

An Essay of Dramatic Poesy Main Text

Writer: John Dryden | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

It was that memorable day, in the first Summer of the late War, when our Navy engaged the Dutch: a day wherein the two most mighty and best appointed Fleets which any age had ever seen, disputed the command of the greater half of the Globe, the commerce of Nations, and the riches of the Universe. While these vast floating bodies, on either side, moved against each other in parallel lines, and our Country men, under the happy conduct of his Royal Highness, went breaking, by little and little, into the line of the Enemies; the noise of the Cannon from both Navies reached our ears about the City: so that all men, being alarmed with it, and in a dreadful suspense of the event, which we knew was then deciding, every one went following the sound as his fancy led him; and leaving the Town almost empty, some took towards the Park, some cross the River, others down it; all seeking the noise in the depth of silence.

Amongst the rest, it was the fortune of Eugenius, Crites, Lisideus and Neander, to be in company together: three of them persons whom their wit and Quality have made known to all the Town: and whom I have chose to hide under these borrowed names, that they may not suffer by so ill a relation as I am going to make of their discourse.

Taking then a Barge which a servant of Lisideus had provided for them, they made haste to shoot the Bridge, and left behind them that great fall of waters which hindered them from hearing what they desired: after which, having disengaged themselves from many Vessels which rode at Anchor in the Thames, and almost blocked up the passage towards Greenwich, they ordered the Watermen to let fall their Oars more gently; and then every one favoring his own curiosity with a strict silence, it was not long ere they perceived the Air break about them like the noise of distant Thunder, or of Swallows in a Chimney: those little undulations of sound, though almost vanishing before they reached them, yet still seeming to retain somewhat of their first horror which they had betwixt the Fleets: after they had attentively listened till such time as the sound by little and little went from them; Eugenius lifting up his head, and taking notice of it, was the first who congratulated to the rest that happy Omen of our Nations Victory adding, we had but this to desire in confirmation of it, that we might hear no more of that noise which was now leaving the English Coast. When the rest had concurred in the same opinion, Crites, a person of a sharp judgment, and somewhat too delicate a taste in wit, which the world have mistaken in him for ill nature, said, smiling to us, that if the concernment of this battle had not been so exceeding great, he could scarce have wished the

Victory at the price he knew must pay for it, in being subject to the reading and hearing of so many ill verses as he was sure would be made upon it; adding, that no Argument could scape some of those eternal Rhymers, who watch a Battle with more diligence than the Ravens and birds of Prey; and the worst of them surest to be first in upon the quarry, while the better able, either out of modesty writ not at all, or set that due value upon their Poems, as to let them be often called for and long expected! "There are some of those impertinent people you speak of," answered Lisideius, "who to my knowledge, are already so provided, either way, that they can produce not only a Panegyric upon the Victory, but, if need be, a funeral elegy upon the Duke: and after they have crowned his valor with many Laurels, at last deplore the odds under which he fell, concluding that his courage deserved a better destiny." All the company smiled at the conceit of Lisideius, but Crites, more eager than before, began to make particular exceptions against some Writers, and said the public Magistrate ought to send betimes to forbid them; and that it concerned the peace and quiet of all honest people, that ill Poets should be as well silenced as seditious Preachers. "In my opinion," replied Eugenius, "you pursue your point too far; for as to my own particular, I am so great a lover of Poesy, that I could wish them all rewarded who attempt but to do well; at least I would not have them worse used than Sylla the Dictator did one of their brethren heretofore: *Quem in concione vidimus* (says Tully speaking of him) *cum ei libellum malus poeta de populo subjecisset, quod epigramma in eum fecisset tantummodo alternis versibus longiuculis, statim ex iis rebus quæ tunc vendebat jubere ei præmium tribui, sub ea conditione ne quid postea scriberet.*" [We saw him once in an assembly, when out of the crowd a bad poet offered him an epigram in elegiac verse that he had just written as an attack on Sylla; he immediately ordered that the poet be given a reward out of the articles that he was selling, with the condition that he never again write anything—ed.] "I could wish with all my heart," replied Crites, "that many whom we know were as bountifully thanked upon the same condition, that they would never trouble us again. For amongst others, I have a mortal apprehension of two Poets, whom this victory with the help of both her wings will never be able to escape." "'Tis easy to guess whom you intend," said Lisideius; "and without naming them, I ask you if one of them does not perpetually pay us with clenches upon words and a certain clownish kind of raillery? if now and then he does not offer at a Catachresis or Clevelandism, wresting and torturing a word into another meaning: In fine, if he be not one of those whom the French would call *un mauvais buffon*; one that is so much a well-willer to the Satire, that he spares no man; and though he cannot strike a blow to hurt any, yet ought to be punished for the malice of the action, as our Witches are justly hanged because they think themselves so; and suffer deservedly for believing they did mischief, because they meant it." "You have described him," said Crites, "so exactly, that I am afraid to come after you with my other extremity of Poetry: He is one of those who having had some advantage of education and converse, knows better than the other what a Poet should be, but puts it into

practice more unluckily than any man; his stile and matter are every where alike; he is the most calm, peaceable. Writer you ever read: he never disquiets your passions with the least concernment, but still leaves you in as even a temper as he found you; he is a very Leveller in Poetry, he creeps along with ten little words in every line, and helps out his Numbers with *For to*, and *Unto*, and all the pretty Expletives he can find, till he drags them to the end of another line; while the Sense is left tired half way behind it; he doubly starves all his Verses, first for want of thought, and then of expression; his Poetry neither has wit in it, nor seems to have it; like him in Martial: *Pauper videri Cinna vult, et est pauper* [Cinna wants to seem to be a pauper; and, sure enough, he is a pauper]: He affects plainness, to cover his want of imagination: when he writes the serious way, the highest flight of his fancy is some miserable Antithesis, or seeming contradiction; and in the Comic he is still reaching at some thin conceit, the ghost of a Jest, and that too flies before him, never to be caught; these Swallows which we see before us on the Thames, are just resemblance of his wit: you may observe how near the water they stoop, how many proffers they make to dip, and yet how seldom they touch it: and when they do, 'tis but the surface: they skim over it but to catch a gnat, and then mount into the air and leave it."

"Well Gentlemen," said Eugenius, "you may speak your pleasure of these Authors; but though I and some few more about the Town may give you a peaceable hearing, yet, assure yourselves, there are multitudes who would think you malicious and them injured: especially him who you first described; he is the very Withers of the City: they have bought more Editions of his Works than would serve to lay under all the Pies at the Lord Mayor's Christmas. When his famous Poem first came out in the year, I have seen them reading it in the midst of Change-time; many so vehement they were at it, that they lost their bargain by the Candles ends: but what will you say, if he has been received amongst the great Ones? I can assure you he is, this day, the envy of a great person, who is Lord in the Art of Quibbling; and who does not take it well, that any man should intrude so far into his Province." "All I would wish," replied Crites, "is, that they who love his Writings, may still admire him, and his fellow Poet: *Qui Bavium non odit, etc.* [who does not hate Bavius—ed.] is curse sufficient." "And farther," added Lisideius, "I believe there is no man who writes well, but would think himself very hardly dealt with, if their Admirers should praise anything of his: *Nam quos contemnimus eorum quoque laudes contemnimus* [For we detest praise that comes from those we detest—ed.]" "There are so few who write well in this Age," said Crites, "that methinks any praises should be welcome; then neither rise to the dignity of the last Age, nor to any of the Ancients; and we may cry out of the Writers of this time, with more reason than Petronius of his, *Pace vestra liceat dixisse, primi omnium eloquentiam perdidistis* [If I may be permitted to say so, you were, of all, the first to lose the old eloquence]: you have debauched the true old Poetry so far, that Nature, which is the soul of

it, is not in any of your Writings."

"If your quarrel," said Eugenius, "to those who now write, be grounded only upon your reverence to Antiquity, there is no man more ready to adore those great Greeks and Romans than I am: but on the other side, I cannot think so contemptibly of the Age I live in, or so dishonorably of my own Country, as not to judge we equal the Ancients in most kinds of Poesy, and in some surpass them; neither know I any reason why I may not be as zealous for the Reputation of our Age, as we find the Ancients themselves in reference to those who lived before them. For you hear your Horace saying,

*Indignor quidquam reprehendi, non quia crassé
Compositum, illepidève putetur, sed quia nuper
[I bristle when something is condemned, not because
it is badly or obscurely written, but just because it is new—ed.].*

And after,

*Si meliora dies, ut vina, poemata reddit,
Scire velim pretium chartis quotus arroget annus?
[If books, like wines, improve with age, tell me
in what year they achieve value?—ed.].*

"But I see I am engaging in a wide dispute, where the arguments are not like to reach close on either side; for Poesy is of so large extent, and so many both of the Ancients and Moderns have done well in all kinds of it, that, in citing one against the other, we shall take up more time this Evening, than each man's occasions will allow him: therefore I would ask Crites to what part of Poesy he would confine his Arguments, and whether he would defend the general cause of the Ancients against the Moderns, or oppose any Age of the Moderns against this of ours?"

Crites a little while considering upon this Demand, told Eugenius he approved his Propositions, and, if he pleased, he would limit their Dispute to Dramatic Poesy; in which he thought it not difficult to prove, either that the Ancients were superior to the Moderns, or the last Age to this of ours.

Eugenius was somewhat surprised, when he heard Crites make choice of that Subject; "For ought I see," said he, "I have undertaken a harder Province than I imagined; for though I never judged the Plays of the Greek or Roman Poets comparable to ours; yet on the other side those we now see acted, come short of many which were written in the last Age: but my comfort is if we are o'ercome, it will be only by our own Countrymen: and if we yield to them in this one part of Poesy, we more surpass them in all the other; for in the Epic or Lyric way it will be hard

for them to show us one such amongst them, as we have many now living, or who lately were so. They can produce nothing so courtly writ, or which expresses so much the Conversation of a Gentleman, as Sir John Suckling; nothing so even, sweet, and flowing as Mr. Waller; nothing so Majestic, so correct as Sir John Denham; nothing so elevated, so copious, and full of spirit, as Mr. Cowley; as for the Italian, French, and Spanish Plays, I can make it evident that those who now write, surpass them; and that the Drama is wholly ours."

All of them were thus far of Eugenius's opinion, that the sweetness of English Verse was never understood or practiced by our Fathers; even Crites himself did not much oppose it: and every one was willing to acknowledge how much our Poesy is improved, by the happiness of some Writers yet living; who first taught us to mould our thoughts into easy and significant words; to retrench the superfluities of expression, and to make our Rime so properly a part of the Verse, that it should never mislead the sense, but itself be led and governed by it.

Eugenius was going to continue this Discourse, when Lisideius told him it was necessary, before they proceeded further, to take a standing measure of their Controversy; for how was it possible to be decided who writ the best Plays, before we know what a Play should be? but, this once agreed on by both Parties, each might have recourse to it, either to prove his own advantages, or discover the failings of his Adversary.

