

Hub Edits

- **John Dryden, *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668)**
- Dryden's famous pronouncement: It concerns the peace and quiet of all honest people that ill poets should be silenced
- The structure of Dryden's essay is a dialogue between four imaginary friends who each contribute aesthetic and dramatic theories to the conversation
 - However, it becomes clear that Dryden is setting up classical ideas of drama in order to portray them as timeworn and to argue for the merits of more modern devices
- The First Classical Idea – The Three Unities
- The Three Unities – Time, Place, Action
- Time
 - Classically, plays are thought to best imitate nature if they keep their plots within a small time frame – because the farther away you get from this the less like reality it is since you manipulate the speed of time
 - Thus if the audience is sitting for a two hour play, but the events in the play take place over five years, there is a certain verisimilitude that is inevitably lost by this inflationary time scale
 - It is also important that one act should not have a disproportionate time allotment compared to the others
 - The ancient playwrights “set the audience at the post where the race is to be concluded and, saving them the tedious expectation of seeing the poet set out and ride the beginning of the course, they suffer you not to behold him till he is in sight of the goal and just upon you”
- Place
 - The scene ought to be continued in the play in the same place where it was laid in the beginning – because the stage on which it is represented is one and the same place
 - In other words, if the scene begins in a garden, it ought to end there
 - Thus do not try to persuade people that the stage is many places
 - If there are to be more than one place it carries a greater probability of truth if those places are near each other
- Action
 - The poet is to aim at **one** great and complete action, and everything else must be subservient to this
 - “The Poet is to aim at one great and complete action, to the carrying on of which all things in his Play, even the very obstacles, are to be subservient; and the reason of this is as evident as any of the former. For two Actions equally labored and driven on by the Writer, would destroy the unity of the Poem; it would be no longer one Play, but two.”
 - Of course there can be many actions in the play but all are subservient to the ONE
 - Thus there should be one complete action that leaves the mind of the audience in complete repose
 - But this cannot be brought to pass except by many other imperfect actions which conduce to it, and hold the audience in a delightful suspense of what will be

Hub Edits

- Clearly the moderns have profited by the rules of the Ancients but in order to overcome them (the ancients) we (the moderns) must make use of the advantages we have received from them
- Aristotle's division of the play into four parts
 - 1) The Protasis (or entrance) – which gives light only to the characters of the persons and proceeds very little into any part of the action
 - 2) The Epitasis (working up of the plot) – where the play grows warmer, the design or action of it is drawing on, and you see something promising that will come to pass
 - 3) The Catastasis – the height and full growth of the play; the counterturn, which destroys that expectation, embroils the action in new difficulties, and leaves you far distant from the hope you once had
 - 4) The Catastrophe (denouement) – the discovery or unraveling of the plot: there you see all things settling again upon their first foundations, and the obstacles which hindered the design or action of the play once removed it ends with that resemblance of truth and nature that the audience are satisfied with
- The language of a play is most admired when a great thought comes dressed in words so commonly received that it is universally understood
 - The best meat is most easily digested
 - Ovid had a way of writing so fit to stir up a pleasing admiration and concernment, which are the objects of a tragedy, and to show the various movements of a soul combating between two different passions
 - [William Faulkner called this internal struggle: “The human heart in conflict with itself”]
- The Second Classical Idea – Conceptions of Plot (Narration vs. Action)
- For the Classical aesthetic, the problem with breaking the unity of action is that now you have the audience spreading their attention across two distinct components
- The problem with excessive plot is that the writer is forced to multiply the adventures and inevitably this leads to actions that occur without proper causality – adventures not produced from one another – and consequently you have not one play but many plays
- But by pursuing closely one argument which is not cloyed with many turns, you gain more liberty in the verse and have the leisure to dwell on a subject which deserves it, and to represent passions (which are the poet's prime works) without being hurried from one thing to another
- In French drama they follow this above precept of minimal plot
 - The French focus on one considerable person – they dwell on him, and his concernments, while the rest of the persons are only subservient to set him off
 - One person must always be more conspicuous and have the greatest share in action
- The use of narrations in the play has two forms – 1) those which are antecedent to the play and are related to make the conduct of it more clear to us; 2) the use of narrative woven in to the action of the play
 - Here the second is clearly preferable because the first will cause the audience to lose their attention and once this happens that attention never returns

