his most emphatic endorsement of probability, as one might expect, in the Preface to \textit{Troilus and Cressida}, written at the peak of Rymer's influence. Condemning the improbable Spanish plots, "where accident is heaped upon accident, and that which is first might as reasonably be last,"\textsuperscript{92} Dryden reasserts the doctrine of Aristotle that the tragic action should be uniform and well-ordered, with a beginning, middle, and end. He defines probability and advocates its observance, but he realizes

\textsuperscript{91}Ibid., II, p. 139.
\textsuperscript{92}Ibid., I, pp. 208-209.
at the same time, that tragic action has to be wonderful. To create an action that is both probable and wonderful is by no means an easy task. The audience wants it both ways, and Dryden realizes the poet's difficulty of meeting the challenge successfully:

The last quality of the action is that it ought to be probable, as well as admirable and great. 'Tis not necessary that there should be historical truth in it; but always necessary that there should be a likeness of truth, something that is more than barely possible; probable being that which succeeds, or happens, oftener than it misses. To invent therefore a probability, and to make it wonderful, is the most difficult undertaking in the art of Poetry; for that which is not wonderful is not great; and that which is not probable will not delight a reasonable audience.

Observe how sensible Dryden is in his awareness of human weaknesses. No poet, he says, can be perfect because life itself is not perfect. Poets who undertake the gigantic task of synthesizing the wonderful and the probable ought, says Dryden, to command admiration and respect. One should appreciate, he adds, the nature of the dangers to which they expose themselves:

For the stage being the representation of the world, and the actions in it, how can it be imagined, that the picture of human life can be more exact than life itself is? He may be allowed sometimes to err, who undertakes to move so many characters and humours, as are requisite in a play, in those narrow channels which are proper to each of them; to conduct his imaginary persons through so many various intrigues and chances, as the labouring audience shall think them lost under every billow; and then at length to work them so naturally out of their distresses, that when the whole plot is laid open, the spectators may rest satisfied that every cause was powerful enough to produce the effect it had; and that the whole chain of them was with such due order linked together,

93Ibid., I, p. 209.
that the first accident would naturally beget the second, till they all rendered the conclusion necessary. 94

Note Dryden's reminder that the characters in a play are "imaginary persons." They have all, that is to say, been idealized, and they therefore move on a superhuman level. Is it fair, then, to apply to them standards which are derived from our ordinary world? Whatever the answer may be, Dryden is not blind to the fact that we are human, that in judging a work of art—especially in the rationalistic world that was acquiring recognition in his day—we really have no choice but to apply criteria from our known experience. If, however, we judge exclusively according to standards of personalized, rational experience, then—along with Rymer—we shall probably have to dismiss Othello as a tissue of "improbable lies." Can poetry survive, then, such an aesthetic that would force it to conform to the individual critic's limited historical experience? Certainly most reasonable men have never known Moors who smothered their wives on account of a misplaced handkerchief. But at the same time we have seen the contradictions that develop when a Rymer applies quotidian standards to poetry which, by his own definition, is concerned with the ideal. We are justified in asking, then, whether rational laws of cause and effect can apply to the ideal world in the same way they apply to the real one. Can they, indeed, apply at all?

While he may not have the perfect answer to these baffling questions, Dryden can at least pose the central problem with rare

\[94 \text{Ibid.}, I, p. 2.\]
understanding and clarity. Defending an improbable action of his own Almanzor, he says very simply that, "This is indeed the most improbable of all his actions, but 'tis far from being impossible." Beyond this limit, one is not confidently certain how far to go. One could, of course, make a statistical study and draw up tables to show what particular human sequences occur more often than others. But even after this is done—even if only on a theoretical level—the possibility remains that the least common experiences are precisely the ones that offer the most interesting opportunities for dramatic investigation. The people who are provoked to the danger point by handkerchiefs—or by their equivalents—are the very men and women whose actions are already raised to an abnormally high pitch and who are, therefore, ideal subjects for imaginative analysis. Furthermore, the "statistical table" would record only the number of "misplaced handkerchiefs," and would fail to show that the many kinds of Othellos who accept too hastily the appearances of things are probably more numerous than we think. For a handkerchief they may substitute a bank account, a newspaper headline, a political promise.

The whole problem, of course, reduces itself to what was suggested earlier and hinges upon just how much imagination one is willing to unloose when he considers a given work of art. Rymer, plainly enough, unlooses very little; Dryden unlooses a good deal. The poet is still faced with the challenge of creating

95 Ibid., I, p. 158.
something wonderful which will at the same time delight an audience whose day-to-day experiences allow little room for the wonderful. In attempting to penetrate, moreover, into what is probable and what is wonderful, into what is real and what is imaginary, he may find a magnificent confusion which he may never succeed rationally in resolving. The probable and the wonderful are, in the most beautiful phases of life as in the greatest poems, identical. In appreciating this complexity—as Rymer did not—Dryden is perhaps coming as close to a satisfactory solution as criticism can reasonably hope for:

And if any man object the improbabilities of a spirit appearing, or of a palace raised by magic; I boldly answer him, that an heroic poet is not tied to a bare representation of what is true, or exceeding probable; that he let himself loose to visionary objects, and to the representation of such things as depending not on sense, and therefore not to be comprehended by knowledge, may give him a freer scope for imagination. 'Tis enough that, in all ages and religions, the greatest part of mankind have believed in the power of magic, and that there are spirits or spectres which have appeared. This, I say, is foundation enough for poetry. 96

It is also enough that "in all ages and religions" men, out of improbable absorptions, have again and again heaped tragedy upon themselves and their fellow men. They become savages, and often, to be sure, over issues scarcely less trivial than a handkerchief. In the hands of Shakespeare this, too, is foundation enough for poetry.

On the matter of poetic justice Dryden has less to say than on any of the other rules and adds little to what has already

96Ibid., I, p. 153.
been established. Except for a few statements in the "Heads," he virtually agrees with Rymer's notion that in tragedy the good should prosper; the wicked suffer. The Greeks have, with only one exception, observed poetic justice, and Dryden feels that they have thereby realized the function of tragedy:

In Tragedy, where the actions and persons are great, and the crimes horrid, the laws of justice are more strictly observed; and examples of punishment to be made, to deter mankind from the pursuit of vice. Faults of this kind have been rare amongst the ancient poets: for they punished in Oedipus, and in his posterity, the sin which he knew not he had committed. Medea is the only example I remember at present, who escapes from punishment after murder. Thus Tragedy fulfills one great part of its institution; which is, by example, to instruct. 97

In the Preface to Troilus and Cressida Dryden observes that we are glad when we see justice executed upon a wicked man.98 Quite in the spirit of Rymer is his complaint that Shakespeare has committed a grave error: "Cressida is false, and is not punished."99 On the other hand, Dryden extols the excellency of the moral in Antony and Cleopatra, for the chief characters in that play "were famous patterns of unlawful love; and their end accordingly was unfortunate."100

Dryden's remarks in the "Heads," however, concerning poetic justice are samples of his most unconvincing argument. Because Dryden's answers are full of contradictions that weaken his

97 Ibid., I, p. 142.
99 Ibid., I, p. 203.
100 Ibid., I, p. 191.
case, Rymer seems to come out the victor. Defending the attack on Rollo in which Rymer had charged that the bloody hero stands condemned by the laws of poetry to a horrible—and visible—death, Dryden can only say that "poetic justice is not neglected, neither, for we stab him in our minds for every offence which he commits."  

The point, continues Dryden, is not the death of the offender, but the raising of horror at his crimes. In discussing the aim of tragedy as the reformation of manners, he insists that on the stage, "Virtue is always amiable, though it be shown unfortunate, and vice detestable, though it be shown triumphant."  

Yet, almost in the same breath, Dryden states that specific reward and punishment are the most important features of tragedy: "The punishment of vice and the reward of virtue are the most adequate ends of tragedy, because most conducing to good example of life."  

Peculiarly, he now criticizes the Greeks for not always punishing the offender. Dryden has also forgotten what he had noted a few sentences before: that actual punishment of the offender is not necessary, that Fletcher is from his point of view exonerated. Can it be that we "stab Rollo in the mind" more readily than we stab Medea? The inconsistency is inexplicable.

101 Dryden, Works, XV, p. 387.  
102 Ibid., XV, p. 383.  
103 Ibid., XV, p. 390.
One is, of course, aware that the "Heads of an Answer to Rymer" are merely fragments and that if he had elaborated on these notations, Dryden might have cleared up his apparent muddle. Nor should one deny that Dryden's notion of "stabbing" an offender in the mind has a good deal of psychological validity. But one must read Dryden's remarks as they stand, not as they may have been projected; and, as they stand, the observations on poetic justice are far from satisfactory. Rymer may have been limited by an inability to distinguish between the artist's scheme of justice within a specific work and the static scheme of justice arbitrarily imposed from without; but he is at least clear where Dryden is disappointingly confused. In his discussion of poetic justice, Dryden simply missed a splendid opportunity; and, although Dryden surely sensed the subtlety with which the rule must be applied, he unfortunately does not develop his intuition into a complete critical insight.

While he may deal inadequately with poetic justice, Dryden, in his discussions of various aspects of decorum, effects a superb recovery. He once again speaks to us out of the richness of his experience; once again he proves his great capacity for understanding people as well as principles. As usual, Dryden accepts the basic theory of decorum as exemplified in Rymer, but he broadens its meanings so that it becomes a logical requirement of tragedy.

In the Essay of Dramatic Poesy, Lisideius—with the unanimous approval of his colleagues—expresses a belief in the jus-
tice of certain aesthetic decorums. Praising the French for avoiding the representation on the stage of cruel and violent action, he urges that the poet be on his guard against the unwitting creation of aversion or incredulity on the part of the spectators. Especially interesting in this connection is what Lisideius has to say about death:

I have observed that in all our tragedies, the audience cannot forbear laughing when the actors are to die; it is the most comic part of the whole play. All Passions may be lively represented on the stage....But there are many actions which can never be imitated to a just height: dying especially is a thing which none but a Roman gladiator could naturally perform on the stage, when he did not imitate or represent, but naturally do it. 104

It is therefore better, he continues, to omit the representation of death on the stage, the principal reason being that dying cannot be effectively executed.

But Neander, while agreeing with Lisideius that incredible or tumultuous actions ought ideally to be removed, offers the very realistic observation that audiences like violence:

...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. 105

Dryden is later to defend the "drum-and-trumpet" plays on the grounds that the spectators can more willingly suspend their disbelief when they see the action before their eyes. Both Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, says Dryden, used violence as an aid to the

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104 Dryden, Essays, I, p. 63.
105 Ibid., I, p. 74.
imagination of the spectators:

But I add farther, that these warlike instruments, and even their presentations of fighting on the stage, are no more than necessary to produce the effects of an heroic play; that is, to raise the imagination of the audience, and to persuade them, for the time, that what they behold on the theatre is really performed. The poet is then to endeavour an absolute dominion over the minds of the spectators; for, though our fancy will contribute to its own deceit, yet a writer ought to help its operation. 106

The DeMille screen-epic, then, would probably delight Dryden because it so realistically presents all the horror and excitement of an imaginary action, thereby persuading the audience—temporarily, to be sure—that the action is not a fiction.

Dryden specifies carefully, however, that all actions cannot be represented, that broad obscenities are to be avoided regardless of how exciting or natural they may be. 107 One does smile at Dryden's defence of the cave episode between Dido and Aeneas. Virgil, argues Dryden, is to be forgiven this licentiousness on the grounds that he has pretended a marriage before the consummation. "Besides," he adds, "the poet passes it over as hastily as he can, as if he were afraid of staying in the cave with the two lovers, and of being a witness to their actions." 108

Rymer, it will be remembered, had urged that a brutish malefactor ought not to be permitted in tragedy, for such a character cannot arouse pity and terror. "Shall we therefore," asks

106 Ibid., I, pp. 154-155.
107 Ibid., I, p. 193.
108 Ibid., II, p. 129.
Dryden, "banish all characters of villany?" While his answer is essentially the same as Rymer's, Dryden manages to add a very perceptive touch:

I confess I am not of that opinion; but it is necessary that the hero of the play be not a villain; that is, the characters, which should move our pity, ought to have virtuous inclinations, and degrees of moral goodness in them. As for a perfect character of virtue, it never was in Nature, and therefore there can be no imitation of it. 109

While virtue, then, may be more pleasing aesthetically than vice, Dryden realizes that the cause of realism must be served first. He can, therefore, make concessions to that realism—concessions which Rymer would have much less willingly granted.

In his attitude towards the social decorums, Dryden again reveals a mind that is extraordinarily sensitive to the realities of human behavior, and this sense of reality is constantly shaping and reorienting his artistic insights. Like Rymer, for example, he insists generally on the modesty of women, and he praises Ovid for having faithfully preserved this decorum in the Epistles.

But of the general character of women, which is modesty, he has taken a most becoming care; for his amorous expressions go no further than virtue may allow, and therefore may be read, as he intended them, by matrons without a blush. 110

This passage calls to mind some remarks Rymer sees fit to make in his tiny preface to an edition of the Earl of Rochester's poems. Rymer concludes his preface with a final word of praise for that poet and gallant—or, perhaps more accurately—for the poet's

110 Ibid., I, p. 236.
publisher, Jacob Tonson:

For this matter, the Publisher assures us he has been
diligent out of measure, and has taken exceeding care that
every Block of Offence should be remov'd.

So that this Book is a Collection of such Pieces only,
as may be receiv'd in a virtuous Court, and not unbecome
the Cabinet of the Severest Matron. 111

Modesty is for both Rymer and Dryden the necessary part of a
lady's character, both in life and—more importantly—in the
ideal stage.

But Dryden, when he speaks of his own All for Love, finds
it necessary to transcend the grim social decorums. According to
strict standards of feminine modesty, Cleopatra and Octavia should
not meet in the play. Yet, Dryden defends their encounter on
realistic grounds; and, not only does he justify having the two
rivals meet, but he takes pains to explain just why he has them
speak to each other so harshly and immodestly. Dryden's observa-
tions in this matter seem skillful and dynamic:

The faults my enemies have found are rather cavils con-
cerning little and not essential decencies; which a master
of the ceremonies may decide betwixt us. The French poets,
I confess, are strict observers of these punctilios: they
would not, for example, have suffered Cleopatra and Octavia
to have met; or, if they had met, there must have only
passed betwixt them so cold civilities, but no eagerness
of repartee, for fear of offending against the greatness
of their characters, and the modesty of their sex. This
objection I foresaw, and at the same time contemned; for
I judged it both natural and probable, that Octavia, proud
of her new-gained conquest, would search out Cleopatra, to
triumph over her; and that Cleopatra, thus attacked, was
not of a spirit to shun the encounter: and 'tis not unlike—

ly, that two exasperated rivals should use such satire as I have put into their mouths; for, after all, though the one were a Roman, and the other a queen, they were both women. 112.

It is difficult to imagine Rymer waiving, in this manner, a principle of decorum on the grounds that the breach would be conducive to greater dramatic excitement and would be nearer to the truth of nature. Dryden is coming much closer than Rymer to establishing genuinely universal characteristics for the figure with whom he deals. The one critic knows only points-of-honor; the other, more happily, understands men and women in the world.

In fact, Dryden is even more deadly in his criticism of the French poets for too much concern over little niceties at the expense of important action. French heroes, says Dryden, observe good manners with supreme care, but, as a result, they are frequently absurd and unconvincing:

Yet in this nicety of manners does the excellency of French poetry consist: their heroes are the most civil people breathing; but their good breeding seldom extends to a word of sense; all their wit is in their ceremony; they want the genius which animates our stage; and therefore 'tis but necessary, when they cannot please, that they should take care not to offend. But as the civilest man in the company is commonly the dullest, so these authors, while they are afraid to make you laugh or cry, out of pure good manners make you sleep. 113

A few lines later Dryden's remarks are even more pungent:

But while they affect to shine in trifles, they are often careless in essentials. Thus, their Hippolytus is so scrupulous in point of decency, that he will rather expose himself to death, than accuse his step-mother to

113 Ibid., I, pp. 193-194.
his father; and my critics I am sure will commend him for it: but we of grosser apprehensions are apt to think that this excess of generosity is not practicable, but with fools and madmen. This was good manners with a vengeance; and the audience is like to be much concerned at the misfortunes of this admirable hero; but take Hippolytus out of his poetic fit, and I suppose he would think it a wiser part to set the saddle on the right horse, and choose rather to live with the reputation of a plainspoken, honest man, than to die with the infamy of an incestuous villain. 114

For Dryden, then, the demands of dramatic realism are clearly to be given priority over the dubious demands of social etiquette; and whatever claims the decorums may make upon the work of art, Dryden will not sacrifice to them if it means creating ineffectual characters.