He had no sooner said this, but all desired the favor of him to give the definition of a Play; and they were the more importunate, because neither Aristotle, nor Horace, nor any other, who writ of that Subject, had ever done it.

Lisideius, after some modest denials, at last confessed he had a rude Notion of it; indeed rather a Description than a Definition: but which served to guide him in his private thoughts, when he was to make a judgment of what others writ: that he conceived a Play ought to be, *A just and lively Image of Humane Nature, representing its Passions and Humors, and the Changes of Fortune to which it is subject; for the Delight and Instruction of Mankind.*

This Definition, though Crites raised a Logical Objection against it; that it was only a *genere et fine* [that is, too broadly, according to category and purpose—as though one defined "shirt" as "a garment to keep one warm"—ed.], and so not altogether perfect; was yet well received by the rest: and after they had given order to the Water-men to turn their Barge, and row softly, that they might take the cool of the Evening in their return; Crites, being desired by the Company to begin, spoke on behalf of the Ancients, in this manner:

"If Confidence presage a Victory, Eugenius, in his own opinion, has already triumphed over the Ancients; nothing seems more easy to him, than to overcome those whom it is our greatest

praise to have imitated well: for we do not only build upon their foundation; but by their models. Dramatic Poesy had time enough, reckoning from Thespis (who first invented it) to Aristophanes, to be born, to grow up, and to flourish in Maturity. It has been observed of Arts and Sciences, that in one and the same Century they have arrived to a great perfection; and no wonder, since every Age has a kind of Universal Genius, which inclines those that live in it to some particular Studies: the Work then being pushed on by many hands, must of necessity go forward.

“Is it not evident, in these last hundred years (when the Study of Philosophy has been the business of all the Virtuosi in Christendom) that almost a new Nature has been revealed to us? that more errors of the School have been detected, more useful Experiments in Philosophy have been made, more Noble Secrets in Optics, Medicine, Anatomy, Astronomy, discovered, than in all those credulous and doting Ages from Aristotle to us? so true it is that nothing spreads more fast than Science, when rightly and generally cultivated.

“Add to this the more than common emulation that was in those times of writing well; which though it be found in all Ages and all Persons that pretend to the same Reputation; yet Poesy being then in more esteem than now it is, had greater Honors decreed to the Professors of it; and consequently the Rival-ship was more high between them; they had Judges ordained to decide their Merit, and Prizes to reward it: and Historians have been diligent to record of Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, Lycophron, and the rest of them, both who they were that vanquished in these Wars of the Theater, and how often they were crowned: while the Asian Kings, and Grecian Commonwealths scarce afforded them a Nobler Subject than the unmanly Luxuries of a Debauched Court, or giddy Intrigues of a Factious City. *Alit æmulatio ingenia* (says Paternus) *et nunc invidia, nunc admiratio incitationem accendit*: Emulation is the Spur of Wit, and sometimes Envy, sometimes Admiration quickens our Endeavors.

“But now since the Rewards of Honor are taken away, that Virtuous Emulation is turned into direct Malice; yet so slothful, that it contents itself to condemn and cry down others, without attempting to do better: 'Tis a Reputation too unprofitable, to take the necessary pains for it; yet wishing they had it, is incitement enough to hinder others from it. And this, in short, Eugenius, is the reason, why you have now so few good Poets; and so many severe Judges: Certainly, to imitate the Ancients well, much labor and long study is required: which pains, I have already shown, our Poets would want encouragement to take, if yet they had ability to go through with it. Those Ancients have been faithful Imitators and wise Observers of that Nature, which is so torn and ill represented in our Plays, they have handed down to us a perfect resemblance of her; which we, like ill Copiers, neglecting to look on, have rendered monstrous and disfigured. But, that you may know how much you are indebted to those your Masters, and

be ashamed to have so ill requited them: I must remember you that all the Rules by which we practice the Drama at this day, either such as relate to the justness and symmetry of the Plot; or the Episodical Ornaments, such as Descriptions, Narrations, and other Beauties, which are not essential to the Play; were delivered to us from the Observations that Aristotle made, of those Poets, which either lived before him, or were his Contemporaries: we have added nothing of our own, except we have the confidence to say our wit is better; which none boast of in our Age, but such as understand not theirs. Of that Book which Aristotle has left us, *Peri tes Poiekes*, Horace's *Art of Poetry* is an excellent Comment, and, I believe, restores to us that Second Book of his [Aristotle's—ed.] concerning Comedy, which is wanting [missing—ed.] in him.

“Out of these two has been extracted the Famous Rules which the French call, *Des Trois Unitez*, or, The Three Unities, which ought to be observed in every Regular Play; namely, of Time, Place, and Action.

“The unity of Time they comprehend in hours, the compass of a Natural Day; or as near it as can be contrived: and the reason of it is obvious to every one, that the time of the feigned action, or fable of the Play, should be proportioned as near as can be to the duration of that time in which it is represented; since therefore all Plays are acted on the Theater in a space of time much within the compass of hours, that Play is to be thought the nearest imitation of Nature, whose Plot or Action is confined within that time; and, by the same Rule which concludes this general proportion of time, it follows, that all the parts of it are to be equally subdivided; as namely, that one act take not up the supposed time of half a day; which is out of proportion to the rest: since the other four are then to be straitened within the compass of the remaining half; for it is unnatural that one Act, which being spoke or written, is not longer than the rest, should be supposed longer by the Audience; 'Tis therefore the poet's duty, to take care that no Act should be imagined to exceed the time in which it is represented on the Stage, and that the intervals and inequalities of time be supposed to fall out between the Acts.

“This Rule of Time how well it has been observed by the Ancients, most of their Plays will witness; you see them in their Tragedies (wherein to follow this Rule is certainly most difficult) from the very beginning of their Plays, falling close into that part of the Story which they intend for the action or principal object of it; leaving the former part to be delivered by Narration: so that they set the Audience, as it were, 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) you behold him not, till he is in sight of the Goal, and just upon you.

“For the Second Unity, which is that of place, the Ancients meant by it, That the Scene ought to be continued through the Play, in the same place where it was laid in the beginning: for the Stage, on which it is represented, being but one and the same place, it is unnatural to conceive it many; and those far distant from one another. I will not deny but by the variation of painted Scenes, the Fancy (which in these cases will contribute to its own deceit) may sometimes imagine it several places, with some appearance of probability; yet it still carries the greater likelihood of truth, if those places be supposed so near each other, as in the same Town or City; which may all be comprehended under the larger Denomination of one place: for a greater distance will bear no proportion to the shortness of time, which is allotted in the acting, to pass from one of them to another; for the Observation of this, next to the Ancients, the French are to be most commended. They tie themselves so strictly to the unity of place, that you never see in any of their Plays a Scene changed in the middle of the Act: if the Act begins in a Garden, a Street, or Chamber, 'tis ended in the same place; and that you may know it to be the same, the Stage is so supplied with persons that it is never empty all the time: he that enters the second has business with him who was on before; and before the second quits the Stage, a third appears who has business with him. This Corneille calls *La Liaison des Scenes*, the continuity or joining of the Scenes; and 'tis a good mark of a well contrived Play when all the Persons are known to each other, and every one of them has some affairs with all the rest.

“As for the third Unity which is that of Action, the Ancients meant no other by it than what the Logicians do by their *Finis*, the end or scope of an action that which is the first in Intention, and last in Execution: now 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: not but that there may be many actions in a Play, as Ben Jonson has observed in his *Discoveries*; but they must be all subservient to the great one, which our language happily expresses in the name of under-plots: such as in Terence's *Eunuch* is the difference and reconciliation of Thais and Phædria, which is not the chief business of the Play, but promotes; the marriage of Chærea and Chreme's Sister, principally intended by the Poet. There ought to be one action, says Corneille, that is one complete action which leaves the mind of the Audience in a full repose: But this cannot be brought to pas but by many other imperfect ones which conduce to it, and hold the Audience in a delightful suspense of what will be.

“If by these Rules (to omit many other drawn from the Precepts and Practice of the Ancients) we should judge our modern Plays; 'Tis probable, that few of them would endure the trial: that

which should be the business of a day, takes up in some of them an age; instead of one action they are the Epitomes of a man's life; and for one spot of ground (which the Stage should represent) we are sometimes in more Countries than the Map can show us.

"But if we will allow the Ancients to have contrived well, we must acknowledge them to have writ better; questionless we are deprived of a great stock of wit in the loss of Meander among the Greek Poets, and of Caeilius, Afranius and Varius, among the Romans: we may guess of Menander's Excellency by the Plays of Terence, who translated some of his, and yet wanted so much of him that he was called by C. Cæsar the Half-Menander, and of Varius, by the Testimonies of Horace Martial, and Velleus Paterculus: 'Tis probable that these, could they be recovered, would decide the controversy; but so long as Aristophanes in the old Comedy, and Plautus in the new are extant; while the Tragedies of Euripides, Sophocles, and Seneca are to be had, I can never see one of those Plays which are now written, but it increases my admiration of the Ancients; and yet I must acknowledge further, that to admire them as we ought, we should understand them better than we do. Doubtless many things appear flat to us, whose wit depended upon some custom or story which never came to our knowledge, or perhaps upon some Criticism in their language, which being so long dead, and only remaining in their Books, 'tis not possible they should make us know it perfectly. To read Macrobius, explaining the propriety and elegancy of many words in Virgil, which I had before passed over without consideration, as common things, is enough to assure me that I ought to think the same of Terence; and that in the purity of his style (which Tully so much valued that he ever carried his works about him) there is yet left in him great room for admiration, if I knew but where to place it. In the mean time I must desire you to take notice, that the greatest man of the last age (Ben Jonson) was willing to give place to them in all things: He was not only a professed Imitator of Horace, but a learned Plagiary of all the others; you track him every where in their Snow: If Horace, Lucan, Petronius Arbiter, Seneca, and Juvenal, had their own from him, there are few serious thoughts which are new in him; you will pardon me therefore if I presume he loved their fashion when he wore their clothes. But since I have otherwise a great veneration for him, and you Eugenius, prefer him above all other Poets, I will use no farther argument to you than his example: I will produce Father Ben to you, dressed in all the ornaments and colors of the Ancients, you will need no other guide to our Party if you follow him; and whether you consider the bad Plays of our Age, or regard the good ones of the last, both the best and worst of the Modern Poets will equally instruct you to esteem the Ancients."