Hub Edits

- And using the second form helps eliminate the need to show things like battles and duels which are almost comical in how they can be portrayed on a stage and remove all seriousness from a play
 - According to this thought, the words of a playwright can render it better than the action of an actor
 - Dryden makes the bold claim that a poet's description of a beautiful garden will please our imagination more than the place itself can please our sight
 - To back up his claim, Dryden notes that when we see death represented we consider it fiction (because the actors do not actually die, and we know this) but when we hear death related our eyes cannot deceive us and we believe it more
- The objection to this of course is that if one part of the play may be related via narrative why not just all parts – and the counter to this is that some parts recommend themselves better for narration than others
 - The poet is not obliged to expose to view all particular action which conduce to the principle
 - He ought to select that which will appear with the greatest beauty – either by the magnificence of the show or the vehemence of passions they produce (or some other charm which they have in them) – and let the rest arrive to the audience by narration
 - Like the law of motion that a body in motion remains so forever until acted on by a force to stop it – once the audience is in sympathy with the narrated character then they will have their sympathies continued and thus narration can still be of use
 - It is a mistake to claim that this type of minimal plot is without action since the passions themselves are the actions
 - The mistake is in thinking that only the characters coming to blows constitutes actions
 - Painting the hero's mind is just as much action as painting his body
 - Let a viewer inform him or herself of what has just happened
- In French drama you never see their plays end with a conversion or a simple change of will
 - If you attempt this you must make sure to convince the audience that the motivation of the change is enough
 - Otherwise you run the risk of didacticism
- There is no need to stick to the rule that a character only enters the scene if the business which brings them on stage is evident
 - Again, let the audience do their interpretative work
- Compassion (tragedy) and mirth in the same subject DO NOT destroy each other
 - [See *Hamlet*]
- Dryden then presents the counterargument about the superiority of French narrative plotting

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- The use of active plots and the use of subplots (in contravention of the French model) is like having the main plot be a fixed star and all the under-action smaller planets revolving around it
 - The under-current is only different, not contrary, and therefore can be conducted along with the flow of the main plot
 - But all petty actions must still relate to the main plot otherwise unity of action is violated
 - But variety, if well ordered, will afford a greater pleasure to the audience
- The French drama, by pursuing minimal plot, often does so to its detriment because it sometimes leads to such lengthy declamations and instead of persuading us to grieve for the imagery of the heroes we are concerned for ourselves sitting through all the tedium
 - Here the actors speak by the hourglass
- Grievances and passions must be like floods raised in little brooks by a sudden rain – they are quickly up and if the concernment be poured unexpectedly in upon us, it overflows us
 - However a long sober shower gives grief and passion time to run out without troubling the ordinary current
 - Thus comedy can break up this long sober shower of tragedy
 - Repartee and swift wit is one of the chief virtues of comedy
- Dryden then offers the counterpoint to the idea that a plot should only follow one person
 - The author concedes that one person will tend to dominate the play but this does not mean that other characters of a second order can't also rise up and play important roles, almost rivaling the protagonist himself
 - The more persons there are the greater the variety in the plot – but if these parts are managed so regularly that the beauty of the whole is kept intact, and that the variety does not become a perplexed and confused mass of accidents then the audience will find it infinitely more pleasing to be lead in a labyrinth of design
 - In this labyrinth you see some of the way before you, yet discern not the end till you arrive at it
- As to the claim that certain fantastic elements are best left off stage owing to their lack of verisimilitude – this marks a distrust for the audience
 - The playwright should include such elements, if done well, and trust the audience will properly absorb them (by suspending disbelief – i.e. ignoring the fact that wars do not take place on stages with only ten combatants)
 - The writer must reach a mean between showing too much action and too little so that the audience may be neither left unsatisfied by not seeing what is beautiful, or shocked by beholding what is either incredible or indecent
- Dryden chides critics saying they should try to produce the works of art and see the difficulty and the constraints of the writer before they are so quick to criticize
 - By critics insisting on the three unities of time, place, action they have brought on themselves drama that has too little plot, and a narrowness of imagination
 - Limiting the scope of a play limits the numbers of happy accidents that may happen and please the audience
 - Some plots also need to mature as they progress and cannot be pulled off in such narrow constraints
- Shakespeare had the largest and most complex soul of all the modern poets, Dryden says – all the images of nature were present to him