It will be recalled that Rymer insists upon the decorum of character, and Dryden, on the whole, does not radically depart from Rymer's interpretation of this idea. In a rather lengthy passage, for example, Dryden discourses in some detail concerning the manners that are suitable to particular characters. The passage, as a matter of fact, comes so close to Rymer's position, that one is hardly surprised to find it occurring in the Preface to Troilus and Cressida, written, as has been pointed out, at the height of Rymer's influence upon him:

But as the manners are useful in this art, they may be all comprised under these general heads: first, they must be apparent; that is, in every character of the play, some inclinations of the person must appear; and these are shown in the actions and discourse. Secondly, the manners must be suitable, or agreeing to the persons; that is, to the age, sex, dignity, and the other general heads of manners: thus, when the poet has given the dignity of a king to one of his persons, in all his actions and speeches, that person must discover majesty, magnanimity, and jeal-

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114 Ibid., I, p. 194.
ousy of power, because these are suitable to the general manners of a king. The third property of manners is resemblance; and this is founded upon the particular characters of men, as we have them delivered to us by relation or history; that is, when a poet has the known character of this or that man before him, he is bound to represent him such, at least not contrary to that which fame has reported him to have been. Thus, it is not a poet's choice to make Ulysses choleric, or Achilles patient, because Homer has described 'em quite otherwise. Yet this is a rock on which ignorant writers daily split; and the absurdity is as monstrous as if a painter should draw a coward running from a battle, and tell us it was the picture of Alexander the Great. 115

Observe Dryden's belief—again reminiscent of Rymer—that universal characteristics can be found for kings, soldiers, and in fact for all levels of society. Because they are to be apparent, manners are necessarily simple and general, and the resulting character is often a stereotype far removed from reality. According to this theory of the drama, there can at no time be any doubt in the spectator's mind as to the identity, nature, and stature of the characters seen on the stage. Both Rymer and Dryden turn out to be talking about essences, not real people, and the characters on the stage are necessarily imbued with the most rarified and abstracted personalities.

Nor is Dryden's general acceptance of the decorum of

115 Ibid., I, pp. 214-215. See also Essays, I, p. 218, where Dryden charges that Fletcher "gives neither to Arbaces, nor to his king in the Maid's Tragedy, qualities which are suitable to a monarch." About the king in the Maid's Tragedy, Dryden continues: "Tis true, we find him a lawful prince...and therefore Mr. Rymer's criticism stands good; that he should not be shown in so vicious a character." When Sophocles, in Antigone, was faced with the problem of showing a vicious king, he was careful, Dryden observes, to make the bloody Creon a usurper, not a king by nature.
character confined to that period in his life when he was actively reading Rymer. In 1685, for instance, he criticizes Virgil's shepherds because they "are too well read in the philosophy of Epicurus and of Plato," and remarks of Guarini that his shepherds seem to have been bred in courts instead of in cottages and fields. Ten years later Dryden is to endorse Du Fresnoy's statement that we must regard seriously the qualities of the persons we represent in order that we endow them with the correct passions. "The joy of a monarch for the news of a victory," adds Dryden, "must not be expressed like the ecstasy of a Harlequin on the receipt of a letter from his mistress." Discussing the Aeneid, even as late as 1697, Dryden embarks on an incredibly elaborate discussion of just when a hero may decorously shed tears, reaching the interesting conclusion that weeping is to be permitted only in time of public misfortune, and never for ordinary, private woes. And finally, in the very last year of his life, Dryden praises Chaucer for excelling in the delineation of character, an excellence made possible only because the author has been so faithful to the age, calling, and breeding of the individual pilgrims and has given them manners and discourses which "are becoming of them, and of them only."

116 Ibid., I, p. 265.
117 Ibid., II, p. 146.
118 Ibid., II, pp. 181 ff.
119 Ibid., I, p. 223.
We are again drawn into a consideration of the decorum of language, urged by Dryden as emphatically as by Ben Jonson or Rymer. Little need be added to what was said in the original discussion except to note Dryden's celebrated observation, "No man is at leisure to make sentences and similies, when his soul is in agony." This statement, of course, brings to mind Rymer's previous objection to Fletcher's Sophia, who rambles for comparisons and computes the value of diamonds at a time when she is torn by violent passion.

Before proceeding to Dryden's qualifications of the decorum of character, it is necessary to call attention to one further passage concerning language; the passage seems to offer the most conclusive proof that Dryden at one time fell very deeply under Rymer's influence—so deeply, in fact, that he began, perhaps deliberately, to copy Rymer's blustering style. Referring to two speeches which are quoted by one of the players in Hamlet, Dryden writes with an exuberant savagery almost worthy of the severe Rymer himself. The speeches in question are the exclamation against Fortune and the description of "the mobbled queen." Dryden's tirade is from Troilus:

What a pudder is here kept in raising the expression of trifling thoughts! Would not a man have thought that the poet had been bound prentice to wheelwright, for his first rant? and had followed a ragman, for the clout and blanket in the second? Fortune is painted on a wheel, and therefore the writer, in a rage, will have poetical

120 Ibid., I, p. 223.
121 See page 143 of the present dissertation.
justice done upon every member of that engine: after this execution, he bowls the nave down-hill, from Heaven, to the fiends (an unreasonable long mark, a man would think); 'tis well there are no solid orbs to stop it in the way, or no element of fire to consume it: but when it came to earth, it must be monstrous heavy, to break ground as low as the centre. His making milch the burning eyes of heaven was a pretty tolerable flight too: and I think no man ever drew milk out of eyes before him: yet, to make the wonder greater, these eyes were burning. Such a sight indeed were enough to have raised passion in the gods; but to excuse the effects of it, he tells you, perhaps they did not see it. Wise men would be glad to find a little sense couched under all these pompous words; for bombast is commonly the delight of that audience which loves Poetry, but understands it not: and as commonly has been the practice of those writers, who, not being able to infuse a natural passion into the mind, have made it their business to ply the ears, and to stun their judges by the noise. 122

It is—and this cannot be too strongly emphasized—not nobleness of expression nor pathetic vehemence per se that Dryden objects to, but rather the "extravagant thought, instead of a sublime one."

As an example, on the other hand, of eloquence that is appropriate to the situation and character, Dryden offers the speech of the deposed King Richard, who, after being led humiliatingly through the streets by the new King, sees his condition as that of a wretched actor trudging on to the stage after the favorite has just made a triumphant exit. 123 This elaborate metaphor Dryden regards as apt and genuinely poignant.

Let it not be thought, then, that Dryden accepts unquestioningly Rymer's decorums of character and language, or that he would find in Othello the same violations that inflamed Rymer.

123 Ibid., I, pp. 226-227.
Dryden, although he tells us nothing specifically about Othello, nevertheless demonstrates the keen grasp of art and life that would permit him to admit the play into the ranks of tragic masterpieces. The same logic by which he justifies the speech of Richard could apply as well to Othello's "Farewell, the tranquil mind." After all, speech is almost the only means a poet has to suggest emotional states. Situations in actual life which would be met silently, or only with secret thought, must, in tragedy, be made articulate. Othello, then, in a moment of shattering passion, could quite justly bid farewell to peace, joy, tranquility. If one is concerned—as Rymer is throughout his critiques—mainly with the "fable," then the important thing from that point of view is to get Desdemona killed without any delay; in this case, one will resent any "digression" Shakespeare may choose to make into the complicated hearts of his characters. But Dryden sees tragedy in a different way and comes much closer to the real spirit and significance of the tragic experience.

Characters certainly can be invented who will, at all times, act with perfect rationality and with an immaculate sense of proportion. They can, as Dryden sneeringly points out of the French heroes, proceed on the clear-cut assumption that "love and honour are to be weighed by drachms and scruples," but if so, they lose all reality as human beings with human passions and frailties. When the decorum becomes a hindrance to vigorous and

124 Ibid., I, pp. 156-157.
spontaneous action, observes Dryden, the great authors are quick to dispense with it. "They contented themselves," he says, "to show you what men of great spirits would certainly do when they were provoked, not what they were obliged to do by the strict rules of moral virtue." It is when he makes his eloquent plea in behalf of the human touch that Dryden, with a wisdom that Rymer never found, is sensing the enkindling principle of great tragedy, the principle that begins to arrive at the tragic hero's deathless power.

This chapter has tried to show, therefore, what distinguished Dryden as a critic from Rymer. Both men operated within the same general framework of neoclassicism, but for several reasons Dryden was better able to achieve a living criticism. These reasons have been treated in terms of Dryden's double obligation as opposed to Rymer's single one, in terms of Dryden's absorption and the notion of the "sublime," an absorption that Rymer never made, and finally, in terms of a long tradition of scepticism which activated Dryden in contrast to the rigid dogmatism of Rymer. Through these elements Dryden was able to transform neoclassic critical standards into flexible and meaningful tools; this chapter has attempted to analyze and to assess these tools.

What this chapter has tried to do in a concrete manner has been unforgettably accomplished in the figurative language of

125 Ibid., I, p. 157.
Samuel Johnson. In his metaphorical way Dr. Johnson strikes very close to the heart of the real and important difference between criticism as practised by Rymer and by Dryden:

The different manner and effect with which critical knowledge may be conveyed, was perhaps never more clearly exemplified than in the performances of Rymer and Dryden. It was said of a dispute between two mathematicians, "malim cum Scaligero errare, quam cum Olavio recte sapere"; that "it was more eligible to go wrong with one than right with the other." A tendency of the same kind every mind must feel at the perusal of Dryden's prefaces and Rymer's discourses. With Dryden we are wandering in quest of Truth; whom we find, if we find her at all, dressed in the graces of elegance; and, if we miss her, the labour of the pursuit rewards itself; we are led only through fragrance and flowers. Rymer, without taking a nearer, takes a rougher way; every step is to be made through thorns and brambles; and Truth, if we meet her, appears repulsive by her mien, and ungraceful by her habit. 126

"Dryden's criticism," he concludes, "has the majesty of a queen; Rymer's has the ferocity of a tyrant." 127

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127 Ibid.
CHAPTER III

Rymer's Critical System

Chapter Three attempts to present a reasonable exposition of Rymer's theory of criticism, keeping the presentation as free as possible from extremes either of approval or of condemnation. The first part of this chapter attempts to do just that, at the same time suggesting the distinguished critical tradition of which Rymer is a part. In the second part of this chapter I have established what I found to be the specific rules with which Rymer attacks Elizabethan tragedy, analyzing these rules as emerging from Rymer's central critical position and demonstrating some of the ways in which they apply, or fail to apply, to particular poems. I have dealt mainly with Othello because Rymer deals mainly with Othello and because the example is so familiar. I should like to emphasize, however, that we permit Dryden to function until he attacks a play that we traditionally admire. In other words, I wonder whether a good deal of the scorn Rymer arouses results not so much from his critical position itself, but from the nature of his target. In fact, Rymer and the highly respected Dryden do not differ in their general assumptions about art so much as in the extent to which they are willing to examine and re-examine these assumptions in the light of fresh aesthetic experiences.
The most striking fact about the critical system of Thomas Rymer is its assumption that poetry has a moral function and that the poet is accordingly a kind of philosopher. This is an assumption that has been made by reformers and moralist-critics of all ages, and Rymer, by virtue of the unusual consistency with which he carries out and applies the doctrine, becomes an important representative of a recurring critical tendency.

Rymer feels that the poet must find in Nature eternal truths which he interprets for the less gifted man. What he demands of the poet, therefore, in the way of intellectual equipment is particularly exacting, and not all men are capable of meeting the qualifications Rymer imposes:

Although a Poet is obliged to know all Arts and Sciences, yet he ought discreetly to manage this knowledge. He must have judgment to select what is noble or beautiful and proper for his occasion. He must by a particular Chymistry extract the essence of things without soiling his Wit with the gross and trumpery. 1

Especially grave is the responsibility of the tragic poet, and Rymer traces the development of tragedy with special emphasis on the evolution of its moral program.

Tragedy, according to Rymer, originated with the choral

I have found it convenient to note the complete titles of Rymer's works only for the first references. For subsequent references to these works I have used the following abbreviations:

TLA The Tragedies of the Last Age
Short View A Short View of Tragedy
Preface to Preface to Rapin's Reflections on Aristotle's
Rapin Treatise of Poesie

chants that accompanied Greek religious ceremonies. Although the Chorus was at first only an aimless diversion, sensible men soon protested against its lack of purpose and Socrates "set up for morality." The tragic art gradually was given a more exact definition and certain procedures became standardized. As one of the formulators of Greek dramatic pattern, Aristophanes is cited for insisting that the best poet was he who had done most towards making men virtuous citizens. For Aristophanes, the theatre is a great school and is therefore to be protected from sordid and immoral representations which may shock or corrupt an audience:

That if anything looks with an ill face, the Poet must hide it; not suffer it, by any means, to be shown or represented in a Play: Because as the schools are for teaching Children, the Stage should be for men of riper years and judgment. So that a Poet must be sure that his Doctrine be good and wholesome.

In a striking passage Rymer speaks in broad terms of the poet's method as he conceives it:

And besides the purging of the passions, something must stick by observing the constant order, that harmony and beauty of Providence, that necessary relation and chain whereby the causes and the effects, the vertues and rewards, the vices and their punishments are proportion'd and linked together, how deep and dark soever are laid the Springs and however intricate and involved are their operations.

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2 Thomas Rymer, The Tragedies of the Last Age Consider'd and Examin'd by the Practice of the Ancients and by the Common Sense of All Ages (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 22


4 Ibid.

5 Rymer, TLA, p. 75.
The poet uncovers the hidden but ordered mysteries of the universe and reveals them to the spectators through a correspondingly well-ordered work of art. His poem has to embody the same principles of causation and interaction that the philosopher perceives in nature, and since tragedy is so serious an instrument in education, it must be carefully guarded lest it harm men with the wrong kind of teaching.6

Now the ancients succeeded in raising tragedy to perfection, and the poet was at one time held in high esteem for his diligent activity in behalf of the moral welfare of the state. As he surveys the history of the drama, however, Rymer reaches the bitter conclusion that something unfortunately has happened to the quality of tragic poetry. Tragedy may have once been "a school of virtue and a poem for kings,"7 but in the hands of later practitioners the art lost that nobility. Either poetry, says Rymer, is not the same as it once was, or else men's brains "lye not in the same place as formerly."8 Does the change in poetic quality result from a new theory of poetry, or from a general shift in manners? Is it only poetry that is different, or—and this would be more serious—are men different? Rymer answers his own questions clearly and unhesitatingly:

6Rymer, Short View, p. 94. Rymer speaks of the theatre as "a Magazine, not to be trusted," and advocates that the government once again exercise a kind of censorship.

7Rymer, TLA, p. 17.

8Ibid., p. 18.
I found that our Philosophers agreed well enough with theirs in the main; however, that our Poets have forc'd another way to the wood: a by-road that runs directly cross to that of Nature, Manners, and Philosophy which gain'd the Ancients so great veneration. 9

Poetry flourished when it was the handmaiden of philosophy. Since the divorce between poet and philosopher, however, tragedy has deteriorated into brutishness. The same philosophy, says Rymer, certainly holds at Athens and Malmesbury, 10 and human psychology should be universal and unchanging:

Certain it is that Nature is the same, and Man is the same: he loves, grieves, hates, envies, has the same affections and passions in both places and the same springs that give them motion. What mov'd pity there will here also produce the same effect. 11

But modern poets, through their disregard for immutable moral and psychological laws, have failed to enter into men's hearts with the effectiveness of the ancients.