Crites had no sooner left speaking, but Eugenius who waited with some impatience for it, thus began:

"I have observed in your Speech that the former part of it is convincing as to what the Moderns have profited by the rules of the Ancients, but in the latter you are careful to conceal how much they have excelled them: we own all the helps we have from them, and want neither veneration nor gratitude while we acknowledge that to overcome them we must make use of the advantages we have received from them; but to these assistances we have joined our own industry; for (had we sat down with a dull imitation of them) we might then have lost somewhat of the old perfection, but never acquired any that was new. We draw not therefore after their lines, but those of Nature; and having the life before us, besides the experience of all they knew, it is no wonder if we hit some airs and features which they have missed: I deny not what you urge of Arts and Sciences, that they have flourished in some ages more than others; but your instance in Philosophy makes for me: for if Natural Causes be more known now than in the time of Aristotle, because more studied, it follows that Poesy and other Arts may with the same pains arrive still nearer to perfection, and, that granted, it will rest for you to prove that they wrought more perfect images of human life than we; which, seeing in your Discourse you have avoided to make good, it shall now be my task to show you some part of their defects, and some few Excellencies of the Moderns; and I think there is none among us can imagine I do it enviously, or with purpose to detract from them; for what interest of Fame or Profit can the living lose by the reputation of the dead? on the other side, it is a great truth which Velleius Paterculus affirms. *Audita visis libentius laudemus; et præsentia invidia, præterita admiratione prosequimur; a his nos obrui, illis instrui credimus* [we praise what we have heard more readily than what we have seen, and we regard the present with envy and the past with admiration; we feel weighed down by the former, lifted up by the latter]: That praise or censure is certainly the most sincere which unbribed posterity shall give us.

"Be pleased then in the first place to take notice, that the Greek Poesy, which Crites has affirmed to have arrived to perfection in the Reign of the old Comedy, was so far from it, that the distinction of it into Acts was not known to them; or if it were, it is yet so darkly delivered to us that we can not make it out.

"All we know of it is from the singing of their Chorus, and that too is so uncertain that in some of their Plays we have reason to conjecture they sung more than five times: Aristotle indeed divides the integral parts of a Play into four: First, The Protasis or entrance, which gives light only to the Characters of the persons, and proceeds very little into any part of the action: Secondly, The Epitasis, or 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 it will come to pass: Thirdly, the Catastasis, or Counterturn, which destroys that expectation, embroils the action in new difficulties, and leaves you far distant from that hope in which it found you, as you may have

observed in a violent stream resisted by a narrow passage; it runs round to an eddy, and carries back the waters with more swiftness than it brought them on: Lastly, the Catastrophe, which the Grecians called *lysis*, the French *le denouement*, and we 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 conduct of it. Thus this great man delivered to us the image of a Play, and I must confess it is so lively that from thence much light has been derived to the forming it more perfectly into Acts and Scenes; but what Poet first limited to five the number of the Acts I know not; only we see it so firmly established in the time of Horace, that he gives it for a rule in Comedy; *Neu brevior quinto, neu sit productior actu* [let it be neither shorter nor longer than five acts—ed.]: So that you see the Grecians cannot be said to have consummated this Art; writing rather by Entrances than by Acts, and having rather a general indigested notion of a Play, than knowing how and where to bestow the particular graces of it.

“But since the Spaniards at this day allow but three Acts, which they call *Jornadas*, to a Play; and the Italians in many of theirs follow them, when I condemn the Ancients, I declare it is not altogether because they have not five Acts to every Play, but because they have not confined themselves to one certain number; 'Tis building an House without a Model: and when the succeeded in such undertakings, they ought to have sacrificed to Fortune, not to the Muses.

“Next, for the Plot, which Aristotle called *to mythos* and often *Tōn pragmatōn synthesis* [the ordering of the actions—ed.], and from him the Romans *Fabula*, it has already been judiciously observed by a late Writer, that in their Tragedies it was only some Tale derived from Thebes or Troy, or at least some thing that happened in those two Ages; which was worn so threadbare by the Pens of all the Epic Poets, and even by Tradition itself of the Talkative Greeklings (as Ben Jonson calls them) that before it came upon the Stage, it was already known to all the Audience: and the people so soon as ever they heard the Name of Oedipus, knew as well as the Poet, that he had killed his Father by mistake, and committed Incest with his Mother, before the Play; that they were now to hear of a great Plague, an Oracle, and the Ghost of Laius: so that they sat with a yawning kind of expectation, till he was to come with his eyes pulled out, and speak a hundred or two of Verses in a Tragic tone, in complaint of his misfortunes. But one Oedipus, Hercules, or Medea, had been tolerable; poor people they scaped not so good cheap: they had still the *Chapon Bouillé* [boiled capon, a delicacy and a luxury—ed.] set before them, till their appetites were cloyed with the same dish, and the Novelty being gone, the pleasure vanished: so that one main end of Dramatic Poesy in its Definition, which was to cause Delight, as of consequence destroyed.

“In their Comedies, the Romans generally borrowed their Plots from the Greek Poets; and theirs was commonly a little Girl stolen or wandered from her Parents, brought back unknown to the same City, there got with child by some lewd young fellow; who, by the help of his servant, cheats his father, and when her time comes, to cry *Juno Lucina fer opem* [Juno, goddess of childbirth, bring help—ed.]; one or other sees a little Box or Cabinet which was carried away with her, and so discovers her to her friends, if some God do not prevent it, by coming down in a Machine, and take the thanks of it to himself.

“By the Plot you may guess much of the Characters of the Persons. An Old Father that would willingly before he dies see his Son well married; his Debauched Son, kind in his Nature to his Wench, but miserably in want of Money, a Servant or Slave, who has so much wit to strike in with him, and help to dupe his Father, a Braggadochio, Captain, a Parasite, and a Lady of Pleasure.

“As for the poor honest Maid, whom all the Story is built upon, and who ought to be one of the principal Actors in the Play, she is commonly a Mute in it: She has the breeding of the Old Elizabeth way, for Maids to be seen and not to be heard; and it is enough you know she is willing to be married, when the Fifth Act requires it.

“These are Plots built after the Italian Mode of Houses, you see through them all at once; the Characters are indeed the Imitations of Nature, but so narrow as if they had imitated only an Eye or an Hand, and did not dare to venture on the lines of a Face, or the Proportion of a Body.

“But in how straight a compass soever they have bounded their Plots and Characters, we will pass in by, if they have regularly pursued them, and perfectly observed those three Unities of Time, Place, and Action: the knowledge of which you say is derived to us from them. But in the first place give me leave to tell you, that the Unity of Place, how ever it might be practiced by them, was never any of their Rules: We neither find it in Aristotle, Horace, or any who have written of it, till in our age the French Poets first made it a Precept of the Stage. The unity of time, even Terence himself (who was the best and the most regular of them) has neglected: His *Heautontimoroumenos* or *Self-Punisher* takes up visibly two days; therefore says Scaliger, the two first Acts concluding the first day, were acted over-night; the three last on the ensuing day: and Euripides, in trying himself to one day, has committed an absurdity never to be forgiven him: for in one of his Tragedies he has made Theseus go from Athens to Thebes, which was about forty English miles, under the walls of it to give battle, and appear victorious in the next Act; and yet from the time of his departure to the return of the Nuntius, who gives the relation of his Victory, *Æthra* and the Chorus have but Verses; that is not for every Mile a Verse.

"The like error is as evident in Terence's *Eunuch*, when Laches, the old man, enters in a mistake the house of Thais, where betwixt his Exit and the entrance of Pythias, who comes to give an ample relation of the Garboyles he has raised within, Parmeno who was left upon the Stage, has not above five lines to speak: *C'est bien employé un temps si court* [It is well to employ such a short time—Corneille, *Troisième Discours*—ed.], says the French Poet, who furnished me with one of the observations; And almost all their Tragedies will afford us examples of the like nature.

"'Tis true, they have kept the continuity, or as you called it *Liaison des Scenes* somewhat better: two do not perpetually come in together, talk, and go out together; and other two succeed them, and do the same throughout the Act, which the English call by the name of single Scenes; but the reason is, because they have seldom above two or three Scenes, properly so called, in every act; for it is to be accounted a new Scene, not every time the Stage is empty, but every person who enters, though to others, makes it so: because he introduces a new business: Now the Plots of their Plays being narrow, and the persons few, one of their Acts was written in a less compass than one of our well wrought Scenes, and yet they are often deficient even in this: To go no further than Terence, you find in the *Eunuch*, Antipho entering single in the midst of the third Act, after Chremes and Pythias were gone off: In the same Play you have likewise Dorias beginning the fourth Act alone; and after she has made a relation of what was done at the Soldier's entertainment (which by the way was very inartificial to do, because she was presumed to speak directly to the Audience, and to acquaint them with what was necessary to be known, but yet should have been so contrived by the Poet as to have been told by persons of the Drama to one another, and so by them to have come to the knowledge of the people) she quits the Stage, and Phœdria enters next, alone likewise: He also gives you an account of himself, and of his returning from the Country in Monologue, his *Adelphi* or *Brothers*, Syrus and Demea enter; after the Scene was broken by the departure of Sostrata, Geta and Cathara; and indeed you can scarce look into any of his Comedies, where you will not presently discover the same interruption.

"But as they have failed both in laying of their Plots, and managing of them, swerving from the Rules of their own Art, by misrepresenting Nature to us, in which they have ill satisfied one intention of a Play, which was delight, so in the instructive part they have erred worse: instead of punishing Vice and rewarding Virtue, they have often shown a Prosperous Wickedness, and Unhappy Piety: They have set before us a bloody image of revenge in Medea, and given her Dragons to convey her safe from punishment. A Priam and Astyanax murdered, and Cassandra ravished, and the lust and murder ending in the victory of him that acted them: In short, there is no indecorum in any of our modern Plays, which if I would excuse, I could not shadow with

some Authority from the Ancients.

“And one farther note of them let me leave you: Tragedies and Comedies were not writ then as they are now, promiscuously, by the same person; but he who found his genius bending to the one, never attempted the other way. This is so plain, that I need not instance to you, that Aristophanes, Plautus, Terence, never any of them writ a Tragedy; Æschylus, Euripides, Sophocles and Seneca, never meddled with Comedy; the Sock and Buskin were not worn by the same Poet: having then so much care to excel in one kind, very little is to be pardoned them if they miscarried in it; and this would lead me to the consideration of their wit, had not Crites given me sufficient warning not to be too bold in my judgment of it; because the languages being dead, and many of the Customs and little accidents on which it depended, lost to us, we are not competent judges of it. But though I grant that here and there we may miss the application of a Proverb or a Custom, yet a thing well said will be wit in all Languages; and though it may lose something in the Translation, yet, to him who reads it in the Original, 'tis still the same; He has an Idea of its excellency, though it cannot pass from his mind into any other expression or words than those in which he finds it. When Phœdria, in the *Eunuch*, had a command from his Mistress to be absent two days; and encouraging himself to go through with it, said; *Tandem ego non illa caream, si opus sit, vel totum triduum?* [Shall I not do without her, if need be, even for three whole days?—ed.] Parmeno to mock the softness of his Master, lifting up his hands and eyes, cries out as it were in admiration; *Hui! universum triduum!* [Alas! all of three days!—ed.] the elegancy of which *universum*, though it cannot be rendered in our language, yet leaves an impression of the wit upon our souls: but this happens seldom in him, in Plautus oftener; who is infinitely too bold in his Metaphors and coining words; out of which many times his wit is nothing, which questionless was one reason why Horace falls upon him so severely in those Verses:

*Sed Proavi nostri Plautinos et numeros, et
Laudavere sales, nimium patienter utrumque,
Ne dicam stolidè.*

[Our forebears praised both the versification
and the witticisms of Plautus—all too indulgently,
not to say stupidly—ed.]