Hub Edits

- When he describes anything you more than see it, you feel it
- Shakespeare was accused of not being learned but Dryden says you don't need book learning to appreciate the beauty of nature (Dryden says Shakespeare looked inwards and found nature in there)
- On Ben Jonson
 - Jonson managed his strength to more advantage than any who preceded him
 - Humor was his proper sphere
 - He robs from others so openly in his work
 - And with the spoils of these writers he so represents old Rome to us, in its rites, ceremonies, and customs
 - If there is any fault in his language it is that he weaved it too closely and laboriously
 - He is more of a correct poet than Shakespeare but Shakespeare is a greater wit
 - Dryden admires Johnson but loves Shakespeare
- An Examination of Ben Jonson's Play, *The Silent Woman*
 - Its action far exceeds the compass of a normal day
 - It lies within two houses, and after the first act only one house
 - The action of the play is entirely one – the aim of which is the settling of Morose's estate on Dauphine, Morose's nephew in the play
 - Morose is an old man who is crotchety and peevish – to him all noise is offensive except his own voice
 - He lives in his house, a place where he may make himself obeyed
 - Thus his name makes sense – he does not like the plight of his old age and is called Morose
 - Dryden compares Morose to Falstaff, who Dryden says is the best of comical characters
 - Falstaff is old, fat, merry, cowardly, drunken, amorous, vain, and lying – in drama many characters resemble this
 - Humor is the ridiculous extravagance of conversation wherein one man differs from all others
 - Falstaff is not a single humor but a miscellany of humors or images, drawn from so many several men
 - Where he is singular is in his wit, or those things he says that are unexpected by the audience
 - Humor in the ancient drama (of which Aristophanes was the chief practitioner) was directed at making people laugh at some odd conceit, which commonly had an unnatural or obscene essence
 - Thus a lot of the old humor is directed at irony as where Aristophanes shows Socrates acting in a foolish way very uncharacteristic of the actual Socrates
 - In the comedy of the ancients the poets tried to express the ethos of mankind (as in their drama they tried to express the pathos of mankind)
 - But this ethos contained only the general characters of men and manners: old men, lovers, serving-men, courtesans, parasites, and other stock characters
 - Often these characters are similar to each other in the play

Hub Edits

- For the English, humor is meant as some extravagant habit, passion, or affection, particular to some person, by the oddness of which, he is immediately distinguished from the rest of men
- Besides Morose there are at least nine or ten different characters and humors in *The Silent Woman*, all of which have several concerns of their own yet all are still used toward conducting the main design
- The contrivance of the plot is extreme, elaborate, and yet withal easy
- Jonson also gives skillful explanations of major characters before they come on stage so that you have a longing expectation of them before they appear
 - And when they appear you are acquainted with them from first appearance. So acquainted that none of their quirks of character are lost on you
- The business of plot rises in every act – the second is greater than the first, the third than the second, and so on
- New difficulties (under-plots) arise to the very last scene
- New characters appear in later acts to raise interest
- Like a skillful chess play, Jonson draws out his men little by little
- The Third Classical Idea – Notions of Rhyme and Meter in Drama
- One opinion is that it has no place in serious plays but only in comedy
 - Here rhyme is seen as unnatural because dialogue is presented as the effect of sudden thought (for a play is the imitation of nature) and no one speaks in rhyme without premeditation
 - Essentially this argument says rhyme sounds unnatural and ruins the play's realism
 - The ancients tried to avoid rhyme by writing in the meter that is closest to human speech, iambic
- “A play is still an imitation of nature; we know we are to be deceived and we desire to be so; but no man ever was deceived but with a probability of truth; for who will suffer a gross lie to be fastened on him? Thus we sufficiently understand that the scenes which represent cities and countries to us are not really such but only painted on boards and canvas; but shall that excuse the ill painture or designment of them? Nay, rather ought they not to be labored with so much the more diligence and exactness to help the imagination? The mind of man does naturally tend to, and see after, the truth – therefore the nearer anything comes to the imitation of it, the more it pleases.”
- The counter to saying that rhyme doesn't belong in tragedy is that just because some writers use it poorly doesn't mean it shouldn't be used at all
- Often in blank verse the rules of meter force an unnatural rearrangement of words
 - In the same way no one speaks in rhyme no one speaks in meter or blank verse
- When it comes to rhyme, variety of cadence is the best rule
- And if rhyme can ever come naturally of itself then surely it has a role in plays since plays are imitations of nature
 - Rhyme may be made as natural as blank verse with well placing of the lines
- No poet need constrain herself at all times, it is enough that she makes it her general rule
 - Sometimes it is better to break the general rule in some places
- The genius of every age is different and the greats like Jonson and Shakespeare could not come alive and delight today

Hub Edits

- Tragedy is wont to image the minds and fortunes of noble persons, and to portray these exactly
- Tragedy performs its function via action whereas epic poetry does it only through narration
- We must strive for more in verse than whatever seems to sound premeditated – we must make fiction better than real life