Denying that moral and aesthetic principles may shift from one age to another, Rymer posits for all men a common instinct that allows them always to respond similarly to emotional stimuli. Local conditions—climate and culture, for example—do not, in Rymer's opinion, produce significant variations. Morality, assuming that it can be defined (and Rymer never doubts this assumption), remains fixed for all time. Of course, the soul of

9 Ibid.
10 Rymer, TLA, p. 57. Rymer is curiously uncertain with regard to Hobbes. Apparently he accepts Hobbes's attempt to define emotions, but rejects his conclusions as to man in the natural state.
11 Ibid., p. 19.
man—essentially a moral and reasonable soul—can be corrupted; but the poet's obligation to teach good manners and refinement does not, on that account, end. It rather asserts itself eloquently in the form of a new answer to a new challenge:

But were it to be supposed that Nature with us is a corrupt and deprav'd Nature, that we are Barbarians, and humanity dwells not amongst us; shall our Poet therefore pamper this corrupt nature and indulge our barbarity? Shall he not rather purge away the corruption and reform our manners? Shall he not with Orpheus rather choose to draw the Brutes after him, than be himself a follower of the Herd? Was it thus that ancient Poets (by the best Philosophers) became stil'd the Fathers of Knowledge, and Interpreters of the Gods? 12

Until the poet rediscovers philosophy, even if it means defying the tastes of his age, he cannot regain the high level reached by the founders of tragedy.

In his conception of the poet as a teacher and reformer, Rymer is part of a long critical tradition which had counted, during the course of its emergence, many illustrious figures. Probably the most important English exponents of the Poet-as-Philosopher Doctrine were Sidney and Ben Jonson, and from both of these men Rymer derives substantial portions of his poetic theory.

Sir Philip Sidney, in the Defence of Poesie, laments the fact that poets and poetry are no longer esteemed as they had been in Greece. Answering the learned men "who have come to defame poetry," he emphasizes the high educational function poetry

12 Ibid., pp. 19-20. The tendency to identify the poet with Orpheus, the charmer of brutes, is a familiar one in English aesthetic theory of the Renaissance and seventeenth century.
once served and still ought to serve. Poetry, says Sidney, had been the greatest champion of learning:

They go very neare to ungratefulnesse to seek to de-
face that which in the noblest nations and languages that
are knowne, hath bene the first light giver to ignorance,
and first nurse whose milke little & little enabled them
to feed afterwards of tougher knowledges. 13

Pointing to the Psalms, Sidney recalls that the poet had been a "Maker," a real creator. 14 Poetry, for Sidney, even excels phil-
osophy, for while the Philosopher teaches those that are already
taught, the Poet reaches the many who need knowledge. He is "the
food for the tenderest stomacks," a popular philosopher who makes
truth beautiful. 15

But Rymer seems to owe an even greater debt to Ben Jonson
who, particularly in the Dedication to Volpone, speaks with su-
perb eloquence of the poet's responsibilities. Announcing that
the principal end of poesie is "to inform men in the best reason
of living," 16 Jonson entertains a fabulous notion of what the
poet ought to be:

For if men will impartially, and not asquint, look
toward the offices and function of a poet, they will ea-
sily conclude to themselves the impossibility of any man's
being the good poet, without first being a good man. He
that is said to be able to inform young men to all good
disciplines, inflame grown men to all great virtues, keep
old men in their best and supreme state, or as they de-
cline to childhood, recover them to their first strength;
that comes forth the interpreter and arbiter of nature,

13Sir Philip Sidney, The Defence of Poesie, ed. Albert Fe-
14Ibid., p. 6.
15Ibid., p. 16.
16Ben Jonson, "Epistle Dedicationary to Volpone," Complete
a teacher of things divine no less than human, a master in manners; and can alone, or with a few, effect the business of mankind: this, I take him, is no subject for pride and ignorance to exercise their railing rhetoric upon. 17

This reliance upon the poet to "effect the business of mankind"—certainly not new even in the times of Sidney and Jonson—is, of course, a crucial factor in Rymer's theory of poetry.

There is another important feature in Rymer's aesthetic that comes largely from Jonson: a suspicion of popular applause. On that point Jonson is emphatic:

But a man cannot imagine that thing so foolish, or rude, but will find, and enjoy an Admirer: at least a Reader, or Spectator....There are never wanting that dare preferre the worst Preachers, the worst Pleaders, the worst Poets: not that the better have left to write, or speake better, but that they that heare them judge worse. ...Nay, if it were put to the question of the Water-rimers workes against Spencers; I doubt not, but they would find more Suffrages; because the most favour common vices, out of a Prerogative the vulgar have to lose their judgements: and like that which is naught. 18

For Jonson, moreover, this vice belongs to the Gallants as well as to the vulgar, "for all are the multitude, only they differ in cloaths, not in judgement or understanding." 19 So when Rymer de­plores the tastes of his age, he is echoing at least one perfect­ly respectable voice.

18 Ben Jonson, Timber, or Discoveries (Paris: Hachette, 1906), p. 34.
19 Ibid., p. 35.
It is wrong, however, to assume that Rymer denies altogether the value of pleasing the public. On the contrary, he feels that the poet is required to please, but his idea of pleasure is rather unusual.

Outlining his dramatic principles, Rymer states bluntly and unequivocally:

1. I believe the end of all Poetry is to please.
2. Some sorts of Poetry please without profiting.
3. I am confident whoever writes a Tragedy cannot please but must also profit; 'tis the Physick of the mind that he makes palatable.

While Socrates teaches morality dryly, by means of questions and parables, the poet teaches by example, "in a graver way, yet extremely pleasant and delightful." He sugar-coats virtue so that his public will find it attractive and enjoyable. In defending the theatre against charges of depicting crimes and passions of fierce intensity, Rymer exclaims:

Grant all this, I say, where is the hurt? What is the danger? If the end of all is to show Virtue in Triumph. The noblest thoughts make the strongest impressions, and the juster passions find the kindest reception among us. The medicine is not less wholesome for the Honey, or the gilded pill. Nor can a moral lesson be less profitable when dressed and set off with all the advantage and decoration of the Theatre.

Not only, then, does Rymer accept pleasure as an end of tragedy, but regards it as precisely the element which makes the theatre

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20 Rymer, TLA, p. 75.
21 Ibid., p. 22.
22 Rymer, Short View, p. 111.
superior to the treatise. Pleasure is a necessary by-product of tragedy, but Rymer never lets us forget that it is only a by-product.

Although we may learn better from the stage because we enjoy ourselves while learning, Rymer warns of the abuses to which the Theatre is susceptible by very reason of its delightful-ness. The spectator may be pleased with the immediate effects of a production even when the poetry is defective. Some plays, says Rymer, succeed only because of the acting. A King and No King, for example, pleases on account of Mr. Hart, and the spectators are gracefully misled by his utter charm:

Their eyes are prepossessed and charm'd by his action before aught of the Poet's can approach their ears; and to the most wretched of Characters he gives a lustre and brillant which dazzles the sight, that the deformities in the Poetry cannot be perceived. 23

Sometimes it is the spectacle that pleases. Since the eye is easily won by splendid and violent action, Rymer thinks it may so prejudice the mind that the spectators forget to examine the justness or propriety of the action. 24 Or, the ears being instantly impressed with a good voice, an audience might fall in love with the sound and judge poorly of the sense. 25 Because our senses are so quickly and pleasantly invaded, we often reach hasty ver-

24 Rymer, Short View, p. 85.
25 Ibid., p. 87. Rymer sees in the Bar and Pulpit, as well as in the Theatre, the danger of a good voice interfering with the listener's judgment of the sense and propriety of what is said.
dicts which later, after sober thinking, we are forced to revise. Consequently, if a poet follows exclusively the applause of the multitude, he may give only superficial pleasure to his audience. Rymer distinguishes between two kinds of pleasure. There is that which pleases naturally in itself and that which pleases accidentally, on account of the acting or the spectacle. The natural pleasures are more lasting, for Rymer sees them as emerging from permanent principles of psychology. A poet who lacks an understanding of natural pleasures will frequently attempt to achieve massive effects, but Rymer will admit no substitute for genuine inspiration. The true poet knows what ought to please and, barring a given age's temporary depravity, what ought to please will please. 26

Rymer's distinction between the natural and accidental pleasures seems to have been suggested by the Poetics. For Aristotle, the natural pleasures arise out of the instinct for imitation, and are to be separated from those that are artificially designed. The following passages are interesting in that they show the germination of Aristotle's distinctions. Rymer, it seems certain, read these portions of the Poetics and was impressed by them:

The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of

26 Rymer, TLA, p. 19.
spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage than on that of the poet. 27 (Poetics, VI. 19)

Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet... But to produce this effect (of pity and terror) by the mere spectacle is a less artistic method, and dependent on extraneous aids. Those who employ spectacular means to create a sense not of the terrible, but only of the monstrous, are strangers to the purpose of Tragedy: for we must not demand of Tragedy any and every kind of pleasure, but only that which is proper to it. And since the pleasure which the poet should afford is that which comes through pity and fear through imitation, it is evident that this quality must be impressed upon the incidents. 28 (Poetics, XIV, 1-3)

For both Aristotle and Rymer, then, the pleasures of tragedy are somehow identified with the natural.

The term "nature" has meant many things to many men. It has already been indicated what it meant to Rymer, but the concept is so crucial and integral a part of his critical method that it is necessary to enlarge upon one use he makes of it—that is, as human nature. Rymer's is the Platonic moral nature and, by and large, the eighteenth-century human nature. It is a common instinct for virtue that may be found in all uncorrupted men of all ages. Very significant is the fact that Rymer's is not the Hobbesian nature, which would have scarcely admitted that all men innately abhor Evil and love Good. Nature has nothing to do, moreover, with majority practice or with history, but is an ideal:


28 Ibid., p. 49.
Many are apt to mistake use for nature, but a Poet is not to be an Historiographer, but a Philosopher. He is not to take Nature at the second hand, soyl'd and deform'd as it passes in the customes of the unthinking vulgar. 

Since, in Rymer's view, it is not "natural" to do evil when we know good, vice, therefore, can never please unless it be made to look like virtue. Should any man knowingly prefer evil to good, then Rymer reckons him "the greatest of Monsters, and in no wise to be look't on as any image of what is Natural, or what is suitable with humane kind." 

He who would understand human nature must look, then, to the greatest of her interpreters: Aristotle. Not only did he unravel mysteries of physics, Rymer says, but he uncovered for all time the operational principles for the art of poetry. Although Rymer demonstrates an extensive knowledge of the entire history of criticism, he seems satisfied to restrict his highest praise almost exclusively to Aristotle. He may announce that his zeal "goes no higher than the Doctrine of Horace and Aristotle," but he elsewhere gives complete credit to the latter as the father of all that is important in criticism. The passage is significant because it tells us plainly how Rymer felt about Aristotle's authority:

29 Rymer, TLA, p. 62.

30 Ibid., p. 63. The observation that vice can please only when disguised as a virtue suggests the famous couplet from Pope.

31 Rymer, Short View, Epistle Dedicatory, p. 83.
And therefore Critical Learning, in the Modern Acceptation, is commonly taken for a thorough Understanding of Classick Authors and an exact Knowledge of those Rules by which men judge and determine nicely of all the finer parts and Branches of Humane Literature. Aristotle was the first that drew these Rules up into Compass and made Criticism an art. And the Philosopher took such care to form his Precepts upon the Practice of the best writers and to reduce them withal to the severest Test of Nature and Reason, that he scarcely left anything for succeeding Ages to do. We find little or nothing in Horace and the admirable Fragments of Longinus but what he had in a great measure lay'd down before. The Modern Criticks drain all their Notions from this great Source and Fountain. And tho' later Systems have endeavoured to explode his Philosophy, yet I find no Reflections on his Criticks but what are likely to perpetuate that Esteem and Value the World has all along had for them. 32

In view of the above passage, one feels that Rymer's position has been inadequately represented by at least one scholar as one of blind subservience to the rules. 33 Dissenting from Spingarn's classification of Rymer as a representative of the School of Sense, 34 Professor George B. Dutton claims that Rymer's


"Nothing is more ridiculous then to make an Author a Dictator, as the schooles have done Aristotle. The damage is infinite, knowledge receives by it. For to many things a man should owe but a temporary belief, and a suspension of his owne Judgement, not an absolute resignation of himselfe, or a perpetual captivity. Let Aristotle, and others have their dues: but if wee can make further discoveries of truth and fitnesse then they, why are we envied? Let us beware, while wee strive to adde wee doe not diminish, or deface; wee may improve, but not augment." (Jonson, Timber, pp. 107–108).


application of sense, or reason, is a typical neo-classical development which attempted to find rational justification for the rules.

The point is that one should not assume in the rules a necessary opposition to reason, an opposition which Rymer would never have considered. The classicist does not create rules in a vacuum, but is confident that his rules—whatever a later age may think of them—are at bottom reasonable and natural. Rymer accepts the rules and insists upon their use because they are for him the same thing as reason. Aristotle did not invent rules of poetry any more than Newton "invented" the law of universal gravitation, or Harvey, the circulation of the blood. Poetic principles, like scientific principles, lie hidden in Nature waiting to be discovered, to be "drawn into Compass," or methodized. Through a rare instinct the poet hits upon the natural principles of pleasure and instruction and puts them into poetic practice. But even a man who is not endowed with these superior intuitions can exercise his intellect and, through diligent study of the most successful poetic achievements, arrive rationally at the same conclusions the poet reaches instinctively. As the supreme master of the art of reason, Aristotle could formulate the natural laws of poetry better than anyone else, and his judgments are held valid because they grew out of highly refined powers of observation:

35Dutton, p. 190.
The truth is, what Aristotle writes on this Subject are not the dictates of his own magisterial will or dry deductions of his Metaphysicks; But the Poets were his Masters, and what was their practice he reduced to principles. 36

For Rymer, then, adherence to the rules is not blind but logical, and their reasons are "as convincing and clear as any demonstration in Mathematicks." 37 Rymer believes that the rules enjoin nothing that Reason would not sanction. 38 Nor is it necessary, in his opinion, for one to be erudite or super-subtle in order to judge correctly a work of art. "Common sense suffices." 39 The complete title of Rymer's first dramatic critique ought in this connection to be emphasized, for, important as it is as a guide to his critical thought, the title is almost never noted in its entirety: The Tragedies of the Last Age Consider'd and Examin'd by the Practice of the Ancients and by the Common Sense of All Ages. It follows from this virtual equation of Common Sense to the practice of the Greek dramatists that the sin of the

36 Rymer, Preface to Rapin, pp. 2-3.
37 Ibid.
38 Rymer, Essay Concerning Critical and Curious Learning, p. 32.
39 Rymer, TLA, p. 18. Jonson says:
"I know Nothing can conduce more to letters, then to examine the writings of the Ancients, and not to rest in their sole Authority, or take all upon trust from them: provided the plagues of Judging, and Pronouncing against them be away... For to all the observations of the Ancients wee have our owne experience, which if we will use, and apply, wee have better means to pronounce. It is true they open'd the gates, and made the way that went before us; but as Guides, not Commanders: Non Domini nostri, sed Duces fuere. Truth lyes open to all; it is no man's several." (Jonson, Timber, pp. 9-10).
Elizabethan tragedians is two-fold: Through neglect of the Poetics they have not only ignored Rymer’s Aristotle, but—what amounts to the same thing—have betrayed the cause of universal reason, nature, and good sense.