For Horace himself was cautious to obtrude a new word upon his Readers, and makes custom and common use the best measure of receiving it into our writings.

*Multa renascentur quæ nunc cecidere, cadentque
Quæ nunc sunt in honore vocabula, si volet usus,*

Quem penes, arbitrium est, et jus, et norma loquendi.

[Many words now fallen into disuse will be revived,

Many now accepted will fall into disuse, according to the
demands

Of practice, which governs the choice, the right, and the norm
of speech—ed.]

“The not observing this Rule is that which the world has blamed in our Satirist Cleveland; to express a thing hard and unnaturally, is his new way of Elocution: ‘Tis true, no Poet but may sometimes use a Catachresis; Virgil does it—

Mistaque ridenti Colocasia fundet Acantho

[And the colocasia will spread forth, mingled with the
laughing acanthus—ed.]

—in his Eclogue of *Pollio*, and in his 7th *Æneid*.

miratur et undæ,

Miratur nemus, insuetum fulgentia longe,

Scuta virum fiuvio, pictasque innare carinas

[The woods and waters wonder at the gleam

Of shields, and painted ships, that stem the stream

(trans. Dryden’s)].

And Ovid once so modestly, that he asks leave to do it:

quem si verbo audacia detur,

Haud metuam summi dixisse Palatia cœli

[if I may use such a bold figure,

I should not hesitate to call it the palace of the sky—ed.]

—calling the Court of Jupiter by the name of Augustus’s Palace, though in another place he is more bold, where he says, *Et longas visent Capitolia pompas* [And the capitol will see long processions—ed.]. But to do this always, and never be able to write a line without it, though it may be admired by some few Pedants, will not pass upon those who know that wit is best conveyed to us in the most easy language; and is most to be admired when a great thought comes dressed in words so commonly received that it is understood by the meanest apprehensions, as the best meat is the most easily digested: but we cannot read a verse of Cleveland’s without making a face at it, as if every word were a Pill to swallow: he gives us many times a hard Nut to break our Teeth, without a Kernel for our pains. So that there is this

difference betwixt his Satires and Doctor Donne's: That the one gives us deep thought in common language, though rough cadence; the other gives us common thoughts in abstruse words: 'Tis true, in some places his wit is independent of his words, as in that of the Rebel Scot:

Had Cain been Scot God would have changed his doom;
Not forced him wander, but confined him home.

"*Si sic, omnia dixisset!* [If only he had said everything thus—ed.] This is within all languages: 'Tis like Mercury, never to be lost or killed; and so that other—

For Beauty like White-powder makes no noise,
And yet the silent Hypocrite destroys.

You see the last line is highly Metaphorical, but it is so soft and gentle, that it does not shock us as we read it.

"But, to return from whence I have digressed, to the consideration of the Ancients' Writing and their Wit, (of which by this time you will grant us in some measure to be fit judges). Though I see many excellent thoughts in Seneca, yet he, of them who had a Genius most proper for the Stage, was Ovid, he 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 betwixt two different Passions, that, had he lived in our age, or, in his own could have writ with our advantages, no man but must have yielded to him; and therefore I am confident the *Medea* is none of his: for, though esteem it for the gravity and sententiousness of it, which he himself concludes to be suitable to a Tragedy, *Omne genus scripti gravitate Tragœdia vincit* [Tragedy surpasses every kind of writing in gravity—ed.], yet it moves not my soul enough to judge that he, who in the Epic way wrote things so near the Drama as the Story of Myrrha, of Caunus and Biblis, and the rest, should stir up no more concernment where he most endeavored it. The Master piece of Seneca I hold to be that Scene in the *Troades*, where Ulysses is seeking for Astyanax to kill him; There you see the tenderness of a Mother, so represented in Andromache, that it raises compassion to a high degree in the Reader, and bears the nearest resemblance of any thing in their Tragedies to the excellent Scenes of Passion in Shakespeare, or in Fletcher: for Love Scenes you will find few among them, their Tragic Poets dealt not with that soft passion, but with Lust, Cruelty, Revenge, Ambition, and those bloody actions they produced; which were more capable of raising horror than compassion in an audience: leaving love untouched, whose gentleness would have tempered them, which is the most frequent of all the passions, and which being the private concernment of every person, is soothed by viewing its own image in a public entertainment.

“Among their Comedies, we find a Scene or two of tenderness, and that where you would least expect it, in Plautus; but to speak generally, their Lovers say little, when they see each other, but *anima mea, vita mea* [my soul, my life—ed.], *zōe kai psyche* [my life, my soul—ed.], as the women in Juvenal’s time used to cry out in the fury of their kindness: then indeed to speak sense were an offence. Any sudden gust of passion (as an ecstasy of love in an unexpected meeting) cannot better be expressed than in a word and a sigh, breaking one another. Nature is dumb on such occasions, and to make her speak, would be to represent her unlike her self. But there are a thousand other concernments of Lovers, as jealousies, complaints, contrivances and the like, where not to open their minds at large to each other, were to be wanting to their own love, and to the expectation of the Audience, who watch the movements of their minds, as much as the changes of their fortunes. For the imaging of the first is properly the work of a Poet, the latter he borrows of the Historian.”

Eugenius was proceeding in that part of his Discourse, when Crites interrupted him. “I see,” said he, “Eugenius and I are never like to have this Question decided betwixt us; for he maintains the Moderns have acquired a new perfection in writing, I can only grant they have altered the mode of it. Homer described his Heroes men of great appetites, lovers of beef broiled upon the coals, and good fellows; contrary to the practice of the French Romances, whose Heroes neither eat, nor drink, nor sleep, for love. Virgil makes Æneas a bold Avower of his own virtues,

Sum pius Æneas fama super aethra notus;

[I am dutiful Aeneas of fame known above the heavens—ed.]

which in the civility of our Poets is the Character of a fanfaron [braggart—ed.] or Hector: for with us the Knight takes occasion to walk out, or sleep, to avoid the vanity of telling his own Story, which the trusty Squire is ever to perform for him. So in their Love Scenes, of which Eugenius spoke last, the Ancients were more hearty; we more talkative: they writ love as it was then the mode to make it, and I will grant thus much to Eugenius, that perhaps one of their Poets, had he lived in our Age, *Si foret hoc nostrum fato delapsus in avum* [If he had been dropped by fate into our age—ed.] (as Horace says of Lucilius), he had altered many things; not that they were not as natural before, but that he might accommodate himself to the Age he lived in: yet in the mean time we are not to conclude any thing rashly against those great men; but preserve to them the dignity of Masters, and give that honor to their memories, (*Quos Libitina sacrauit* [which Libitina has consecrated—ed.]) part of which we expect may be paid to us in future times.”

This moderation of Crites, as it was pleasing to all the company, so it put an end to that dispute; which, Eugenius, who seemed to have the better of the Argument, would urge no farther: but Lysideus after he had acknowledged himself of Eugenius's opinion concerning the Ancients; yet told him he had forborne, till his Discourse were ended, to ask him why he preferred the English Plays above those of other Nations? and whether we ought not to submit our Stage to the exactness of our next Neighbors?

"Though," said Eugenius, "I am at all times ready to defend the honor of my Country against the French, and to maintain, we are as well able to vanquish them with our Pens as our Ancestors have been with their swords; yet, if you please," added he, looking upon Neander, "I will commit this cause to my friend's management; his opinion of our Plays is the same with mine: and besides, there is no reason, that Crites and I, who have now left the Stage, should re-enter so suddenly upon it; which is against the Laws of Comedy."

"If the Question had been stated," replied Lysideus, "who had writ best, the French or English, forty years ago, I should have been of your opinion, and adjudged the honor to our own Nation; but since that time," (said he, turning towards Neander) "we have been so long together bad Englishmen, that we had not leisure to be good Poets, Beaumont, Fletcher, and Jonson (who were only capable of bringing us to that degree of perfection which we have) were just then leaving the world; as if (in an Age of so much horror) wit and those milder studies of humanity, had no farther business among us. But the Muses, who ever follow Peace, went to plant in another Country; it was then that the great Cardinal of Richelieu began to take them into his protection; and that, by his encouragement, Corneille and some other Frenchmen reformed their Theatre, (which before was as much below ours as it now surpasses it and the rest of Europe). But because Crites, in his Discourse for the Ancients, has prevented me, by touching upon many Rules of the Stage, which the Moderns have borrowed from them; I shall only, in short, demand of you, whether you are not convinced that of all Nations the French have best observed them? In the unity of time you find them so scrupulous, that it yet remains a dispute among their Poets, whether the artificial day of twelve hours more or less, be not meant by Aristotle, rather than the natural one of twenty four; and consequently whether all Plays ought not to be reduced into that compass? This I can testify, that in all their Drama's writ within these last years and upwards, I have not observed any that have extended the time to thirty hours: in the unity of place they are full as scrupulous, for many of their Critics limit it to that very spot of ground where the Play is supposed to begin; none of them exceed the compass of the same Town or City. The unity of Action in all their Plays is yet more conspicuous, for they do not burden them with under-plots, as the English do; which is the reason why many Scenes of our Tragi-comedies carry on a design that is no thing of kin to the main Plot; and that we see

two distinct webs in a Play; like those in ill wrought stuffs; and two actions, that is, two Plays carried on together, to the confounding of the Audience; who, before they are warm in their concernments for one part, are diverted to another; and by that means espouse the interest of neither. From hence likewise it arises that the one half of our Actors are not known to the other. They keep their distances as if they were Montagues and Capulets, and seldom begin an acquaintance till the last Scene of the Fifth Act, when they are all to meet upon the Stage. There is no Theatre in the world has any thing so absurd as the English Tragicomedy, 'tis a Drama of our own invention, and the fashion of it is enough to proclaim it so, here a course of mirth, there another of sadness and passion; a third of honor, and fourth a Duel: Thus in two hours and a half we run through all the fits of Bedlam. The French affords you as much variety on the same day, but they do it not so unseasonably, or *mal à propos* [inappropriately—ed.] as we: Our Poets present you the Play and the farce together; and our Stages still retain somewhat of the Original civility of the Red-Bull; *Atque ursum et pugiles media inter carmina poscunt* [they ask for a bear or boxers in the middle of plays. The end of Tragedies or serious Plays, says Aristotle, is to beget admiration, compassion, or concernment; but are not mirth and compassion things incompatible? and is it not evident that the Poet must of necessity destroy the former by intermingling of the latter? that is, he must ruin the sole end and object of his Tragedy to introduce somewhat that is forced in, and is not of the body of it: Would you not think that Physician mad, who having prescribed a Purge, should immediately order you to take restringents upon it?

“But to leave our Plays, and return to theirs, I have noted one great advantage they have had in the Plotting of their Tragedies; that is, they are always grounded upon some known History: according to that of Horace, *Ex noto fictum carmen sequar* [Out of a known story I should bring a poem—ed.]; and in that they have so imitated the Ancients that they have surpassed them. For the Ancients, as was observed before, took for the foundation of their Plays some Poetical Fiction, such as under that consideration could move but little concernment in the Audience, because they already knew the event of it. But the French goes farther;

Atque ita mentitur; sic veris falsæ remiscet,

Primo ne medium, medio ne discrepet imum:

[He so lies and so mingles the false with the true

that the middle will not disagree with the first, nor the last
with the middle—ed.]

He so interweaves Truth with probable Fiction, that he puts a pleasing Fallacy upon us; mends the intrigues of Fate, and dispenses with the severity of History, to reward that virtue which has been rendered to us there unfortunate. Sometimes the story has left the success so

doubtful, that the Writer is free, by the privilege of a Poet, to take that which of two or more relations will best suit with his design: As for example, the death of Cyrus, whom Justin and some others report to have perished in the Scythian war, but Xenophon affirms to have died in his bed of extreme old age. Nay more, when the event is past dispute, even then we are willing to be deceived, and the Poet, if he contrives it with appearance of truth; has all the audience of his Party; at least during the time his Play is acting: so naturally we are kind to virtue, when our own interest is not in question, that we take it up as the general concernment of Mankind. On the other side, if you consider the Historical Plays of Shakespeare, 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: this instead of making a Play delightful, renders it ridiculous.

Quodcunque ostendis mihi sic, incredulus odi.

[Unbelieving, I hate whatever you show me in this
manner—ed.]

For the Spirit of man cannot be satisfied but with truth, or at least verisimilitude, and a Poem is to contain, if not *ta etyma* [true things], yet *etymoisin homoid* [things like the truth—ed.], as one of the Greek Poets has expressed it.

“Another thing in which the French differ from us and from the Spaniards, is, that they do not embarrass, or cumber themselves with too much Plot: they only represent so much of a Story as will constitute one whole and great action sufficient for a Play; we, who undertake more, do but multiply adventures; which not being produced from one another, as effects from causes, but barely following, constitute many actions in the Drama, and consequently make it many Plays.

“But by pursuing close one argument, which is not cloyed with many turns, the French have gained more liberty for verse, in which they write: they have leisure to dwell upon a subject which deserves it; and to represent the passions (which we have acknowledged to be the Poet’s work) without being hurried from one thing to another, as we are in the Plays of Calderon, which we have seen lately upon our Theaters, under the name of Spanish Plots. I have taken notice but of one Tragedy of ours, whose Plot has that uniformity and unity of design in it which I have commended in the French; and that is *Rollo*, or rather, under the name of *Rollo*, the story of Bassianus and Geta in Herodian, there indeed the Plot is neither large nor intricate, but just enough to fill the minds of the Audience, not to cloy them. Besides, you see it

founded upon the truth of History, only the time of the action is not reducible to the strictness of the Rules; and you see in some places a little farce mingled, which is below the dignity of the other parts; and in this all our Poets are extremely peccant, even Ben Jonson himself in *Sejanus* and *Catiline* has given us this Oleo [also Olio: a hodgepodge of many various ingredients—ed.] of a Play; this unnatural mixture of Comedy and Tragedy, which to me sounds just as ridiculously as the History of David with the merry humors of Goliath. In *Sejanus* you may take notice of the Scene betwixt Livia and the Physician, which is a pleasant Satire upon the artificial helps of beauty: In *Catiline* you may see the Parliament of Women; the little envies of them to one another; and all that passes betwixt Curio and Fulvia: Scenes admirable in their kind, but of an ill mingle with the rest.

“But I return again to French Writers; who, as I have said, do not burden themselves too much with Plot, which has been reproached to them by an ingenious person of our Nation as a fault, for he says they commonly make but one person considerable in a Play; they dwell upon him, and his concerns, while the rest of the persons are only subservient to set him off. If he intends this by it, that there is one person in the Play who is of greater dignity than the rest, he must tax, not only theirs, but those of the Ancients, and which he would be loth to do, the best of ours; for ’tis impossible but that one person must be more conspicuous in it than any other, and consequently the greatest share in the action must devolve on him, We see it so in the management of all affairs; even in the most equal Aristocracy, the balance cannot be so justly poised, but some one will be superior to the rest; either in parts, fortune, interest, or the consideration of some glorious exploit; which will reduce the greatest part of business into his hands.

“But, if he would have us to imagine that in exalting of one character the rest of them are neglected, and that all of them have not some share or other in the action of the Play, I desire him to produce any of Corneille’s Tragedies, wherein every person (like so many servants in a well governed Family) has not some employment, and who is not necessary to the carrying on of the Plot, or at least to your understanding it.

“There are indeed some prosaic persons in the Ancients, whom they make use of in their Plays, either to hear, or give the Relation: but the French avoid this with great address, making their narrations only to, or by such who are some way interested in the main design. And now I am speaking of Relations, I cannot take a fitter opportunity to add this in favor of the French, that they often use them with better judgment and more *à propos* [to the purpose (the earliest recorded use in English)—ed.] than the English do. Not that I commend narrations in general, but there are two sorts of them; one of those things which are antecedent to the Play, and are related to make the conduct of it more clear to us, but, ’tis a fault to choose such subjects for

the Stage which will enforce us upon that Rock; because we see they are seldom listened to by the Audience, and that is many times the ruin of the Play: for, being once let pass without attention, the Audience can never recover themselves to understand the Plot; and indeed it is somewhat unreasonable that they should be put to so much trouble, as, that to comprehend what passes in their sight, they must have recourse to what was done, perhaps, ten or twenty years ago.

“But there is another sort of Relations, that is, of things happening in the Action of the Play, and supposed to be done behind the Scenes: and this is many times both convenient and beautiful: for, by it, the French avoid the tumult, which we are subject to in England, by representing Duels, Battles, and the like; which renders our Stage too like the Theaters, where they fight Prizes. For what is more ridiculous than to represent an Army with a Drum and five men behind it; all which, the Hero of the other side is to drive in before him, or to see a Duel fought, and one slain with two or three thrusts of the foils, which we know are so blunted, that we might give a man an hour to kill another in good earnest with them.

“I have observed that in all our Tragedies, the Audience cannot forbear laughing when the Actors are to die; 'tis the most Comic part of the whole Play. All passions may be lively represented on the Stage, if to the well-writing of them the Actor supplies a good commanded voice, and limbs that move easily and without stiffness; 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 upon the Stage when he did not imitate or represent, but naturally do it; and therefore it is better to omit the representation of it.

“The words of a good Writer which describe it lively, will make a deeper impression of belief in us than all the Actor can persuade us to, when he seems to fall dead before us; as a Poet in the description of a beautiful Garden, or a Meadow, will please our imagination more than the place itself can please our sight. When we see death represented we are convinced it is but Fiction; but when we hear it related, our eyes (the strongest witnesses) are wanting, which might have undeceived us; and we are all willing to favor the sleight when the Poet does not too grossly impose upon us. They therefore who imagine these relations would make no concernment in the Audience, are deceived, by confounding them with the other, which are of things antecedent to the Play; those are made often in cold blood (as I may say) to the audience; but these are warmed with our concernments, which are before awakened in the Play. What the Philosophers say of motion, that when it is once begun it continues of it self, and will do so to Eternity without some stop put to it, is clearly true on this occasion; the soul being already moved with the Characters and Fortunes of those imaginary persons, continues going of its own accord, and we are no more weary to hear what becomes of them when they are not

on the Stage, then we are to listen to the news of an absent Mistress. But it is objected, That if one part of the Play may be related, then why not all? I answer, Some parts of the action are more fit to be represented, some to be related. Corneille says judiciously, that the Poet is not obliged to expose to view all particular actions which conduce to the principal: he ought to select such of them to be seen which will appear with the greatest beauty; either by the magnificence of the show, or the vehemence of passions which they produce, or some other charm which they have in them, and let the rest arrive to the audience by narration. 'Tis a great mistake in us to believe the French present no part of the action upon the Stage: every alteration or crossing of a design, every new sprung passion, and turn of it, is a part of the action, and much the noblest, except we conceive nothing to be action till they come to blows; as if the painting of the Heroes mind were not more properly the Poets work than the strength of his body. Nor does this any thing contradict the opinion of Horace, where he tells us,

*Segnius irritant animos demissa per aurem
Quam quæ sunt oculis subjecta fidelibus*
[Matters transmitted through the ear stir the spirit
less forcibly than those set before the trustworthy eyes]

—For he says immediately after,

*Non tamen intus
Digna geri promes in scenam, multaque tolles
Ex oculis, quæ mox narret facundia præsens.*
[You shall not bring on the stage
Things that should be accomplished offstage; you shall
remove from my sight
Things that resourceful eloquence will effectively narrate]

Among which many he recounts some.

*Nec pueros coram populo Medea trucidet,
Aut in avem Progne mutetur, Cadmus in anguem, etc.*
[Medea should not butcher her children in public,
Nor Procne be changed into a bird, Cadmus into a snake, etc.]

“That is, those actions which by reason of their cruelty will cause aversion in us, or by reason of their impossibility unbelief, ought either wholly to be avoided by a Poet, or only delivered by narration. To which, we may have leave to add such as to avoid tumult, (as was before hinted) or to reduce the Plot into a more reasonable compass of time, or for defect of Beauty in them,

are rather to be related than presented to the eye. Examples of all these kinds are frequent, not only among all the Ancients, but in the best received of our English Poets. We find Ben Jonson using them in his *Magnetic Lady*, where one comes out from Dinner, and relates the quarrels and disorders of it to save the undecent appearing of them on the Stage, and to abbreviate the Story: and this in express imitation of Terence, who had done the same before him in his *Eunuch*, where Pythias makes the like relation of what had happened within at the Soldier's entertainment. The relations likewise of Sejanus's death, and the prodigies before it are remarkable, the one of which was hid from sight to avoid the horror and tumult of the representation; the other to shun the introducing of things impossible to be believed. In that excellent Play *The King and No King*, Fletcher goes yet farther; for the whole unraveling of the Plot is done by narration in the fifth Act, after the manner of the Ancients; and it moves great concernment in the Audience, though it be only a relation of what was done many years before the Play. I could multiply other instances, but these are sufficient to prove that there is no error in choosing a subject which requires this sort of narrations; in the ill managing of them, there may.