Just why, asks Rymer, do we need rules for creating and evaluating works of art? Because in protecting us from the excesses of blind enthusiasm, they prevent aesthetic anarchy and hold the poet and critic responsible to good sense. Answering the theorists who claim that poetry is simply inspiration or pure rapture, Rymer assigns to Fancy and Reason their respective roles in the artistic process. Fancy is wild and exuberant; Reason is ordered and sober:

In framing a Character for Tragedy a Poet is not to leave his Reason and blindly abandon himself to follow fancy: for then his fancy might be monstrous, might be singular and please nobody’s maggot but his own; but reason is to be his guide; reason is common to all people and can never carry him from what is Natural. 40

Reason reshapes the Fancy and ratifies it. When Fancy strikes out after an image, Reason follows behind her to adjust and approve the image. Reason is like the sure hand of the father restraining the excited child:

But Fancy, I think, in Poetry is like Faith in Religion: it makes far discoveries and soars above reason, but never clashes or runs against it. Fancy leaps and frisks and away she’s gone: whilst reason rattles the chains and follows after. 41

40 Ibid., p. 62.
41 Ibid., p. 15.
Far, then, from clogging invention and producing a dull uniformity, the rules insure the poet against offending his audience and keep him moving in a straight line towards the vital aims of art. Though English dramatic poetry has been defective in realizing these aims, Rymer is not prepared to give up hope. Let English dramatists again begin to study the Poetics. If they succeed in learning from Aristotle what is natural and proper, then, while perhaps not yet able to carry on from where the Greeks left off, the English poets may nevertheless start out modestly with an imitation of Greek drama in its most primitive form:

If we cannot rise to the Perfection of Intrigue in Sophocles, let us sit down with the honesty and simplicity of the first beginners in Tragedy. As for example: One of the most simple now extant is the Persians by Aeschylus.

With his attention thus focused upon Aristotle and the Greek tragedians, Rymer proceeds to attack Elizabethan dramatists for neglecting the laws of tragedy and thereby failing to teach morality. Specifically, he calls upon English poets and critics to return to the observance of certain precise rules, and their relation to Elizabethan tragedy will help reveal Rymer's essential strength as well as his inevitable weakness.

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42 Rymer, An Essay Concerning Critical and Curious Learning, p. 29.

43 "I have thought our poetry of the last age as rude as our architecture, one cause thereof might be, that Aristotle's treatise of Poetry has been so little studied amongst us." (Rymer, TLA, p. 76).

44 Rymer, Short View, p. 89.
Rymer's sense of nature as a moral force rooted in a universal instinct for good has been discussed. As a hypothesis of ideal man before the world has had a chance to corrupt him, the state of nature is not a real state. That is to say, it does not partake of the same kind of reality one normally encounters in the world of fact. While the actual world is made up of particular truths, this Nature represents eternal truth. To reach moral decisions on the strength of historical facts is to form permanent judgments on the basis of incomplete evidence. Consequently the poet who would teach morality—and this includes all true poets—dare not choose for portrayal of men, or things, as they really are in fact. If he looks to history for moral examples, he may find that he misleads rather than teaches, for history is not necessarily moral.

Since the poet is to imitate what ought to happen and to show men as they ought to be, the best poets of Greece acknowledged that history was unfit for their purposes. Rymer commends them for perceiving the disparity between what is and what should be. Obviously, this is a distinction between the actual and the ideal:

They found that History, grossly taken, was neither proper to instruct nor apt to please; and therefore they would not trust History for their examples, but refin'd...
upon the History; and thence contriv'd something more philosophical and more accurate than History....46

In refining upon history the poet comes closer to that pure "Nature" which is the only subject suitable for representation:

Poetry is to follow Nature; Philosophy must be his guide. History and fact in particular cases...are no warrant or direction for a Poet...Poetry is more general and abstracted, is led more by philosophy, the reason and nature of things, than History which only records things high-falutin', right or wrong, as they happen. 47

Rymer, in this declaration of the poet's freedom from history, again demonstrates his dependence on Sidney. In speaking of how the poet regards nature--which in this case means simply the world in which we live--Sidney offers memorable testimony to the poet's unfettered powers:

Onely the Poet disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect into an other nature: in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or quite a new, formes such as never were in nature: as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chymeras, Furies, and such like; so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging with in the zodiak of his owne wit....(nature's work is brasen, the Poets only deliver a golden.) 48

The poet, Sidney continues, improves nature by idealizing it. Flowers, in poetry, are more beautiful, friends more constant, trees more fruitful, lovers more devoted than in the world of fact. This belief was absorbed by Rymer and became one of the cardinal tenets of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century criticism.

46Rymer, TLA, p. 23.
47Rymer, Short View, p. 144-145.
48Sidney, Defence of Poesy, p. 8.
One finds it difficult, however, to subscribe to the view that the neo-classic separation of poetry from history implies that history is true and poetry, false. Even the most extreme naturalism, while it may decry such separation in theory, tends in practice to exercise some kind of selective, refining process on history. It may idealize experience only in that it heightens its intensity. But this very magnification takes for granted that "history grossly taken" will not do as material for art.

Rymer, moreover, would have answered the accusation that poetry is false with a false denial. He would say that the only real truth is poetic truth. Though it is perhaps not so readily perceivable in the factual world, poetic truth is as vital and demonstrable as any particular truth. The truth of history is, in Rymer's own phrase, merely a "yesterday-truth," and yesterday-truths cannot serve to illustrate eternal truths. Far from being false, therefore, poetry constitutes truth of the most enduring kind.

While imitating the ideal, however, tragedy has to retain a close resemblance to life in the real world. When the tragic poet draws upon human experiences, it is in order that he may enrich experience. Like a good painter, he designs his image "like

49 Dutton, p. 173.

50 It is an interesting fact that the theory of Ideal Imitation, supposedly emerging from Aristotle, strikes close to Platonism. Professor Bredvold has written an essay on this complex subject. (Louis I. Bredvold, "The Tendency toward Platonism in Neo-Classical Esthetics," ELH, I (April, 1934), pp. 91-119.)
the Life, but yet better and more beautiful than the Life." Even when the poet has decided to represent evil, Rymer holds that he must make the malefactor a better sort of person than in real life; for an impenitent and brutish malefactor fails to arouse on the part of the audience the requisite compassion or terror. Patterned after nature, the characters in tragedy should be recognizable as real people; but the world of the stage is an ideal world and bears only a partial likeness to our own.

If this interpretation of ideal imitation seems, to modern taste, too baseful, it may be worthwhile to observe how a seventeenth-century "modern" like Sir Francis Bacon approaches the problem. Bacon, in the Advancement of Learning, shares the conviction that poetry must improve on history, but he offers a masterful insight into the psychological processes with which ideal imitation is connected. There is an extraordinary air of solemnity in Bacon's celebrated comment:

The use of this feigned history hath been to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it, the world being in proportion inferior to the soul; by reason whereof there is, agreeable to the spirit of man, a more ample greatness, a more exact goodness, and a more absolute variety, than can be found in the nature of things. Therefore, because the acts or events of true history have not that magnitude which satisfieth the mind of man, poesy feigneth acts and events greater and more heroical... And therefore it was ever thought to have some participation

51Rymer, TLA, p. 36.

52Rymer throughout emphasizes the importance of pity and terror as the emotions proper for tragedy. The notion of the refined malefactor seems to be based on Aristotle's celebrated "men better than they are" passages in the Poetics.
of divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind, by submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind; whereas reason doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things. 53

One cannot help sensing in the above passage—especially in its contrasting of poetry to the "real" world and to the unsatisfied longings of the will—a remarkable affinity with modern theories. In any event, Bacon's ideal imitation has its roots in the longing for something noble. It required a Bacon, and not a Rymer, to give ideal imitation an explanation that seems to probe deeply into the complexities of the human mind with its many disappointments and fantasies.

Moving from a discussion of ideal imitation to a discussion of probability, one finds that Rymer often says that poetry teaches by example. It necessarily follows, then, that the poet chooses for imitation examples which an audience can readily accept as logical. If he imitates an improbable action, the author may destroy the moral effect of his play and succeed only in arousing laughter. Probability, for Rymer, therefore becomes an essential ingredient of good tragedy.

Considering, for example, the virtues and defects of Cowley's Davideis, Rymer objects to Scripture as subject matter for a heroic poem on the grounds that sacred history is bound up too tightly with truth. Besides, says Rymer, many of its details are improbable:

And since many particulars in Sacred Story are neither Heroick, nor indeed consistent with the common principles of Morality, but of a singular, extraordinary, and unaccountable dispensation; and since in the principal actions all is carried on by Machine, how can these examples be propos'd for great persons to imitate? Or what foundations for their hopes in impossibilities? Poetry has no life, nor can have any operation, without probability. It may indeed amuse the People but moves not the Wise, for whom alone (according to Pythagoras) it is ordained. 54

Rymer forgets such trifling matters as style, diction, and the unities—all of which he chooses to regard merely as "outward regularities" of a poem—and busies himself chiefly with what he considers the essentials. He has not, he tells us, "gone a-quibble-catching" with the "French grammaticasters," 55 but feels obliged to concentrate on what Aristotle regarded as "the soul of the tragedy"—the fable. Following in Aristotle's footsteps, Rymer holds that a probable impossibility is to be preferred to a possible improbability, 56 and proceeds, with unfltering and merciless abandon, to uncover the many improbable features of Elizabethan fable.

In regard to Rollo, Rymer makes a distinction between general and particular probability. Having just deplored Fletcher's substitution of fictitious names for the real ones of the

54 Rymer, Preface to Rapin, p. 8.
55 Rymer, TLA, p. 18.
56 Aristotle's famous formula regarding probability occurs several times in the Poetics. Here is one instance:
"Accordingly, the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities. The tragic plot must not be composed of irrational parts. Every thing irrational should, if possible, be excluded." (Poetics, XXIV. 10) in Butcher, op. cit., p. 95.
whatever the extent of our sympathy with moralistic criticism, the trend is one that has to be seriously reckoned with.

Whether he is admiring the tragedy of the Greeks, then, or disparaging that of the Elizabethans, Rymer's final evaluations are conceived mainly in terms of the poet's success or failure as a teacher of virtue. This high sense of virtue drives Rymer to an almost desperate insistence upon the most rigid and extreme tenets of neoclassical criticism. As a crusader conscious of the poet's responsibility to purge mankind of sin and corruption, Rymer exalts poetry high above all other human activity. Even the rules grow for him out of a virtual deification of the art of poetry, and Rymer's devotion to that art—misdirected as it may sometimes appear to be—is nevertheless complete and uncompromising.

It would not be altogether fair to Rymer, however, to conclude this exposition without calling attention to a strain that is important in his attitude toward criticism and even toward the very poets he mutilates. Rymer, I feel certain, is not to be taken altogether seriously; nor does he seem to regard himself with the solemnity that most of his critics choose to regard him. The following passage, which precedes his vicious assault on the Elizabethan masters, has not been accorded the attention it deserves, and he who fails to bear the passage in mind when he reads Rymer's irreverent attack misses much of Rymer's charm and humanity. Rymer apologizes for handling Elizabethan tragedy as freely as he did the epics of Spenser, Cowley, "and such names
original characters, he states briefly the nature of this dis-
tinction:

Besides, many things are probable of Antonius, or of
Alexander and particular men because they are true, which
cannot be generally probable; and he that will be feign-
ing persons should confine his fancy to general probabil-
ity. 57

The distinction immediately presents difficulties. Rymer is say-
ing, in effect, that it is probable that General Curtis LeMay
might take off in jet-powered airplane and drop a bomb on China.
It is probable because it is, in a particular sense, true, LeMay
having the skill to do such a thing and having said, on occasion,
that this is what ought to be done. A poet, however, cannot
write a play about a public figure performing the unthinkable act
because such an action is generally improbable and would not be
believed. The only condition on which a poet could write such a
play is that the principal character be named Curtis LeMay. But
since the action is not generally probable, but probable only of
this particular man, the poet ought not imitate this historical
event.

It is on grounds such as these that Rymer can attack a
play like Othello. It is possible, says Rymer, that particular
persons behave as do the characters in Othello, but since the
poet is required to treat broader, more general and abstracted
notions, this particular play becomes the most odious thing in
Nature: a mass of improbable lies. 58 Here are a few of the lies

58 Rymer, Short View, p. 164.
Rymer sees fit to observe. 59

It is improbable, says Rymer, that a well-bred Venetian lady should lose her heart to a barbarous Moor. In view of the hatred which the Venetians bore towards Negroes, it is preposterous to expect an audience to believe that they should make one of that despised race their general. Why should the Senate, in the midst of a Turkish military threat, stay awake all night to listen to a matrimonial woe? How could an ordinary man like Cassio have known a woman of Desdemona's quality? How could any sensible woman, warned that her husband is jealous, continually twit him with cries of "Cassio! Cassio!"? Is it probable that Roderigo should assent to committing murder for payment when the advantage is so remote a prospect? Does anyone in the play act as if a war is going on? Is it probable that, at a time when her husband may be lost in a storm at sea, Desdemona should engage in "jack puddin' farce" with Iago? Why, moreover, should Shakespeare suddenly shift us from Venice to Cyprus? Though Rymer admits that the unity of place is not a serious moral matter and that unity of time is likewise a minor consideration, why, he asks, is Shakespeare so confused and full of contradictions as to the amount of time consumed by the action? And one could go on and on listing "improbable lies" that Rymer notes. His ingeniousness seems to know no limits.

The value of arguing these, and other, particular objec-

59For a full dose of the improbabilities Rymer notices in Othello, see Short View, pp. 131-164.
tions is debatable. Rymer—despite many inaccuracies as to the
facts of Othello—is perhaps totally right in some objections and
partially right in most. Rymer does observe two improbabilities,
however, and these offer valuable evidence for the limitations of
the principle as he applies it.

First—that business with the handkerchief:

So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repeti-
tion about an Handkerchief! Why was not this call'd the
Tragedy of the Handkerchief? What can be more absurd than
(as Quintilian expresses it) in parvis litibus has Tragedias
movere? Had it been Desdemona's Garter the Sagacious
Moor might have smelt a Rat; but the Handkerchief
is so remote a trifle, no Booby on this side Mauritania
could make any consequence from it.

Here Rymer has unwittingly hit upon one of the keys to
the tragic experience and, in so doing, demonstrates a serious
weakness in his critical equipment. "Why was not this call'd the
Tragedy of the Handkerchief?" Indeed, it could have been. Othel-
lo's tragedy—like many others—is the tragedy of a trifle. This
"reasonable man" of Rymer's, who is a hypothetical man, may not
stoop to make any consequence of a handkerchief, but the specific
man Othello—like many specific men—is undone precisely because
of his absorption in a trifle. In the attempt to reduce all hu-
man behavior to machine-like predictability, Rymer betrays a
glaring lack of imagination; for he fails to recognize that some

60 Rymer seems to have had a peculiar impression that a
title ought to embody the central theme of the tragedy. He had
objected, for example, to A King and No King partially on the
grounds that the title gave no hint of the nature of what was to
follow.

61 Rymer, Short View, p. 160.
of the most interesting activities in life are irrational in their origins. Even from the moral point of view, a poet may instruct very successfully if he shows examples of the consequences of irrational behavior, and this Shakespeare most assuredly does. He is telling us, in effect, that if man abandons reason and places a passionate credulity in things that are unimportant, failing to examine the facts as they really are rationally, he may destroy himself and his world. Furthermore, it seems strange that while insisting that the stage be an ideal place, Rymer should invariably apply to tragedy the mundane standard of "common sense" which he always uses in the most real manner imaginable. If the stage is exclusively to represent the ideal, then by what right can Rymer suggest it to standards and habits of actual life? While we may in theory accept Rymer's argument for a "general probability," we will find in practice that the criterion becomes corrupted and subjectivized into what the particular critic happens at the moment to think "common to all ages."