"But I find I have been too long in this discourse since the French have many other excellencies not common to use, as that you never see any of their Plays end with a conversion, or simple change of will, which is the ordinary way our Poets use to end theirs. It shows little art in the conclusion of a Dramatick Poem, when they who have hindered the felicity during the four Acts, desist from it in the fifth without some powerful cause to take them off; and though I deny not but such reasons may be found, yet it is a path that is cautiously to be trod, and the Poet is to be sure he convinces the Audience that the motive is strong enough. As for example, the conversion of the Usurer in *The Scornful Lady*, seems to me a little forced; for being an Usurer, which implies a lover of Money to the highest degree of covetousness, (and such the Poet has represented him) the account he gives for the sudden change is, that he has been duped by the wild young fellow, which in reason might render him more wary another time, and make him punish himself with harder fare and courser clothes to get it up again: but that he should look upon it as a judgment, and so repent, we may expect to hear of in a Sermon, but I should never endure it in a Play.

"I pass by this; neither will I insist upon the care they take, that no person after his first entrance shall ever appear, but the business which brings him upon the Stage shall be evident: which, if observed, must needs render all the events in the Play more natural; for there you see the probability of every accident, in the cause that produced it; and that which appears chance in the Play, will seem so reasonable to you, that you will there find it almost necessary; so that in the exits of their Actors you have a clear account of their purpose and design in the next

entrance: (though, if the Scene be well wrought, the event will commonly deceive you) for there is nothing so absurd, says Corneille, as for an Actor to leave the Stage, only because he has no more to say.

"I should now speak of the beauty of their Rhyme, and the just reason I have to prefer that way of writing in the Tragedies before ours in Blank verse; but because it is partly received by us, and therefore not altogether peculiar to them, I will say no more of it in relation to their Plays. For our own I doubt not but it will exceedingly beautify them, and I can see but one reason why it should not generally obtain, that is, because our Poets write so ill in it. This indeed may prove a more prevailing argument than all others which are used to destroy it, and therefore I am only troubled when great and judicious Poets, and those who acknowledged such, have writ or spoke against it; as for others they are to be answered by that one sentence of an ancient Author, *Sed ut primo ad consequendos eos quos priores ducimus accendimur, ita ubi autpræteriri, aut æquari eos posse desperavimus, studium cum spe senescit: quod, scilicet, assequi non potest, sequi desinit; præteritoque, eo in quo eminere non possumus, aliquid in quo nitamur conquirimus* [But as we are stimulated to follow those whom we consider foremost, so, when we despair of surpassing or even equaling them, our zeal wanes with our hope; indeed, because it cannot excel, it ceases to follow. When that in which we cannot excel is in the past, we look for something worthy of striving after—ed.]."

Lisideius concluded in this manner; and Neander after a little pause thus answered him.

"I shall grant Lisideius, without much dispute, a great part of what he has urged against us, for I acknowledge the French contrive their Plots more regularly, observe the Laws of Comedy, and decorum of the Stage (to speak generally) with more exactness than the English. Farther I deny not but he has taxed us justly in some irregularities of ours which he has mentioned; yet, after all, I am of opinion that neither our faults nor their virtues are considerable enough to place them above us.

"For the lively imitation of Nature being in the definition of a Play, those which best fulfill that law ought to be esteemed superior to the others. 'Tis true, those beauties of the French-poesy are such as will raise perfection higher where it is, but are not sufficient to give it where it is not: they are indeed the Beauties of a Statue, but not of a Man, because not animated with the Soul of Poesy, which is imitation of humor and passions: and this Lisideius himself, or any other, however biased to their Party, cannot but acknowledge, if he will either compare the humors of our Comedies, or the Characters of our serious Plays with theirs. He that will look upon theirs which have been written till these last ten years or thereabouts, will find it an hard matter to pick out two or three passable humors amongst them. Corneille himself, their Arch-

Poet, what has he produced except *The Liar*, and you know how it was cried up in France; but when it came upon the English Stage, though well translated, and that part of Dorant acted to so much advantage by Mr. Hart, as I am confident it never received in its own Country, the most favourable to it would not put in competition with many of Fletcher's or Ben Jonson's. In the rest of Corneille's Comedies you have little humor; he tells you himself his way is first to show two Lovers in good intelligence with each other; in the working up of the Play to embroil them by some mistake, and in the latter end to clear it up.

"But of late years de Molière, the younger Corneille, Quinault, and some others, have been imitating of afar off the quick turns and graces of the English Stage. They have mixed their serious Plays with mirth, like our Tragicomedies since the death of Cardinal Richelieu, which Lysideus and many others not observing, have commended that in them for a virtue which they themselves no longer practice. Most of their new Plays are like some of ours, derived from the Spanish Novels. There is scarce one of them without a veil, and a trusty Diego, who drolls much after the rate of *The Adventures*. But their humors, if I may grace them with that name, are so thin sown that never above one of them come up in any Play: I dare take upon me to find more variety of them in some one Play of Ben Jonson's than in all theirs together: as he who has seen *The Alchemist*, *The Silent Woman*, or *Bartholomew Fair*, cannot but acknowledge with me.

"I grant the French have performed what was possible on the groundwork of the Spanish Plays; what was pleasant before they have made regular; but there is not above one good Play to be writ upon all those Plots; they are too much alike to please often, which we need not the experience of our own Stage to justify. As for their new way of mingling mirth with serious Plot I do not with Lysideus condemn the thing, though I cannot approve their manner of doing it: He tells us we cannot so speedily recollect our selves after a Scene of great passion and concernment as to pass to another of mirth and humor, and to enjoy it with any relish: but why should he imagine the soul of man more heaven than his Senses? Does not the eye pass from an unpleasant object to a pleasant in a much shorter time than is required to this? and does not the unpleasantness of the first commend the beauty of the latter? The old Rule of Logic might have convinced him, that contraries when placed near, set off each other. A continued gravity keeps the spirit too much bent; we must refresh it sometimes, as we bait upon a journey, that we may go on with greater ease. A Scene of mirth mixed with Tragedy has the same effect upon us which our music has betwixt the Acts, and that we find a relief to us from the best Plots and language of the Stage, if the discourses have been long. I must therefore have stronger arguments ere I am convinced, that compassion and mirth in the same subject destroy each other; and in the mean time cannot but conclude, to the honor of our Nation, that we have invented, increased and perfected a more pleasant way of writing for the Stage than

was ever known to the Ancients or Moderns of any Nation, which is Tragicomedy.

“And this leads me to wonder why Lisideius and many others should cry up the barrenness of the French Plots above the variety and copiousness of the English. Their Plots are single, they carry on one design which is pushed forward by all the Actors, every Scene in the Play contributing and moving towards it: Ours, besides the main design, have under-plots or by-concernments, of less considerable Persons, and Intrigues, which are carried on with the motion of the main Plot: just as they say the Orb of the fixed Stars, and those of the Planets, though they have motions of their own, are whirled about by the motion of the *primum mobile* [prime mover—ed.], in which they are contained: that similitude expresses much of the English Stage: for if contrary motions may be found in Nature to agree; if a Planet can go East and West at the same time; one way by virtue of his own motion, the other by the force of the first mover; it will not be difficult to imagine how the under Plot, which is only different, not contrary to the great design, may naturally be conducted along with it.

“Eugenius has already shown us, from the confession of the French Poets, that the Unity of Action is sufficiently preserved if all the imperfect actions of the Play are conducing to the main design: but when those petty intrigues of a Play are so ill ordered that they have no coherence with the other, I must grant Lisideius has reason to tax that want of due connection; for Coordination in a Play is as dangerous and unnatural as in a State. In the mean time he must acknowledge our variety, if well ordered, will afford a greater pleasure to the audience.

“As for his other argument, that by pursuing one single Theme they gain an advantage to express and work up the passions, I wish any example he could bring from them would make it good: for I confess their verses are to me the coldest I have ever read: Neither indeed is it possible for them, in the way they take, so to express passion, as that the effects of it should appear in the concernment of an Audience: their Speeches being so many declamations, which tire us with length; so that instead of persuading us to grieve for their imaginary Heroes, we are concerned for our own trouble, as we are in the tedious visits of bad company; we are in pain till they are gone. When the French Stage came to be reformed by Cardinal Richelieu, those long Harangues were introduced, to comply with the gravity of a Churchman. Look upon the *Cinna* and the *Pompey*, they are not so properly to be called Plays, as long discourses of reason of State: and *Polieucte* in matters in Religion is as solemn as the long stops upon our Organs. Since that time it is grown into a custom, and their Actors speak by the Hour-glass, as our Parsons do; nay, they account it the grace of their parts: and think themselves disparaged by the Poet, if they may not twice or thrice in a Play entertain the Audience with a Speech of an hundred or two hundred lines. I deny not but this may suit well enough with the French; for as we, who are a more sullen people, come to be diverted at our Plays; they who are of an airy

and gay temper come thither to make themselves more serious: And this I conceive to be one reason why Comedy is more pleasing to us, and Tragedies to them. But to speak generally, it cannot be denied that short Speeches and Replies are more apt to move the passions, and beget concernment in us than the other: for it is unnatural for any one in a gust of passion to speak long together, or for another in the same condition, to suffer him, without interruption. Grief and Passion are 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: But a long sober shower gives them leisure to run out as they came in, without troubling the ordinary current. As for Comedy, Repartee is one of its chiefest graces; the greatest pleasure of the Audience is a chase of wit kept up on both sides, and swiftly managed. And this our forefathers, if not we, have had in Fletcher's Plays, to a much higher degree of perfection than the French Poets can arrive at.

"There is another part of Lisideius's Discourse, in which he has rather excused our neighbors than commended them; that is, for aiming only to make one person considerable in their Plays. 'Tis very true what he has urged, that one character in all Plays, even without the Poet's care, will have advantage of all the others; and that the design of the whole Drama will chiefly depend on it. But this hinders not that there may be more shining characters in the Play many persons of a second magnitude, nay, some so very near, so almost equal to the first, that greatness may be opposed to greatness, and all the persons be made considerable, not only by their quality, but their action. 'Tis evident that the more the persons are, the greater will be the variety, of the Plot. If then the parts are managed so regularly that the beauty of the whole be kept entire, and that the variety become not a perplexed and confused mass of accidents, you will find it infinitely pleasing to be led in a labyrinth of design, where you see some of your way before you, yet discern not the end till you arrive at it. And that all this is practicable, I can produce for examples many of our English Plays: as *The Maid's Tragedy*, *The Alchemist*, *The Silent Woman*; I was going to have named *The Fox*, but that the unity of design seems not exactly observed in it; for there appears two actions in the Play; the first naturally ending with the fourth Act; the second forced from it in the fifth: which yet is the less to be condemned in him, because the disguise of Volpone, though it suited not with his character as a crafty or covetous person, agreed well enough with that of a voluptuary: and by it the Poet gained the end he aimed at, the punishment of Vice, and the reward of Virtue, which that disguise produced. So that to judge equally of it, it was an excellent fifth Act, but not so naturally proceeding from the former.