Rymer, then, may be refuted on either of two grounds. One could insist, on the one hand, that Othello, even in terms of Rymer's own definition, partakes of the universal nature of man and, through heroic example, instructs in the proper manner of living. Or, one could challenge Rymer's basic assumption that tragedy must--or can--deal with the generally probable. Is it possible to reduce the complex mechanism of human action and human motivation to any general rule? If not, then the poet has no alternative to representing a specific aspect of a particular
kind of conduct that he deems significant. The tragedy of a trifling is not without relevance. While the world may not know a "general man," it nevertheless includes in its vast framework many particular men who are a good deal alike. These men can all receive great benefit and enjoyment when they see what happens to an imaginary hero who—for all the intensification with which the dramatist presents him—is in many ways like them. Othello is just such a hero and his passion is a passion of enormous concern both to the reasonable and unreasonable segments of humanity.

Rymer makes at least one other serious misapplication of the rule of probability. In discussing the probability of Cassio's having an opportunity to make love to Desdemona, Rymer offers an objection:

The parties have been in view to this moment. We saw the opportunity which was given for Cassio to 'speak his bosom' to her. Once, indeed, might go a great way with a Venetian, but once will not do the Poet's business; the audience must suppose a great many bouts to make the plot operate. 62

Rymer has simply missed the point of the play. The operation of Shakespeare's plot does not demand that "the audience must suppose a great many bouts," but that Othello merely suspect one bout. The audience has to be absolutely certain of Desdemona's innocence. Unless we definitely know that Othello is making a terrible mistake, then he cannot assume in our minds tragic dimensions. Because Shakespeare clearly intends us to realize that Desdemona is faithful, he gives us no occasion to believe her

62 Ibid., p. 151.
guilty. If her fidelity is in question at the time of the murder, or even at the end of the play, we obviously have an entirely different drama and, possibly, a less powerful one. Shakespeare's "thesis" is that an overly passionate man may, through senseless suspicion, be brought to destroy his ideal and subsequently himself. And when Rymer, moreover, criticizes the eagerness with which Othello seems to embrace proof of Desdemona's guilt, he falls into a crucial error. Rymer may argue that the Moor acts too hastily, that he "is, on other occasions, phlegmatic enough," but he fails to grasp the fact that Desdemona is not, for Othello, just another "occasion." She is his "occupation," his faith, his sense of harmony. She is the fountain from which his "current runs or else dries up." Rymer cannot see this and is hence deficient as a critic. It is for his blindness to psychological subtlety, for his insensitivity to the nuances which raise the great poetic achievements above the ordinary ones—it is on account of these imaginative shortcomings that we find it very difficult to pardon Rymer.

It should be borne in mind, however, that probability, for Rymer, is not merely a dramatic principle that has meaning only in the realms of art. Probability is basically a philosophical doctrine before it is a literary one. Insistence upon "general probability" is a desperate step in the uneasy quest for metaphysical certainty that obsessed Rymer's age. There is im-

63Ibid., p. 150.
plied in this quest a well-ordered universe whose principles apply no less to the drama than to physics. If we approach probability in this manner, as symptomatic of an intensely-felt need to establish laws of cause and effect in the aesthetic and moral spheres, then what appears to us an iron rule may acquire more living meaning. We can, perhaps, better understand the great importance Rymer and other critics attach to it.

The same desire to find a well-ordered universe is involved in Rymer's notion of poetic justice. In the process of refining history, the Poet often finds it necessary to rectify historical errors. The ancients, remarks Rymer, recognizing that history frequently rewards or punishes unjustly, saw fit to devise a more exact system of justice for poetry. Out of this recognition came the principle of poetic, as distinguished from historical, justice:

Finding also that this unequal distribution of rewards and punishments did perplex the wisest and by the Atheist was made a scandal to the Divine Providence, they concluded that a Poet must of necessity see justice exactly administered if he intends to please. 64

Although, for example, a malefactor may, in the world of historical fact, escape punishment, the poet must call him to account in the world of art. There are, moreover, certain crimes of a lesser nature which barely escape the reach of the law, and in such cases the poet has to administer justice. This he must do before the very eyes of the spectators:

64 Rymer, TLA, pp. 22-23.
It would be required that the satisfaction be compleat and full e're the Malefactor goes off the Stage, and nothing left to God Almighty and another World. Nor will it suffer that the Spectators trust the Poet for a Hell behind the Scenes: the fire must roar in the conscience of the Criminal; the fiends and furies be conjured up to their faces, with a world of machine and horrid spectacle. 65

It has already been suggested, however, that the malefactor should be a rather sympathetic character in order that he may arouse pity. Rymer sees pity as consisting in the contemplation by the audience of sufferings beyond those which the crime deserves. 66 It is difficult to see how Rymer can claim that such a scheme—either in drama or in life—executes justice. To force a person to suffer worse misfortunes than he deserves seems far more scandalous than to allow a guilty man to escape unpunished. How is one to reconcile a sympathetic character to an excessively horrible catastrophe, even though that character may in some ways be a villain? At any rate, Rymer applies the standard of poetic justice to Elizabethan tragedy, and his chief target is again Othello, which stands condemned for at least two serious violations of justice.

Poetry, says Rymer, is to show that the good prosper and the wicked suffer. Yet Desdemona is killed and Iago—at least on the stage—escapes injury. About the first breach, Rymer complains that since Desdemona had committed no unnatural crime it is wrong that she should die:

65 Ibid., pp. 27-28.
66 Ibid., p. 28.
What instruction can we make out of this Catastrophe? Or whither must our reflection lead us? Is not this to envenome and sour our spirits, to make us grumble at Providence and the government of the world? If this be our end, what boots it to be virtuous? 67

To improve the plot, Rymer suggests—no one knows how seriously—that Desdemona not die, but fall into a trance so that Othello believe her dead. After Othello, "by the good leave, and with the applause of all the spectators," has killed himself, Desdemona may revive and the audience can go home "with a quiet mind, admiring the beauty of Providence; fairly and truly represented on the Theatre." 68

No doubt Rymer is deliberately teasing and having a grand time contemplating his own wit. But the very fact that Rymer—even in jest—can offer such a suggestion indicates how limited his imagination is. Can a spectator possibly be pleased to see Othello die innocent, especially after so noble an admission of error? Such a fate for Othello would exceed in heartlessness even Desdemona's death. What is there for Desdemona if she were to awaken and find her husband dead? Even by Rymer's own standards, poetic justice has hardly been observed.

Perhaps the tremendous impact of Othello—and, for that matter, all great tragedies—grows out of our feeling that the particular crisis in the life of the protagonist is the ultimate end to which he has always lived and inevitably moved. What went

67 Rymer, Short View, p. 161.
68 Ibid., p. 162.
before is, as far as we are concerned, unimportant, and we cannot conceive of anything to follow after the shattering experiences just witnessed and shared. Does not all time seem to stop at the instant Othello puts an end to his tragic life? He and his Desdemona have fulfilled the purposes for which they were created, and death is their only fitting conclusion. The end of a tragedy is certainly as important dramatically as the beginning or the middle, for it is the end that shocks us into realizing that we have just participated in an action of extraordinary magnitude. If Desdemona, or Othello, or both should live, then the tragedy is not complete. The hero has to rise to the sublime sense of dignity that comes only in triumphing over death, and the audience has to be made to share in that sublimity. Again, purely from the educational point of view, a tragic "close call" scarcely drives home a whole lesson as does a whole catastrophe. Poetic justice requires an interpretation much broader than simply, "The Good prosper and the Wicked suffer." Otherwise the poem may fall short of a complete tragic effect. By creating a world in which acts have consequences and where unbridled passions produce total disasters, Shakespeare preserves an abstract kind of justice that persuades in a manner infinitely artistic and wonderful.

As for Iago, Rymer may be right in asserting that the poet ought visibly to show divine justice executed upon him. 69

69 Ibid., p. 163.
But the poet is not primarily writing about Iago, but Othello. Shakespeare is only incidentally concerned with what happens to Iago because his specific fate is not vital to the main movement of the tragedy. Since he is, to be sure, an uncommonly wicked man, he ought to be punished. But would not the punishing of Iago even come as an anti-climax, destroying the wholeness of the magnificent experience we have just watched tragically unfold? Iago is clearly a character so remote from reality as to preclude our wanting to imitate him, and it may therefore not be essential that the poet punish him.

Necessary, therefore, as the standard may be from the point of view of the psychology of the audience, we should avoid any temptation to apply poetic justice without taking into account the specific demands of a specific drama. Each work of art, in a sense, creates its own system of justice as it creates its own scheme of probability. If the play is not faithful to its own justice—whatever pattern that justice may take—then it will not succeed artistically. When we watch a great tragedy, I believe we are aware primarily of the fact that the ending could not have been otherwise. Whether or not justice, in the play, is conformable to Rymer's simple theory of ideal worldly justice concerns us not nearly so much as whether it is artistically true to the peculiar conditions of the complex world the poet has created. If one would be a responsible critic, then he is accordingly obliged to make a whole-hearted effort to understand that special world, as nearly as possible in isolation from other
At the same time it is also possible that Rymer is fore-
shadowing one of Steele's tenets of Sentimental Comedy. If
this is true, then we can perhaps lay at Rymer's door the respon-
sibility for many of the perversions that were to destroy--al-
most irrevocably--the vitality of English comedy. More impor-
tant, though, is the sinister role Poetic Justice can play in
dulling our sense of social obligation. When we ask, as Rymer
does of Desdemona, "What boots it to be virtuous?" we have alrea-
dy begun to cheapen morality by regarding it as an expedient. In
satisfying our minds, moreover, to the extent that we excuse our-
selves from the urgent demands of historical justice, the doc-
trine can induce a sophisticated kind of moral lassitude. By ap-
plauding justice on the stage we can then shut our eyes to in-
jus-tice in the real world.

Of all Rymer's basic rules of tragedy, the modern reader
is likely to find decorum the most confusing. Because Rymer ap-
plies the principle almost unceasingly, and to situations of im-
mense diversity, one could very easily build up an unqualified
resistance to it and overlook the fact that decorum, in the broad-
est sense, is a legitimate and indispensable requirement of all
art.

In terms of the theatre, decorum is nothing more than a
set of standards by which we determine what is and is not proper

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It could be argued, of course, that Rymer's concept of
poetic justice anticipates the rise of sentimentalism on the Eng-
ish stage.
to be shown on the stage. Some of the decorums have their roots in psychological principles and are related to audience sensitivity. Others are of a dramaturgical nature and are necessarily closely allied with the techniques of good stagecraft. A still larger number of the decorums—ultimately, in fact, all of them—are concerned with social and ethical propriety. Rymer, in a word, provides the poet and critic with a kind of handbook, an anthology of rules which govern the conduct of tragedy.

Probably the simplest type of decorum stressed by Rymer is what I have chosen to call **aesthetic decorum**. Accepting aesthetic decorum means acknowledging—and it is not a difficult acknowledgement to make—that certain objects and actions may be offensive to our sense of delicacy and ought, therefore, to be avoided in an art as noble as tragedy. We react unfavorably, for example, to excessive shedding of blood, as in *Rollo*. As a matter of fact, we dislike seeing a murder committed on the stage because, according to Rymer, "men could not so easily pardon a crime committed before their faces."² Since we naturally abhor vice and love virtue, the poet, who had once been advised to hide anything that looked "with an ill face,"³ dare not introduce a very wicked person into tragedy on the grounds that a wicked man is incapable of arousing pity.⁴ One of Rymer's most violent

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⁴Rymer, *TLA*, p. 28.
²Rymer, *Short View*, p. 87.
³Rymer, *TLA*, p. 75.
attacks is made upon A King and No King because of the crude manner in which incest is represented in the play. Comparing the Fletcher work with an ancient play that contains a similar problem, Rymer shows how Euripides handles incest decorously, concealing the terrible act from the spectators rather than parading it cheaply before their eyes. As a result of this difference in tact, Euripides fills us with real horror and Fletcher with disgust. 74

Not only does Rymer object to portraying incest, but he even resents the introduction of love and music into the action of a tragedy. The French, he charges, have thereby degraded tragedy, and again Rymer looks to the ancients for a precedent:

After all it is observ'd how much that Wild-goose-chase of Romance runs still in their head, some Scenes of Love must everywhere be shuffled in, the never so unseasonable.

The Grecians were for Love and Musick as mad as any Monsieur of 'em all; yet their Musick kept within bounds, attempted no Metamorphosis to turn the Drama to an Opera. Nor did their Love come whining on the Stage to Effeminate the Majesty of their Tragedy. 75

While we may or may not take issue with these specific strictures, we shall have to grant Rymer's contention that not everything can be aesthetically attractive in the same degree. If Rymer errs, therefore, it is, as usual, in some of his concrete applications of the principle and not in the acceptance of the principle itself.

74 Ibid., pp. 50 ff.
75 Rymer, Short View, p. 117.
A second group of decorums is a class which may be called social. I am not sure to what extent Rymer, in outlining many of the particular aspects of social decorum, can be taken seriously, but it is quite certain that they add up to make one of the most vulnerable parts of his critical system. A good many of the rules are derived from the duelling field, and any aesthetic that depends even in part on the social organization we associate with duelling runs the risk of ridicule today.

According to Rymer's social decorum, women in plays are to conduct themselves at all times with modesty. As in the duel, so on the stage, there can be no provocation or injury without revenge, no affront without reparation. When the sword is once drawn, the scabbard "may be thrown away," for there is no turning back without loss of honor. Probably the most curious passage in all Rymer is his directory of who may kill whom with decency:

If I mistake not, in Poetry no woman is to kill a man except her quality gives her the advantage above him, nor is a Servant to kill the Master, nor a Private Man, much less a Subject, to kill a King, nor on the contrary.

Poetical decency will not suffer death to be dealt to each other by such persons whom the Laws of Duel allow not to enter the lists together.

Rymer notes two social errors in Othello as typical and unfor-

76 Rymer, TLA, p. 64.
77 Ibid., p. 65.
78 Ibid., p. 69.
79 Ibid., p. 65.
giveable: 1) A Moor is not socially entitled to the dignity of a name or home; 2) Iago, when he heaps insult after insult upon the head of Brabantio, is displaying a barbarous lack of respect for old age.

Because the social system has faded out of which grew many of these prescriptions, it is difficult for the modern reader to view sympathetically the prescriptions themselves. It is only fair, however, to point out that these social decorums seem to us absurd in a way that they could not have so seemed to men and women in Rymer's society. At one time quality in persons had a meaning and a bearing on life that our newer social structure has discounted. Rymer merely takes an extreme view and assumes that the social structure of which he is a member is absolutely a part of the unchanging order of things; such assumptions are made by many men in every age.

Related to social decorum, but worth a special investigation, is the important decorum of character. According to this standard, men in certain positions have to display the qualities of heart and mind suitable to their stations. Each profession has a tradition which determines the conduct of its members. The poet, it follows, will assign to his characters--kings, soldiers, tradesmen, teachers, etc.--traits that will allow the spectators to recognize them immediately. At the top of the ladder of character stands the King. Somewhat below him is the soldier.

Rymer condemns Elizabethan tragedy for having lowered the standards of kingship and introducing unworthy monarchs to the
stage. Elizabethan poets, says Rymer, have thereby violated the precedent of the ancients, to whom the King was necessarily an object of great respect:

Because by their rules to have lessen'd the Kings would have made their Tragedies of no effect in moving the pity intended by them. They made the Kings unfortunate; we make them wicked: they made them to be pitied; we make them to be curst and abhor'd. 80

In Rollo, for example, Aubrey is not noble enough to be graced with so lofty a title, and the spectators cannot accept a weakling as their monarch:

Whereas each step of his sho'd have been attended with such awe and Majesty, that the spectators, if not guess, might at least wish to see him their sovereign and have the pleasure to see their wishes successful. 81

History, Rymer points out, may have known weak kings, but "Aristotle cries shame; Poetry will allow of nothing so unbecoming." 82

But the issue for Rymer hinges upon something much more serious than merely poor characterization. The King is, above all, a symbol of dignity, and it is on account of this deeper significance that his courage cannot be in doubt:

We are to presume the greatest vertue where we find the highest of rewards; and though it is not necessary that all Heroes should be Kings, yet undoubtedly all crown'd heads by Poetical right are Heroes. This Character is a flower, a prerogative so certain, so inseparably annex'd to the Crown as by no Poet, no Parliament of Poets, ever to be invaded. 83

80 Ibid., pp. 28-29.
81 Ibid., p. 33.
82 Ibid., p. 42.
83 Ibid.
The notion of the King as an inviolable symbol of heroic virtue has been enlarged and perhaps best restated by a modern critic, Joseph Wood Krutch, who makes remarkably clear the attitude Rymer was trying to create:

Modern critics have sometimes been puzzled to account for the fact that the concern of ancient tragedy is almost exclusively with kings and courts. They have been tempted to accuse even Aristotle of a certain naivete in assuming (as he seems to assume) that the nobility of which he speaks as necessary to a tragedy implies a nobility of rank as well as of soul. Yet the tendency to lay the scene of a tragedy at the court of a king is not the result of any arbitrary convention but of the fact that the tragic writers believed easily in greatness. To Shakespeare, robes and crowns and jewels are the garments most appropriate to man because they are the fitting outward manifestations of his inward majesty, but to us they seem absurd because the man who bears them has, in our estimation, so pitifully shrunk. We do not write about kings because we do not believe that any man is worthy to be one.