"But to leave this, and pass to the latter part of Lisideius's discourse, which concerns relations, I must acknowledge with him, that the French have reason when they hide that part of the

action which would occasion too much tumult upon the Stage, and choose rather to have it made known by the narration to the Audience. Farther I think it very convenient, for the reasons he has given, that all incredible actions were removed; but, whither custom has so insinuated it self into our Country-men, 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. And indeed, the indecency of tumults is all which can be objected against fighting: For why may not our imagination as well suffer itself to be deluded with the probability of it, as with any other thing in the Play? For my part, I can with as great ease persuade my self that the blows which are struck are given in good earnest, as I can, that they who strike them are Kings or Princes, or those persons which they represent. For objects of incredibility I would be satisfied from Lisideius, whether we have any so removed from all appearance of truth as are those of Corneille's *Andromede*? A Play which has been frequented the most of any he has writ? If the Perseus, or the Son of an Heathen God, the Pegasus and the Monster were not capable to choke a strong belief, let him blame any representation of ours hereafter. Those indeed were objects of delight; yet the reason is the same as to the probability: for he makes it not a Ballette or Masque, but a Play, which is to resemble truth. But for death, that it ought not to be represented, I have besides the Arguments alleged by Lisideius, the authority of Ben Jonson, who has forborne it in his Tragedies; for both the death of Sejanus and Catiline are related: though in the latter I cannot but observe one irregularity of that great Poet: he has removed the Scene in the same Act, from Rome to Catiline's Army, and from thence again to Rome; and besides has allowed a very inconsiderable time, after Catiline's Speech, for the striking of the battle, and the return of Petreius, who is to relate the event of it to the Senate: which I should not animadvert upon him, who was otherwise a painful observer of *to prepon*, or the decorum of the Stage, if he had not used extreme severity in his judgment upon the incomparable Shakespeare for the same fault. To conclude on this subject of Relations, if we are to be blamed for showing too much of the action, the French are as faulty for discovering too little of it: a mean betwixt both should be observed by every judicious Writer, so as the audience may neither be left unsatisfied by not seeing what is beautiful, or shocked by beholding what is either incredible or undecent.

"I hope I have already proved in this discourse, that though we are not altogether so punctual as the French, in observing the laws of Comedy; yet our errors are so few, and little, and those things wherein we excel them so considerable, that we ought of right to be preferred before them. But what will Lisideius say if they themselves acknowledge they are too strictly tied up by those laws, for breaking which he has blamed the English? I will allege Corneille's words, as I find them in the end of his Discourse of the three Unities; '*Il est facile aux spéculatifs d'estre sévères, &c.*' "'Tis easy for speculative persons to judge severely; but if they would produce to

public view ten or twelve pieces of this nature, they would perhaps give more latitude to the Rules than I have done, when by experience they had known how much we are bound up and constrained by them, and how many beauties of the Stage they banished from it.' To illustrate a little what he has said, by their servile observations of the unities of time and place, and integrity of Scenes, they have brought upon themselves that dearth of Plot, and narrowness of Imagination, which may be observed in all their Plays. How many beautiful accidents might naturally happen in two or three days, which cannot arrive with any probability in the compass of hours? There is time to be allowed also for maturity of design, which amongst great and prudent persons, such as are often represented in Tragedy cannot, with any likelihood of truth, be brought to pass at so short a warning. Farther, by tying themselves strictly to the unity of place, and unbroken Scenes they are forced many times to omit some beauties which cannot be shown where the Act began; but might, if the Scene were interrupted, and the Stage cleared for the persons to enter in another place; and therefore the French Poets are often forced upon absurdities: for if the Act begins in a chamber all the persons in the Play must have some business or other to come thither, or else they are not to be shown that Act, and sometimes their characters are very unfitting to appear there; As, suppose it were the King's Bed-chamber, yet the meanest man in the Tragedy must come and dispatch his business rather than in the Lobby or Court-yard (which is fitter for him) for fear the Stage should be cleared, and the Scenes broken. Many times they fall by it into a greater inconvenience; for they keep their Scenes unbroken, and yet change the place as in one of their newest Plays, where the Act begins in the Street. There a Gentleman is to meet his Friend; he sees him with his man, coming out from his Fathers house; they talk together, and the first goes out: the second, who is a Lover, has made an appointment with his Mistress; she appears at the window and then we are to imagine the Scene lies under it. This Gentleman is called away, and leaves his servant with his Mistress: presently her Father is heard from within; the young Lady is afraid the Servingman should be discovered, and thrusts him in through a door which is supposed to be her Closet. After this, the Father enters to the Daughter, and now the Scene is in a House: for he is seeking from one room to another for this poor Philipin, or French Diego, who is heard from within, drolling [jesting—ed.] and breaking many a miserable conceit upon his sad condition. In this ridiculous manner the Play goes on, the Stage being never empty all the while: so that the Street, the Window, the two Houses, and the Closet, are made to walk about, and the Persons to stand still. Now what I beseech you is more easy than to write a regular French Play, or more difficult than to write an irregular English one, like those of Fletcher, or of Shakespeare.

"If they content themselves as Corneille did, with some flat design, which, like an ill Riddle, is found out ere it be half proposed; such Plots we can make every way regular as easily as they:

but when e'er they endeavor to rise up to any quick turns and counterturns of Plot, as some of them have attempted, since Corneille's Plays have been less in vogue, you see they write as irregularly as we, though they cover it more speciously, Hence the reason is perspicuous, why no French Plays, when translated, have, or ever can succeed upon the English Stage. For, if you consider the Plots, our own are fuller of variety, if the writing ours are more quick and fuller of spirit: and therefore 'tis a strange mistake in those who decry the way of writing Plays in Verse, as if the English therein imitated the French. We have borrowed nothing from them; our Plots are weaved in English Looms: we endeavor therein to follow the variety and greatness of characters which are derived to us from Shakespeare and Fletcher: the copiousness and well-knitting of the intrigues we have from Jonson, and for the Verse if self we have English Presidents of elder date than any of Corneille's Plays: (not to name our old Comedies before Shakespeare, which were all writ in verse of six feet, or Alexandrines, such as the French now use) I can show in Shakespeare, many Scenes of rhyme together, and the like in Ben Jonson's Tragedies: In *Catiline* and *Sejanus* sometimes thirty or forty lines; I mean besides the Chorus, or the Monologues, which by the way, showed Ben no enemy to this way of writing, especially is you look upon his *Sad Shepherd* which goes sometimes upon rhyme, sometimes upon blank Verse, like an Horse who eases himself upon Trot and Amble. You find him likewise commending Fletcher's Pastoral of *The Faithful Shepherdess*; which is for the most part Rhyme, though not refined to that purity to which it hath since been brought: And these examples are enough to clear us from a servile imitation of the French.

"But to return from whence I have digressed, I dare boldly affirm these two things of the English Drama: First, That we have many Plays of ours as regular as any of theirs; and which, besides, have more variety of Plot and Characters: And secondly, that in most of the irregular Plays of Shakespeare or Fletcher (for Ben Jonson's are for the most part regular) there is a more masculine fancy and greater spirit in all the writing, than there is in any of the French. I could produce even in Shakespeare's and Fletcher's Works, some Plays which are almost exactly formed; as *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *The Scornful Lady*: but because (generally speaking) Shakespeare, who writ first, did not perfectly observe the Laws of Comedy, and Fletcher, who came nearer to perfection, yet through carelessness made many faults; I will take the pattern of a perfect Play from Ben Jonson, who was a careful and learned observer of the Dramatic Laws, and from all his Comedies I shall select *The Silent Woman*; of which I will make a short Examen, according to those Rules which the French observe."

As Neander was beginning to examine *The Silent Woman*, Eugenius, looking earnestly upon him; "I beseech you Neander," said he, "gratify the company and me in particular so far, as before you speak of the Play, to give us a Character of the Author; and tell us frankly your

opinion, whether you do not think all Writers, both French and English, ought to give place to him?"

"I fear," replied Neander, "That in obeying your commands I shall draw a little envy upon my self. Besides, in performing them, it will be first necessary to speak somewhat of Shakespeare and Fletcher, his Rivals in Poesy; and one of them, in my opinion, at least his equal, perhaps his superior.

"To begin then with Shakespeare; he was the man who of all Modern, and perhaps Ancient Poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the Images of Nature were still present to him, and he drew them not laboriously, but luckily: when he describes any thing, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning, give him the greater commendation: he was naturally learned; he needed not the spectacles of Books to read Nature; he looked inwards, and found her there. I cannot say he is every where 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 [puns—ed.]; 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.

[As cypresses commonly do among bending shrubs—ed.]

The consideration of this made Mr. Hales of Eaton say, That there was no subject of which any Poet ever writ, but he would produce it much better treated of in Shakespeare; and however others are now generally preferred before him yet the Age wherein he lived, which had contemporaries with him, Fletcher and Jonson never equaled them to him in their esteem: And in the last King's Court, when Ben's reputation was at highest, Sir John Suckling, and with him the greater part of the Courtiers, set our Shakespeare far above him.

"Beaumont and Fletcher of whom I am next to speak, had with the advantage of Shakespeare's wit, which was their precedent, great natural gifts, improved by study. Beaumont especially being so accurate a judge of Plays, that Ben Jonson while he lived, submitted all his Writings to his Censure, and he thought, used his judgement in correcting, if not contriving all his Plots. What value he had for him, appears by the Verses he writ to him; and therefore need speak no farther of it. The first Play which brought Fletcher and him in esteem was their *Philaster*: for before that, they had written two or three year unsuccessfully; as the like is reported of Ben Jonson, before he writ *Every Man in his Humor*. Their Plots were generally more regular than Shakespeare's especially those which were made before Beaumont's death; and they

understood and imitated the conversation of Gentlemen much better; whose wild debaucheries, and quickness of wit in repartees, no Poet can ever paint as they have done. This Humor of which Ben Jonson derived from particular persons, they made it not their business to describe: they represented all the passions very lively, but above all, Love. I am apt to believe the English Language in them arrived to its highest perfection; what words have since been taken in, are rather superfluous than necessary. Their Plays are now the most pleasant and frequent entertainments of the Stage; two of theirs being acted through the year for one of Shakespeare's or Jonson's: the reason is, because there is a certain gayety in their Comedies, and Pathos in their more serious Plays, which suits generally with all men's humors. Shakespeare's language is likewise a little obsolete, and Ben Jonson's wit comes short of theirs.