Whether or not man has, in the eyes of the modern world, "so pitifully shrunk," the concept of the king as a sort of reservoir of human dignity is extremely valuable. Through it, we can evaluate with greater sympathy Rymer's insistence that the tragic king be heroically represented. The king somehow helps to stabilize Rymer's chaotic world and becomes one more instance in the hungry search for order and universality which occupied critics of Rymer's school. The position is quite understandable, and, though we may find ourselves estranged from the conditions that produced it, we can still grant to the position itself certain commanding merits.

This much, unfortunately, cannot be said for Rymer's ob-

servations regarding the soldier; not even the most back-bending sympathy can explain away his incredible comments on the character of Iago, not the least of whose sins is the violation of a soldier's decorum:

But what is most intolerable is Iago. He is no Blackamoor Souldier, so we may be sure he should be like other Souldiers of our acquaintance: yet never in Tragedy, nor in Comedy, nor in Nature, was a Souldier with his Character....

Shakespeare knew his Character of Iago was inconsistent.... But to entertain the audience with something new and surprising, against common sense and Nature, he would pass upon us a close, dissembling, false, insinuating rascal instead of an open-hearted, frank, plain-dealing Souldier, a Character constantly worn by them for some thousands of years in the World. 85

Had Rymer confined his observations to soldiers in poetry he could perhaps be pardoned. After all, if poetry ought to imitate the ideal, it becomes plausible that its soldiers represent the very finest qualities possible and omit those that are most disturbing. But beyond merely outlining desirable stage characteristics for soldiers, Rymer has ventured to fix for all time the qualities of soldiers in the world. When he was discussing kings, Rymer had been prudent enough to admit that history may have known undignified kings and to maintain that he is speaking of kings on the stage and not in actual life. His treatment of the soldier, however, contains no such qualifications. He will not grant that there could be dissembling soldiers—either in tragedy, comedy, or nature.

85 Rymer, Short View, pp. 134-135.
Now plain-dealing soldiers of the type described by Rymer doubtless exist in large numbers, but there have been both in literature and in the world many soldiers who have acted in quite another fashion. One could just as easily conclude of soldiers that falseness—not frankness—is the character "constantly worn by them for some thousands of years in the World," and this conclusion would contain as much, or as little, warrant as Rymer's. Who can really say what the nature of the soldier is?

I have dwelt on this point at what may seem inordinate length because Rymer has here given us a rare opportunity to see just what happens when he attempts to translate his theory of a universal human nature into terms of concrete behavior. The results, much as we may admire the sincerity of the spirit that produced them, are oversimplified and, hence, inadmissible. Again we have evidence to support the claim that the belief in a nature common to all ages tends, in practical criticism, to degenerate into the temporary idiosyncracy of the critic, becoming an impressionism of the most flagrant sort. It is enough that Rymer has criticized the decorum of Othello because he had assigned to Iago the more dangerous job of killing Cassio while he himself attended to the unsoldierly task of dealing with the weaker Desdemona.\(^86\) But in the case of Iago Rymer is nothing less than bewildering. Heaven knows Iago violates enough principles to keep the moralistic critic amply occupied, but by selecting the sol-

\(^{86}\)Ibid., p. 134.
dier's decorum as his criterion, Rymer exposes his position to attack at one of its weakest points.

Finally, the decorum of language ought to be considered. Dryden, in that connection, was to expend one of his most celebrated phrases. "Language most shewes a man," Ben Jonson had written. "Speake that I may see thee." Rymer accepts this judgment, incorporating it into his rules of tragedy.

What Jonson and Rymer both mean is that language in tragedy should not be offered for its own sake, but ought logically to reflect the character speaking and the situation in which he speaks. Sometimes, says Rymer, language gets in the way and interferes with the action, as when Iago, instead of rapping at the door, indulges in a fit of rhetoric. Then, too, after someone has asked, "Who is arrived?" one of the sailors delivers an elaborate oration, "'Tis one Iago, ancient to the General, etc." Rymer objects:

Is this the language of the Exchange or the Ensuring Office? Once in a man's life he might be content at Bedlam to hear such a rapture. In a Play one should speak like a man of business: his speech must be...operativa: but by this Gentleman's talk one may as well guess he has nothing to do. 88

More pointedly, Rymer had criticized Sophia's outburst in Rollo when she is presumably in a state of great turbulence. About to lose her sons, she embarks on an elaborate conceit in which her children are spoken of as diamonds:

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87 Ibid., p. 86.
88 Ibid.
"In a great passion none have leisure to ramble for comparisons, much less to compute the value of Diamonds whole or broken." Criticism is, in this case, probably legitimate. But when Rymer questions the appropriateness of Othello's celebrated "Farewell the tranquil mind," he shows less perception. The speech is not idle, indecorous rhetoric, as Rymer charges, but is vital as an indication of Othello's mind and of the extraordinary place Desdemona occupies in that mind. Again, Rymer is confusing life's probabilities with those within a work of art; when this happens, decorum—or any other essentially reasonable principle of criticism—becomes distorted almost to absurdity.

I should not, by any means, wish to claim that this treatment of decorum is exhaustive, nor am I willing to vouch for the absolute authenticity of the various categories of decorum that have been selected. The division into these categories, however, seems to be a useful division, for through it some of the intricate knots posed by the main concept are untangled. Decorum has usually been enveloped by a vagueness, and it has been my purpose to clear away some of that vagueness in order to determine just what critics of Rymer's day meant when they talked about it.

This entire analysis, moreover, of Rymer's critical system indicates how principles that are sound and intelligent can be misused and strained beyond profitable limits. But Rymer, for all his eccentricities, stands for an important trend in criticism;

89 Rymer, TLA, p. 39.
whatever the extent of our sympathy with moralistic criticism, the trend is one that has to be seriously reckoned with.

Whether he is admiring the tragedy of the Greeks, then, or disparaging that of the Elizabethans, Rymer's final evaluations are conceived mainly in terms of the poet's success or failure as a teacher of virtue. This high sense of virtue drives Rymer to an almost desperate insistence upon the most rigid and extreme tenets of neoclassical criticism. As a crusader conscious of the poet's responsibility to purge mankind of sin and corruption, Rymer exalts poetry high above all other human activity. Even the rules grow for him out of a virtual deification of the art of poetry, and Rymer's devotion to that art—misdirect as it may sometimes appear to be—is nevertheless complete and uncompromising.

It would not be altogether fair to Rymer, however, to conclude this exposition without calling attention to a strain that is important in his attitude toward criticism and even toward the very poets he mutilates. Rymer, I feel certain, is not to be taken altogether seriously; nor does he seem to regard himself with the solemnity that most of his critics choose to regard him. The following passage, which precedes his vicious assault on the Elizabethan masters, has not been accorded the attention it deserves, and he who fails to bear the passage in mind when he reads Rymer's irreverent attack misses much of Rymer's charm and humanity. Rymer apologizes for handling Elizabethan tragedy as freely as he did the epics of Spenser, Cowley, "and such names
as will ever be sacred to me," and continues with a humble confession of his purpose and limitations. He makes no claim for originality or infallibility:

I would only have you before hand advertiz'd that you will find me ty'd to no certain stile, nor laying my reasons together in form and method. You will find me sometimes reasoning, sometimes declaiming, sometimes citing authority for common sense; sometimes uttering as my own, what may be had at any Bookshop in the Nation: Sometimes doubting when I might be positive, and sometimes confident out of season; sometimes turning Tragedy into what is light and comical, and sporting when I should be serious. This variety made the travel more easy. And you know I am not cut out for writing a Treatise, nor have a genius to pen any thing exactly; so long as I am true to the main sense before me, you will pardon me in the rest. Rymer may be limited; he is certainly not without humor and geniality.

That a mild, good-natured antiquarian should have assumed for a later age the proportions of a monster is somewhat ironic. It is, finally, perhaps an even greater irony that an intense concern for literature should seriously damage this man's critical perspectives. Rymer, in a sense, comes very near to destroying poetry, and all because he esteems it too highly.

\[90\text{Ibid.}, \text{ pp. 20-21.}\]
CHAPTER IV

Rymer's Place in the History of Literary Criticism

Study of Rymer's specific influence is made difficult by the fact that his critical principles, insofar as they are not common to the age, are those of the French formalist critics. Rymer helped to popularize their ideas in England, but they were making their way without him, and it is not always possible to isolate Rymer's contribution. The merest glance at the evidence shows that Rymer's initial reputation was high and that he had immediate influence on English criticism; after publication of A Short View the attitude toward him became hostile, but his influence remained strong into the early years of the eighteenth century.

Rymer's effect on Dryden is most important and is easiest to trace because Dryden usually acknowledges his debt. Actually, Dryden was closest to the attitude represented by Rymer before Rymer started writing. In the arrogant epilogue to The Conquest of Granada and the essay in defense of the epilogue (1672) he censured the dramatic poetry of the previous age for about the same faults Rymer was to find—low language, ridiculous plots, violation of decorum. Dryden's standard here was taste, and his argu-
ments were not based on a rigid critical standard.¹ Five years later his attitude toward heroic tragedy had changed, and with it his attitude toward Elizabethan drama. Yet his high praise of Tragedies of the Last Age has already been noted, and Dryden's efforts to answer this work only show how effective Rymer's arguments were. His first attempt, the so-called Heads of an Answer to Rymer, was written on the end papers of the book itself.² We catch Dryden thinking to himself, starting several answers one after the other, and occasionally threatening to overthrow the entire system. Dryden's theoretical arguments center in the importance of the fable and the emotions to be raised by tragedy. He grants Rymer's point that we are inferior to the Greeks in the construction of plots, but suggests that we might excel in the other parts of tragedy. He questions whether pity and terror are the only tragic emotions, or whether all the passions, joy, love, anger, and fear, should not be used. Dryden seems to equate emotions imitated by the actors with those raised in the spectators and has no clear theory of the function of pity and fear; there is no mention of catharsis. The function of tragedy is entirely moral, "to reform manners," or "the encouragement of virtue and discouragement of vice." It is not clear how pleasure arises. All this suggests that Dryden had up to this point been content

¹The Defence of the Epilogue last appeared in the 1678 edition; Dryden omitted it from the 1687 and subsequent editions.

with a rather vague idea of Aristotelian criticism. He soon
turned to Rymer's French sources for guidance.

The more concrete arguments in the Heads are happier.
Dryden points out that the success of the plays Rymer criticized
could not be ascribed only to the actors, and that if the English
had built on a worse foundation than the Greeks they had at least
built well on it. He finally regards Rymer's case as not proved
but consisting only of small faults wittily aggravated. What
probably endeared the Heads to a romantic critic like Saintsbury
was the constant threat to storm the Aristotelian citadel: "'Tis
not enough that Aristotle said so, for Aristotle drew his models
of tragedy from Sophocles and Euripides; and if he had seen ours,
might have changed his mind." 3

Both Tonson's editor, who first printed the Heads in 1711
and Saintsbury, who reprinted them, expressed the wish that Dry-
den had developed them further. The wish was more nearly granted
than they had noted, but with, perhaps, unexpected results. Dry-
den did work these ideas into a formal treatise and attached the
result to his preface to Troilus and Cressida (1679), giving it
the separate title, "The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy." 4 He
had posed the question of how far Shakespeare and Fletcher could
be imitated, delaying answer until the end of the essay since a

3 Samuel Johnson, "Life of Dryden," Lives of the English
474.

4 F. G. Walton, "John Dryden's Answer to Thomas Rymer's
The Tragedies of the Last Age," PQ, XV (1936), 194-214.
prerequisite was to discover the grounds and reason of all criticism. The inquiry which follows started, as probably did the Heads, with Aristotle's definition and listing of the parts of tragedy. It grants in more detail the inadequacy of Shakespeare and Fletcher with respect to plot, then considers more at length the characters or manners. The other parts of tragedy, thoughts and diction, were saved for a later essay which was never written.

In the section on characters Dryden partly fulfills the promise of the Heads by arguing the excellence of Shakespeare (though not of Fletcher) in this particular. There is strong emphasis upon nobility, consistency, probability, and decorum. Wherever in his illustrations Dryden uses Rymer's material he grants, with only slight reservations, Rymer's points. On this side, the essay is reassessing the drama by Rymer's standards and finding much to condemn but much to praise, and we see Dryden trying to make Rymer's material workable.

The other principal topic of the Heads had been emotions and their relation to the function of tragedy. In the Troilus and Cressida preface there is a clear distinction between passions depicted on the stage and those to be moved in the audience. Dryden's former worry as to whether pity and terror were the only passions to move in an audience is overcome by citing Le Bossu's argument that the discoverers of a form have the right

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own critical taste. The turn of the century, when the history of criticism became a recognized field for study, produced nothing kindlier. Saintsbury, with full awareness of the gravity of the verdict, supported Macaulay's sentence; Lounsbury's decision was equally adverse. Spingarn was the first to see Rymer's school in historical context and without prejudice, with real understanding of what Rymer was trying to do in his time. He made clear the difference between Rymer's specific judgments and the methods which prompted them, and also developed the information on which all later study of Rymer has been based. Since Spingarn there have been numerous studies of aspects of neoclassical criticism, and in most of these Rymer's importance is recognized. But historical criticism passes no formal verdicts, and one can only attempt a rash summary of what appears to be the present judgment. Rymer's bad taste and failure to grant any role to the imagination are admitted; his strictures on the Beaumont and Fletcher plays are allowed where probability of plot is concerned but are more doubtful where his standard is decorum of character; his attack on Othello remains a challenge since the attacks on probability seem valid and the play does raise special problems of morality and decorum; his scholarship is admitted and his view of literary history is—if on historical grounds only—

53Saintsbury, II, p. 397.
to set its rules, and Rapin's that these are the tragic emotions because they counterbalance the vices of pride and want of commiseration. From Rapin Dryden also accepts the idea of catharsis, "which is, to rectify or purge our passions, fear and pity," and an explanation of why exercise of these passions is pleasurable. Throughout the essay references to Le Bossu, Rapin, and Rymer are frequent, and even Rymer's style appears in an attack on a passage from Hamlet. But Dryden, aware that one must balance beauties against faults, immediately follows this with a speech from Richard II singled out for praise. The whole ends with a key quotation from Rapin that the rules are nature reduced to method and are necessary to restrain fancy and bring it into accord with probability. The entire essay is Dryden's answer to the unstated question of how far we can use the methods of Thomas Rymer and French formalism in the studies of our early tragedies. Dryden's answer is a compromise, but at no point does he quarrel with Rymer's principles. In fact, he shows as much interest in citing rules as Rymer does, and rather more in showing the interconnection of these ideas into a system.

It is hard to say how much this meant in terms of Dryden's dramatic practice. All for Love was in hand when Rymer's book came out in August, 1677. Since the play was acted the following December it is hard to believe that there could have been any influence on its plan. In the preface there is a flattering

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6 Ibid., I, 209, 210, 211.
mention of Rymer, though Dryden may also have had him in mind in speaking of witty critics who judge of tragedy though their taste is only for comedy. Throughout the preface Dryden is on guard against Rymer's criticism. He points out that the moral of the play is excellent and that the characters are punished for their faults; he regrets that he could not have made them victims of an involuntary fault, thus raising more pity. He adds that he has observed the inferior parts of tragedy, the unities, and then discusses decorum at length, trying to break away from Rymer's rigid concept. The same strain appears, less clearly marked, in the Troilus and Cressida preface even before that essay turns into "The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy." Had Dryden continued with tragedy at this time he would certainly have worked further with Rymer's ideas, but his interests were elsewhere and he did not return to the form until Don Sebastian in 1690, and then with the utmost reluctance. By that time Rymer's challenge seemed less pressing, and there were personal reasons for not valuing his ideas too highly.

During the 1680's Rymer contributed to three of the volumes Dryden was editing for Tonson, and the men probably continued friendly in spite of the widening political differences.

7 Ibid., I, 200, 195-196.
8 Ibid., I, 192.
an open letter to Dryden after Rymer's attack in A Short View, Charles Gildon mentions "so many Public Expressions of your Friendship for him, & private Services (as I'm inform'd) done him."\textsuperscript{10} Whatever these services were, 1688 allowed obligations to be forgotten and Rymer lampooned Dryden in a scurrilous, exuberant verse epistle.\textsuperscript{11} This at least was written in the excitement of the moment and perhaps not intended for publication. The malice in A Short View four years later had no such excuse, and Dryden responded with vigor in Examen poeticum (1693). One can almost regret that the quarrel was not pursued, for Dryden there promised a full criticism of the drama; these "heads of an answer" would have fared better than the earlier ones and given us the views of the Essay of Dramatic Poesy restated in Dryden's maturity.

Dryden thought the quarrel was to be continued. On August 30, 1693, he wrote to Tonson of a rumor that Queen Mary, suspecting an attack on the government in Examen poeticum, "had commanded her Historiographer Rymer, to fall upon my Playes....I doubt not his malice, from a former hint you gave me: & if he be employed, I am confident tis of his own seeking."\textsuperscript{13} Whatever

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 228.
\textsuperscript{13}Dryden, Letters, p. 59.
\end{flushright}
truth there may have been in this rumor, by this date Queen Mary had other uses for her historiographer. Publicly Dryden contended himself with a jibe at Thomas Shadwell's successor:

But now, not I, but poetry is curst;
For Tom the Second reigns like Tom the First... 14

Dryden also takes an inevitable glance at Edgar in the prologue of Love Triumphant. 15 A letter to Dennis grants that almost all the faults Rymer has discovered in Shakespeare are truly there and expresses reverence for Rymer's learning, but is otherwise in the spirit of Examen poeticum. 16 In the mellow mood of the preface to the Fables Dryden can refer noncommittally to "our learned Mr. Rymer," and allow himself to be led astray by Rymer's statements about Chaucer and Provencal. 17

Insofar as criticism can be distinguished from personal quarrel, we see Dryden first strongly influenced then repelled by Rymer's ideas on tragedy, regarding him first as a reformer and then as a destroyer of the stage. Specific strictures, even those on Shakespeare, are allowed but with a quite different estimate of their importance. Dryden and Rymer are at one in their belief in the English language and the possibility of progress. Dryden to be sure regards Rymer as of the party of the ancients, but he was writing when the ancients-moderns controversy had

14 "To My Dear Friend Mr. Congreve," ll. 47-48.
15 Zimansky, p. 217.
17 Dryden, Essays, II, p. 249.
scarcely reached England, and he could not foresee how strangely the lines were to alter. Respect for Rymer's learning remained to the end.

Most seventeenth-century judgments do not vary from Dryden's. Before 1692 references are few and favorable. The anonymous translator of St. Evremond's *Mist Essays* (1685) plagiarizes from Rymer, pays tribute to his learning, and allows that "we may justly number him in the first rank of Criticks, as having a most accomplish'd Idea of Poetry, and the Stage."18 Langbaine in 1688 listed Rymer along with Jonson, Roscommon, Rapin, Longinus, Boileau, St. Evremond, and Dryden as critics available in English who would heighten our appreciation of correct plays, and in 1691 allowed that "he has an excellent Talent towards Criticism."19 Less seriously Prior pays tribute to the critic while damning the poet:

Rash Man! we paid thee Adoration due,
That ancient Criticks were excell'd by you:
Each little Wit to your Tribunal came,
To hear their Doom, and to secure their Fame:
But for Respect you servilely sought Praise,
Slighted the Umpire's Palm to court the Poet's Bays;
While wise Reflections, and a grave Discourse,
Declined to Zoons; a River for a Horse. 20

After the publication of *A Short View* Rymer's attack on Othello alone is remembered, and his full position scarcely gains an adequate hearing. Oddly, Gildon and Dennis, the two who at-

18Ibid., II, pp. 313-314.
19Zimansky, p. xxxix.
20Dryden, Letters, p. 68.
tempted formal answers to A Short View, eventually did the most to further Rymer's ideas. The case of Gildon is simpler. His answer to Rymer in Miscellaneous Letters showed mental agility rather than logical thought.\textsuperscript{21} In 1699, revising Langbaine, he grudgingly admitted that Rymer merited praise for the Rapin preface, attacked his view of Shakespeare, and (oddly) mentioned specifically his love for poetry.\textsuperscript{22} Gildon scarcely appeared again as critic until 1710 when he supplemented Rowe's edition of Shakespeare with "An Essay on the Art, Rise, and Progress of the Stage" and "Remarks on the Plays of Shakespeare," by which time he had moved well toward Rymer's position. In 1718 followed The Complete Art of Poetry and in 1721 The Laws of Poetry, both titles that suggest the method of formalism. These works are based almost entirely on Rymer and the French school of rules, Dacier's ideas appearing most frequently. The position is extreme. Shakespeare pleases only where he has followed the rules, and without rules there can be no standard of judgment. Indeed, there is no point in even arguing about the rules unless we are willing to question things that have been accepted as long as the problems of Euclid.\textsuperscript{23} To be sure, there is such witchery in Shakespeare that Gildon's judgment is no longer free to see the gross and evident faults; still he insists that nothing out of nature, nothing contrary to

\textsuperscript{21}Zimansky, pp. 229-230.


\textsuperscript{23}Zimansky, p. xl.
verisimilitude can please. He defends Rymer even against Dryden:

This unaccountable Biggotry of the Town, to the very Errors of Shakespear, was the Occasion of Mr. Rymer's Criticisms, and drove him as far into the contrary Extream. I am far from approving his Manner of treating our Poet; tho' Mr. Dryden owns, that all, or most of the Faults he has found, are Just; but adds this odd Reflection: And yet, says he, Who minds the Critick, and who admires Shakespear less? That was as much as to say; Mr. Rymer has indeed made good his Charge, and yet the Town admir'd his Errors still: which I take to be a greater Proof of the Folly and abandon'd Taste of the Town, than of any Imperfections in the Critic; which, in my opinion, expos'd the Ignorance of the Age he liv'd in.

Gildon pays Rymer the further tribute of borrowing to the point of plagiarism. The Complete Art of Poetry is admittedly a compilation and he makes general acknowledgement in the introduction. Many of the generalizations from Tragedies of the Last Age are included, as is the entire history of the stage in A Short View, and the sections of Provençal poetry are given almost in full.

On the whole, Gildon's criticism is entirely at second hand and seldom is it clearly thought out, yet it helped carry on the ideas of Rymer and of Rymer's sources.

John Dennis is a far more important figure and is one of the few critics in this tradition who can still be read with pleasure and profit. Dennis knew thoroughly the French critics whom Rymer used. To these he added a Longinian emphasis upon passion and the role of religion in poetry to build a criticism.

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24 Ibid., p. viii.
that was peculiarly his own. Sometimes we find in Dennis an idea or device we can safely trace to Rymer, more often a statement of principle that could come either from Rymer or from the French. One cannot easily say how much of the mixture Rymer was responsible for, or how close Dennis felt himself to the older critic's position. Dennis' first work, The Impartial Critick, was an attack on Rymer, and Remarks upon Prince Arthur in 1696 was an attack on Blackmore who had owed much to Rymer. Neither work, however, attacked the rules to make its points, and both relied heavily on Le Bossu and Dacier for Authority. Dennis' easy style of The Impartial Critick was in the second work modified by using Rymer's technique to attack individual passages. It is in controversial works that one would expect to find the clearest evidences of Rymer's style, and most of Dennis' works are controversial. The Remarks upon Cato (1713) are an excellent illustration:

The dire effects of Civil discord were known to all Mankind, long before Cato was writ; and the only instruction that can be drawn from them, since in this Tragedy, the Invaders of Liberty are seen to Triumph, and the Defenders of it to Perish, must be this, That Fools and Knaves should have a care how they invade the Liberties of their Country, lest Good and Wise Men suffer by it, or that Good and Wise Men should have a care how they defend those Liberties, lest Fools and Knaves should Triumph. 26

This is of course patterned after Rymer's treatment of the moral in Othello, but we are not limited to verbal echoes; probability, decorum, the need for moral instruction, and poetic justice are all emphasized, the last in language that showed that Dennis had

26 Zimansky, p. xlii.
Rymer's argument fresh in his mind. There is even the same fondness for laying down minor rules: a Stoic cannot be a hero in tragedy; a hypocrite can appear only in comedy.

The Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespear (1712) marks perhaps Dennis' closest approach to Rymer. Dennis still lays stress on the beauties of Shakespeare, but faults receive prominent attention. Shakespeare did not know the rules, nor had he read Horace or Aristotle, or he would not have violated poetic justice and written fables without morals. The suggestion for rewriting Julius Caesar owes something to Rymer's suggestions for recasting the story of Rollo. There is the inevitable stress on decorum: "Witness Menenius...whom he has made an arrant Buffoon, which is a great absurdity, For he might as well have imagin'd a grave majestick Jack-Pudding, as a Buffoon in a Roman Senator."

Such instances could be multiplied and Dennis' favorable mentions of Rymer could be cited, all without proving much. That there was indebtedness and some similarity of outlook all will grant, and to define the latter more exactly would require an examination of Dennis far beyond the scope of these paragraphs. Dennis is a more voluminous, more serious, and more able critic than Rymer. A desire to dissociate the two is understandable. The case has been admirably put by Dennis' editor, E. N. Hooker:

28 Ibid., II, 49-50, 53.
29 Zimansky, p. xliii.
But Dennis was much too wise a man to think that the rules could be applied strictly.... Again, he did not believe that the methods of the ancients, suited to a particular climate and to audiences of a certain temperament, could be successfully transferred to different climates with audiences of notably different tempers. The doctrine of poetic justice as Dennis developed it was much closer to Aristotle than to Rymer. Although he sometimes interpreted the rule concerning the "convenience" or decorum of characters to mean that characters must conform to type, he set much less store by it than did Rymer, for he loved Shakespeare, who broke the rule, whereas Rymer scorned Shakespeare for his negligence. As to the validity of common sense in criticism Dennis diverged sharply from Rymer; though he conceded that common sense might suffice in determining the value of certain obvious features in a work, yet he insisted that to perform the highest function of a critic a man must have genius. Dennis was not a member of the school of Rymer, nor of the school of common sense. 30

This is a fair statement of how Dennis goes beyond Rymer and how he frees himself from the rigidity of the French critics. Genius, imagination, a recognition of the sublime and of the grace beyond the reach of art are lacking in Rymer, hence his failure with Milton and Shakespeare. Dennis allowed violations of minor rules provided the major ends were attained, but so must every member of the school of rules. If we cannot illustrate easily from Rymer it is because Rymer's favorable criticism is scant, and one does not make allowances when attacking adversely; certainly Dennis did not when he attacked Addison and Pope. Dennis carries the idea of poetic justice further than Rymer, but he ascribes the popularization of it to Rymer, echoes Rymer's wording of the idea, and in no way contradicts it. 31 Both Rymer and

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p. xliv.
Dennis thought they were close to Aristotle in this matter; by modern readings of the Poetics neither was. Rymer argues that rules are universal, whereas Dennis allows modifications by climate, especially when defending Shakespeare. The difference appears greater than it is, and after the concession is made the principle of the rules is still intact.\(^{32}\) The common sense issue remains. It has been argued earlier that it is confusing to place Rymer with the enemies of formalism in a school of common sense, since Rymer never uses common sense as a weapon to attack the rules. If Rymer in his own criticism does not rise to the development of a system at least he invokes one. Dennis does add the qualification of genius, but this is superimposed on a rationalism and a faith in rules that he shares with Rymer.

We descend to Sir Richard Blackmore, who admired Rymer and in one weary moment suggested that he, together with St. Evremond, be put in charge of the nation's wit:

\[
\text{St. E--m--t and R--r both are fit} \\
\text{To oversee the coining of our Wit.} \\
\text{Let these be made the Masters of the Essay,} \\
\text{They'll every Piece of Metal touch and weigh,} \\
\text{And tell which is too light, which has too much Alay.}^{33}
\]

No stranger combination of critics could have been imagined. Nor did it take Tom Brown to point out that Blackmore's own credit at this bank of wit would be very slight.\(^{34}\) He had already over-

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\(^{32}\)Ibid.  
\(^{33}\)Satyr Against Wit (London, 1700), reprinted in Spingarn, Essays, III, p. 329.  
drawn his account with his first two epics, *Prince Arthur* (1695) and *King Arthur* (1697), with prefaces showing a faith in the rules as great as any man's and admitting allegiance to the great critics of the epic, Rapin, Dacier, Le Bossu, and to "the Judicious Remarks of our own excellent Critick, Mr. Rymer, who seems to have better consider'd these matters and to have gone farther into them than any of the English Nation." He follows his sources in insisting that the end of poetry is to reform manners and instruct, and in the attention he pays to the decorum of his characters. Indeed, Blackmore's faith in rules eventually led to Pope's "Receipt to Make an Epick Poem," an attack on those who use rules as a substitute for genius. We can see Rymer's influence in Blackmore's discussion of tragedies, even in his favorable comments on *The Mourning Bride*. Beyond all this, Blackmore is a strenuous moralist, launching out against the immorality of the stage and using violations of decorum as one of his weapons. In this we see a predecessor of Jeremy Collier.

And--be it said with regret--Jeremy Collier was Rymer's most influential follower. The very title of his attack, *A Short View of the Immorality and Prophaneness of the English Stage*, together with the *Sense of Antiquity upon this Argument*, suggests the title of Rymer's work. This attack in 1698 should not have

35 Spingarn, Essays, III, p. 240.
37 Spingarn, Essays, III, p. 228.
been unexpected, and where literary critics were belaboring the moral issue it should have been no surprise to find a narrow moralist taking over the ideas of an outstanding critic and shaping them to his own uses. It has long been recognized that the effectiveness of Collier's initial attack on the stage was due partly to his epigrammatic style but more particularly to his use of critical tenets that had gone virtually unchallenged. Taking both these devices from Rymer, Collier could pose as a tolerant man of common sense whose aim was to correct and not to abolish the English drama.\textsuperscript{38} The abolitionist had donned the cloak of the reformer; Dryden had accused Rymer of doing exactly the same thing, but that had been forgotten.

Collier is not a critic, and there is little point in discussing his professed views of the drama as though he were. He will talk, when it suits him, of the unities and of probability, merely because they are part of a system he is using for other purposes. He could have got and perhaps did get his knowledge of dramatic criticism from the French, but he recognized the effectiveness of Rymer's methods and used them. Naturally he stressed most the fable and its moral, poetic justice, and the idea of decorum. He considered it axiomatic that the function of the drama was to instruct. Even Rymer's style is taken over; like others who did this, Collier makes it a little more vulgar:

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., I, p. lxxiv.
Had Shakespear secur'd this point for his young Virgin
Ophelia, the play had been better contriv'd. Since he
was resolv'd to drown the Lady like a Kitten, he should
have set her a swimming a little sooner. To keep her
alive only to sully her Reputation, and discover the
Rankness of her Breath, was very Cruel. 39

Rymer's ideas of decorum are made even sharper: "Manly goes on,
and declares He would call a Rascal by no other Title, tho' his
Father had left him a Dukes. That is, he would call a Duke a Ras-
cal. This, I confess, is very much Plain Dealing." 40 The cri-
tique of The Relapse is Collier's most elaborate analysis of a
single play, and it follows with remarkable fidelity Rymer's exa-
mination of Othello. He starts by giving the fable, criticizes
the title, then deduces the moral:

1st. That all Younger Brothers should be careful to run
out their Circumstances as Fast, and as Ill as they can...
2ly. That when a Man is press'd, his business is not to
be govern'd by Scruples, or formalize upon Conscience and
Honesty. 41

Collier's principal attack was against comedy, and until
he dropped the critic's mask his deadliest weapon was the idea of
decorum. In tragedy (to which Rymer restricts the argument) a
case can be made for idealized figures or generic types; but high
comedy deals with deviations from the norm, to which our response
is laughter rather than a demand for justice. But Collier applied
the principles for tragedy to comedy and insisted on ideal types,

39 Jeremy Collier, A Short View of the Immorality and Pro-
40 Spingarn, Essays, III, p. 274.
41 Ibid., III, p. 278.
poetic justice, and a moral fable there. These criteria led inevitably to sentimental comedy.

The result of Collier's method was that critics could not answer him without answering Rymer. On specific points they could succeed, just as they had with Rymer. Dennis, who saw most clearly where Collier's attack was headed, was able to establish the usefulness (or, rather, potential usefulness) of the stage, but only by granting most of Collier's points. The dramatists, notably Vanbrugh, were able to refute specific charges of immorality. But this pruning away left Collier's main arguments unshaken. As long as the narrow idea that all drama must teach by precept and example remained valid, no real answer was possible.

Rymer is often mentioned by his contemporaries and immediate successors. Too often we are given merely the discrepancy between his critical standards and the value of his own tragedy; he is mentioned as a good critic or as a bad critic, most often as a critic of Shakespeare; sometimes one of his specific judgments is answered. These tell us little except that Rymer was enrolled among the critics and that his name would be recognized. Editors of Shakespeare as late as Warburton showed some concern for dealing with Rymer's strictures; sketches for histories of English literature until the time of Warburton used A Short View as their point of departure.\(^{42}\) Apart from such specific points one cannot in the eighteenth century speak of the influence of

\(^{42}\)Curt A. Zimansky, "Chaucer and the School of Provence," FQ, XXV (1946), pp. 321-342.
Rymer's criticism. That had been merged into the general neoclassical creed. Emphasis shifted from rules to taste and good sense and there was less citing of authority. One suspects that many eighteenth-century opinions of Rymer are based on only slight knowledge. For England we can cite two solidly based opinions, one informal, the other formal. Pope's favorable comment, uttered in conversation with Spence, is well known. But Dr. Johnson's unfavorable comment, in which he compares Dryden and Rymer, is probably better known and probably more valid.

Elsewhere Rymer had one belated disciple. In 1776 the French Academy, whose founders had helped form Rymer's critical theory, heard a letter in which the extravagances of Shakespeare were pointed out at some length. In concluding, the author, Voltaire, cited his authority:

Les mêmes réflexions que je fais ici devant vous, messieurs, ont été faites en Angleterre par plusieurs gens de lettres. Rymer même, le savant Rymer, dans un livre dédié au fameux comte Dorset, en 1693, sur L'excellence et la corruption de la tragédie, pousse la sévérité de sa critique jusqu'à dire "qu'il n'y a point de singe en Afrique, point de babouin qui n'ait plus de goût que Shakespeare." Permettez-moi, messieurs, de prendre un milieu entre Rymer et le traducteur de Shakespeare, et de ne regarder ce Shakespeare ni comme un dieu, ni comme un singe.

Despite the pretended balance of the last sentence, Voltaire in his late years was more apt to see in Shakespeare a Barbary pug than a god. He needed to borrow neither critical principles nor

43 Cf. footnotes to the Afterward.
44 Cf. footnotes to the Afterward.
malicious technique from Rymer. In this attack, however, he borrowed both. He apparently had read *A Short View* carefully: there are a few verbal echoes, and he translates Rymer's synopsis of *Gorboduc*, though without praising the play. He shares Rymer's view that Shakespeare was still too close to the strolling players. Like Rymer he is deaf to certain beauties and invents rules to justify his deafness. His first selection is Iago's speech to Brabantio which Rymer had found so shocking. Concerning the line in *Hamlet*, "Not a mouse stirring," which Lord Kames had dared to set against a passage from Racine's *Iphigénie*, he bursts forth:

> Oui, monsieur, un soldat peut répondre ainsi dans un corps de garde; mais non pas sur le théâtre, devant les premières personnes d'une nation, qui s'expriment noblement, et devant qui il faut s'exprimer de même. 47

Passing into the nineteenth-century one finds either vituperation or amused tolerance. For Sir Walter Scott, "Nothing can be more disgusting than the remarks of Rymer, who creeps over the most beautiful passages of the drama with eyes open only to their defects, or their departure from scholastic precept....there is sometimes justice, though never mercy, in his criticism."48 From here it is but a step to the remark Macaulay threw into a parenthesis, "Rymer...the worst critic that every lived."49

Rymer was now reserved for fanciers of curious learning,

46Ibid.
47Ibid.
49Cf. *Afterward.*
who occasionally reported their amusement at so odd a discovery. The first to come upon this strange critic was Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd, who at least gave to Rymer the dignity of place as subject for the opening article of the Retrospective Review in 1820. After a summary of Rymer's views, a tribute to his learning, and amused glances at the sanctity of rules, he admits that an honest, sophisticated hatred of Shakespeare is better than maudlin admiration, and concludes,

Their author has a heartiness, an earnestness almost romantic, which we cannot despise, though directed against our idol....He is the Don Quixote of criticism. Like the hero of Cervantes, he is roused to avenge fictitious injuries, and would demolish the scenic exhibition in his disinterested rage. 50

The figure of Don Quixote also suggested itself to Isaac Disraeli in 1841:

Rymer grasped the new and formidable weapon of modern criticism. Armed at all points with a Grecian helmut and a Gallic lance, this literary Quixote sallied forth to attack all the giants or the windmills of the English theatre. 51

Rymer was no longer a critic to be contended with, and even an editor of Othello could speak tolerantly of "that headlong torrent of amusing abuse of Shakespeare." 52

In this neglect the nineteenth century showed a lack of interest in the history of criticism and some smugness about its

51 Zimansky, p. 1.
52 Ibid.
own critical taste. The turn of the century, when the history of
criticism became a recognized field for study, produced nothing
kindlier. Saintsbury, with full awareness of the gravity of the
verdict, supported Macaulay's sentence; 53 Lounsbury's decision
was equally adverse. 54 Spingarn was the first to see Rymer's
school in historical context and without prejudice, with real un­
derstanding of what Rymer was trying to do in his time. 55 He
made clear the difference between Rymer's specific judgments and
the methods which prompted them, and also developed the informa­
tion on which all later study of Rymer has been based. Since
Spingarn there have been numerous studies of aspects of neoclas­
sical criticism, and in most of these Rymer's importance is recog­
nized. But historical criticism passes no formal verdicts, and
one can only attempt a rash summary of what appears to be the pre­
sent judgment. Rymer's bad taste and failure to grant any role
to the imagination are admitted; his strictures on the Beaumont
and Fletcher plays are allowed where probability of plot is con­
cerned but are more doubtful where his standard is decorum of
character; his attack on Othello remains a challenge since the at­
tacks on probability seem valid and the play does raise special
problems of moral and decorum; his scholarship is admitted and
his view of literary history is—if on historical grounds only--

53 Saintsbury, II, p. 397.

54 Earl Wasserman, Elizabethan Poetry in the Eighteenth

worthy of study; his system and his method of analysis have a clarity which compels interest though not acceptance.
AFTERWARD

Some Reflections on the Nature of Criticism

Rymer, a learned and strict critic? Ay that's exactly his character. He is generally right, though rather too severe in his opinion of the particular plays he speaks of; and is, on the whole, one of the best critics we ever had.1

But his (Dr. Johnson's) observations on Shakespeare's plays and Milton's poems seem to us for the most part as wretched as if they had been written by Rymer himself, whom we take to have been the worst critic that ever lived. 2

How is it possible for "one of the best critics we ever had" to become "the worst critic that ever lived?" In attempting to reconcile, or, at least, to understand, the verdicts of Pope and Macaulay, Professor Spingarn not only helps to explain the paradox of Rymer's reputation but succeeds in raising and at the same time clarifying one of the eternally vexing problems of criticism.

Pope, says Spingarn, disagreed no less than Macaulay with most of Rymer's individual comments. But this fact, he continues, instead of complicating the issue, actually does much to simplify it. Spingarn proceeds to elaborate on this observation:

1.72.


In the age of classicism, not a man's verdicts but his method and doctrine gave him his position as a critic,—not individual dicta or subjective impressions, but principles and learning, and that critical dialectic which was the art with which he wielded these weapons. To respect the critic's prowess, without regard to the object of it, was as intelligible as to admire the skill of a duellist whose thrust has destroyed a noble life. For the dogmatic element in classicism the romantic temper substituted other forms of dogmatism; and the character of the adversary became of even greater importance than the fencer's own skill. If Jeffreys or Gifford is "too severe in his opinion of the particular plays he speaks of," his prestige as a critic suffers; his judgement of individual poems or poets is the test by which we judge his taste: if he has critical principles, they must prove themselves by right application to the facts of literary history. 3

Spingarn is presenting us, I think, with two distinct approaches to the problem of critical standards. There is, first of all, as he suggests, the view that criticism is primarily a matter of method, that in the act of criticism the work of art is for the moment subordinated to the intellectual equipment of the critic. According to this view, the good critic is the man who consistently uses the principles and learning at his command, his final pronouncement remaining of only incidental interest to those who can admire his skill. We are, on the other hand, confronted with the notion that criticism is fundamentally an act of judging and that the critic's usefulness accordingly depends largely upon the degree to which his individual taste conforms to the values we find. What is too often overlooked—and Spingarn is wise to call this to our attention—is the fact that both kinds of criticism tend to become dogmatic. In one case, poetic

justice and decorum dictate critical practice; in the other, it is the way the individual reader has felt that determines how the critic ought to feel about specific poems. If the critic fails to respond, then, in terms of this second approach, we cannot respect his ability as a critic.

According to Pope's standards, for example, Othello may or may not be a good play, but Rymer is surely a good critic for the reason that he knows and can systematically apply, whether to Shakespeare or to anyone else, approved critical principles that are exact and uncompromising. But Macaulay, who himself may find Othello great, cannot consider Rymer a good critic and cannot grant validity to those standards—however systematic they may be—which will not permit Rymer to acknowledge the play's greatness. The character of the adversary has indeed been raised in importance above the fencer's skill, and it is on account of this major shift in the emphasis of criticism that modern readers may find it difficult to appraise that skill with the proper diligence and fairness. Not only does the quick dismissal prevent Rymer from being appreciated, but it contributes heavily towards his being misunderstood. Because changes in critical fashions may have made his evaluations distasteful to us, we find ourselves either reluctant or unable even to formulate adequately some of the important issues which may arise out of Rymer's once-admired position.

The most serious question Rymer raises is, I think, the extent to which literature and criticism are responsible to mor-
ality. The problem, of course, is too vast to be dealt with in any single work. I should like to suggest, however, that moralistic criticism can be useful if the critic who engages in it happens to have—as, it seems to me, Dr. Johnson had—a large and highly discriminating sense of morality. Morality is an extremely complex process of adjustment, and if it is viewed simply in terms of clear-cut distinctions, it cannot, I feel, be successfully transferred to a work like Othello where the poet is concerned with an infinitely subtle and intricate conception of the nature of man. It is not enough merely to scoff at the moral issue as irrelevant to criticism. The moralistic critic can only be refuted—or even understood—after long and patient analysis of the way in which he understands morality. And if Rymer's notion of morality is too simple to permit his enjoyment of Shakespeare, certainly his great contemporary Dryden was not so limited. In the case of Dryden we can observe a man whose interpretation of morality allowed him considerable insight into the behavior of men on the stage as well as in the world.

I should like, moreover, to venture the suggestion that the most meaningful phase of criticism is not the final verdict, but the exciting exploration which precedes the verdict. Rymer's particular pronouncement on Othello, I repeat, seems less important to our appreciation of literature than the process by which he investigates the play and can formulate the pronouncement. It seems to me that it would be well to infuse again into criticism something of the respect Pope and his contemporaries felt
for critical method. One may quite easily quarrel with a particular critic's assumptions or even with his specific judgments and yet be able to find richness in the quality of his intellectual activity. Eliot, for example, whatever we may think of his notions about poetry or of his private evaluation of Donne, at least manages, in the process of arriving at that evaluation, to say some penetrating things about the way poetry can work. Nor does one have to share Dr. Johnson's judgment of Lycidas in order to find stimulation in the fascinating operation of his intelligence. The explorations are rewarding independent of their concrete findings.

If we are skeptical as to the value of a criticism that addressed itself primarily to the task of investigation, it would be well to turn to Dryden's own Essay of Dramatic Poesy. This remarkable work furnishes a beautiful illustration of how the mere activity of criticism can in itself be exciting. The four critics on the barge represent different points of view, and each brings his own method to bear on the particular aesthetic issues under discussion. But no conclusions are reached; none of the problems is clearly resolved; the end of the dialogue shows no marked reversal in the attitudes of any of the men. It would be a grave mistake, however, to conclude that this wonderful talk has therefore been useless. These men have, after all, come to grips with big questions and, regardless of differences in their individual assumptions, they have demonstrated their ability to meet these questions with a humility and an earnestness that are
Neander was pursuing this discourse so eagerly, that Eugenius had called to him twice or thrice, ere he took notice that the barge stood still, and that they were at the foot of Somerset Stairs, where they had appointed to land. The company were all sorry to separate so soon, though a great part of the evening was already spent; and stood a-while looking back on the water, which the moon-beams played on, and made it appear like floating quick-silver; at last they went up through a crowd of French people, who were merrily dancing in the open air, and nothing concerned for the noise of guns which had alarmed the town that afternoon. Walking thence together to the Piazze, they parted there; Eugenius and Lisideius to some pleasant appointment they had made, and Crites and Neander to their several lodgings. 4

The serenity with which they part may be sufficient proof that they have been brought a little closer to final wisdom.

APPENDIX: A RYMER CHRONOLOGY

1643  Probable year of Thomas Rymer's birth at Yafforth.

1649  Rymer placed in the Northallerton Free School under Thomas Smelt.

1659  Rymer admitted to Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, on April 29, at the age of sixteen.

1662. Rymer contributes to a university collection of poetry celebrating the marriage of Charles II. He leaves the university, apparently without taking a degree.

1663  Rymer's father Ralph arrested on October 13 for treason; sentenced on January 7, 1664, to be hanged, drawn, and quartered.

1666  Rymer admitted to Gray's Inn on May 2.

1673  Called to the bar on June 16.

1674  His translation of Rapin's Reflexions sur la poétique published.

1677  Tragedies of the Last Age published in August. No longer at Gray's Inn. His only tragedy Edgar published.

1681  A General Draught and Prospect of Government in Europe, Rymer's most ambitious work in the decade, published.

1684  Contributes the life of Nicias to the Dryden translation of Plutarch.

1691  Preface to the Tonson edition of Rochester's poems published.

1692  A Short View of Tragedy published. In November Rymer succeeds Shadwell as historiographer royal.

1693  On August 26 Rymer begins work on the Foedera, an edition of all past English treaties.

1704  The first volume of the Foedera appears.

1713  Rymer dies at his lodgings in Arundel Street on December 13, apparently in financial difficulties.


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APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by William J. Shanahan has been read and approved by members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

14 April 1967
Date

[Signature of Adviser]