"As for Jonson, to whose Character I am now arrived, if we look upon him while he was himself, (for his last Plays were but his dotages) I think him the most learned and judicious Writer which any Theater ever had. He was a most severe Judge of himself as well as others. One cannot say he wanted wit, but rather that he was frugal of it. In his works you find little to retrench or alter. Wit and Language, and Humor also in some measure we had before him; but something of Art was wanting to the Drama till he came. He managed his strength to more advantage than any who preceded him. You seldom find him making Love in any of his Scenes, or endeavoring to move the Passions; his genius was too sullen and saturnine to do it gracefully, especially when he knew he came after those who had performed both to such an height. Humor was his proper Sphere, and in that he delighted most to represent Mechanic [laboring, vulgar—ed.] people. He was deeply conversant in the Ancients, both Greek and Latin, and he borrowed boldly from them: there is scarce a Poet or Historian among the Roman Authors of those times whom he has not translated in *Sejanus* and *Catiline*. But he has done his Robberies so openly, that one may see he fears not to be taxed by any Law. He invades Authors like a Monarch, and what would be theft in other Poets, is only victory in him. With the spoils of these Writers he so represents old Rome to us, in its Rites, Ceremonies and Customs, that if one of their Poets had written either of his Tragedies, we had seen less of it than in him. If there was any fault in his Language, 'twas that he weaved it too closely and laboriously in his serious Plays; perhaps too, he did a little too much Romanize our Tongue, leaving the words which he translated almost as much Latin as he found them: wherein though he learnedly followed the Idiom of their language, he did not enough comply with ours. If I would compare him with Shakespeare, I must acknowledge him the more correct Poet, but Shakespeare the greater wit. Shakespeare was the Homer, or Father of our Dramatick Poets; Jonson was the Virgil, the pattern of elaborate writing; I admire him, but I love Shakespeare. To conclude of him, as he has given us the most correct Plays, so in the precepts which he has laid down in his *Discoveries*, we have as many and profitable Rules for perfecting the Stage as any wherewith the French can furnish

us.

“Having thus spoken of the Author, I proceed to the examination of his Comedy, *The Silent Woman*.

EXAMEN OF THE SILENT WOMAN.

“To begin first with the length of the Action, it is so far from exceeding the compass of a Natural day, that it takes not up an Artificial one. 'Tis all included in the limits of three hours and an half, which is not more than is required for the presentment on the Stage. A beauty perhaps not much observed; if it had, we should not have looked upon the Spanish Translation of five hours with so much wonder. The Scene of it is laid in London; the latitude of place is almost as little as you can imagine: for it lies all within the compass of two Houses, and after the first Act, in one. The continuity of Scenes is observed more than in any of our Plays, excepting his own *Fox* and *Alchemist*. They are not broken above twice or thrice at most in the whole Comedy, and in the two best of Corneille's Plays, the *Cid* and *Cinna*, they are interrupted once apiece. The action of the Play is entirely one; the end or aim of which is the settling of Morose's Estate on Dauphine. The Intrigue of it is the greatest and most noble of any pure unmixed Comedy in any Language: you see it in many persons of various characters and humors, and all delightful: At first, Morose, or an old Man, to whom all noise but his own talking is offensive. Some who would be thought Critics, say this humor of his is forced: but to remove that objection, we may consider him first to be naturally of a delicate hearing, as many are to whom all sharp sounds are unpleasant; and secondly, we may attribute much of it to the peevishness of his Age, or the wayward authority of an old man in his own house, where he may make himself obeyed; and this the Poet seems to allude to in his name Morose. Besides this, I am assured from diverse persons, that Ben Jonson was actually acquainted with such a man, one altogether as ridiculous as he is here represented. Others say it is not enough to find one man of such an humor; it must be common to more, and the more common the more natural. To prove this, they instance in the best of Comical Characters. Falstaff: There are many men resembling him; Old, Fat, Merry, Cowardly, Drunken, Amorous, Vain, and Lying: But to convince these people, I need but tell them, that humor is the ridiculous extravagance of conversation, wherein one man differs from all others. If then it be common, or communicated to many, how differs it from other men's? or what indeed causes it to be ridiculous so much as the singularity of it? As for Falstaff, he is not properly one humor, but a Miscellany of Humors or Images, drawn from so many several men, that wherein he is singular in his wit, or those things he says, *præter expectatum* [beyond what is expected—ed.], unexpected by the Audience; his quick evasions when you imagine him surprised, which as they are extremely diverting of themselves, so receive a great addition from his person; for the very sight of such an unwieldy

old debauched fellow is a Comedy alone. And here having a place so proper for it I cannot but enlarge somewhat upon this subject of humor into which I am fallen. The Ancients had little of it in their Comedies; for the *to geloion* [the laughable—ed.], of the Old Comedy, of which Aristophanes was chief, was not so much to imitate a man, as to make the people laugh at some odd conceit, which had commonly somewhat of unnatural or obscene in it. Thus when you see Socrates brought upon the Stage, you are not to imagine him made ridiculous by the imitation of his actions, but rather by making him perform something very unlike himself: something so childish and absurd, as by comparing it with the gravity of the true Socrates, makes a ridiculous object for the Spectators. In their new Comedy which succeeded, the Poets fought indeed to express the *ethos* [moral character], as in their Tragedies the *pathos* [emotion—ed.] of Mankind. But this *ethos* contained only the general Characters of men and manners; as old men, Lovers, Servingmen, Courtesans, Parasites, and such other persons as we see in their Comedies; all which they made alike: that is, one old man or Father; one Lover, one Courtesan so like another, as if the first of them had begot the rest of every sort: *Ex homine hunc natum dicas* [You would say that this man is born from that one—ed.]. The same custom they observed likewise in their Tragedies. As for the French, though they have the word *humeur* among them, yet they have small use of it in their Comedies, or Farces; they being but ill imitations of the *ridiculum*, or that which stirred up laughter in the old Comedy. But among the English 'tis otherwise: where by humor is meant some extravagant habit, passion, or affection; particular (as I said before) to some one person: by the oddness of which, he is immediately distinguished from the rest of men; which being lively and naturally represented, most frequently begets that malicious pleasure in the Audience which is testified by laughter: as all things which are deviations from common customs are ever the aptest to produce it: though by the way this laughter is only accidental, as the person represented is Fantastic or Bizarre; but pleasure is essential to it, as the imitation of what is natural. The description of these humors, drawn from the knowledge and observation of particular persons, was the peculiar genius and talent of Ben Jonson; To whose Play I now return.

“Besides Morose, there are at least or different Characters and humors in *The Silent Woman*, all which persons have several concernments of their own, yet are all used by the Poet, to the conducting of the main design to perfection. I shall not waste time in commending the writing of this Play, but I will give you my opinion, that there is more wit and acuteness of Fancy in it than in any of Ben Jonson's. Besides, that he has here described the conversation of Gentlemen in the persons of True-Wit, and his Friends, with more gayety, air and freedom, than in the rest of his Comedies. For the contrivance of the Plot 'tis extreme elaborate, and yet withal easy; for the lusing, or untying of it, 'tis so admirable, that when it is done, no one of the Audience would think the Poet could have missed it; and yet it was concealed so much before the last Scene,

that any other way would sooner have entered into your thoughts. But I dare not take upon me to commend the Fabric of it, because it is altogether so full of Art, that I must unravel every Scene in it to commend it as I ought. And this excellent contrivance is still the more to be admired, because 'tis Comedy where the persons are only of common rank, and their business private, not elevated by passions or high concernments as in serious Plays. Here every one is a proper Judge of all he sees; nothing is represented but that with which he daily converses: so that by consequence all faults lie open to discovery, and few are pardonable. 'Tis this which Horace has judiciously observed:

*Creditur ex medio quia res arcessit habere
Sudoris minimum, sed habet Comedia tanto
Plus oneris, quanto veniæ minus.*

[Comedy is thought to require the minimum of sweat,
Because it takes its characters from ordinary life;
But the less indulgence it encounters, the more work it
needs—ed.]

But our Poet, who was not ignorant of these difficulties, had prevailed himself of all advantages; as he who designs a large leap takes his rise from the highest ground. One of these advantages is that which Corneille has laid down as the greatest which can arrive to any Poem, and which he himself could never compass above thrice in all his Plays, viz. the making choice of some signal and long expected day, whereon the action of the Play is to depend. This day was that designed by Dauphine for the settling of his Uncle's Estate upon him; which to compass he contrives to marry him: that the marriage had been plotted by him long beforehand is made evident by what he tells True-Wit in the second Act, that in one moment he had destroy'd what he had been raising many months.

"There is another artifice of the Poet, which I cannot here omit, because by the frequent practice of it in his Comedies, he has left it to us almost as a Rule, that is, when he has any Character or humor wherein he would show a *Coup de Maistre*, or his highest skill; he recommends it to your observation by a pleasant description of it before the person first appears. Thus, in *Bartholomew Fair* he gives you the Pictures of Numps and Cokes, and in this those of Daw, Lafoole, Morose, and the Collegiate Ladies; all which you hear described before you see them. So that before they come upon the Stage you have a longing expectation of them, which prepares you to receive them favorably; and when they are there, even from their first appearance you are so far acquainted with them, that nothing of their humor is lost to you.

"I will observe yet one thing further of this admirable Plot; the business of it rises in every Act. The second is greater than the first; the third than the second, and so forward to the fifth.

There too you see, till the very last Scene, new difficulties arising to obstruct the action of the Play; and when the Audience is brought into despair that the business can naturally be effected, then, and not before, the discovery is made. But that the Poet might entertain you with more variety all this while, he reserves some new Characters to show you, which he opens not till the second and third Act. In the second, Morose, Daw, the Barber and Otter; in the third the Collegiate Ladies: All which he moves afterwards in by-walks, or under-Plots, as diversions to the main design, lest it should grow tedious, though they are still naturally joined with it, and somewhere or other subservient to it. Thus, like a skilful Chess-player, by little and little he draws out his men, and makes his pawns of use to his greater persons.

“If this Comedy, and some others of his, were translated into French Prose (which would now be no wonder to them, since Molière has lately given them Plays out of Verse which have not displeased them) I believe the controversy would soon be decided betwixt the two Nations, even making them the Judges. But we need not call our heroes to our aid; Be it spoken to the honor of the English, our Nation can never want in any Age such who are able to dispute the Empire of Wit with any people in the Universe. And though the fury of a Civil War, and Power, for twenty years together, abandoned to a barbarous race of men, Enemies of all good Learning, had buried the Muses under the ruins of Monarchy; yet with the restoration of our happiness, we see revived Poesy lifting up its head, and already shaking off the rubbish which lay so heavy on it. We have seen since His Majesty’s return, many Dramatick Poems which yield not to those of any foreign Nation, and which deserve all Laurels but the English. I will set aside Flattery and Envy: it cannot be denied but we have had some little blemish either in the Plot or writing of all those Plays which have been made within these seven years (and perhaps there is no Nation in the world so quick to discern them, or so difficult to pardon them, as ours): yet if we can persuade our selves to use the candor of that Poet, who (though the most severe of Critics) has left us this caution by which to moderate our censures—

ubi plura nitent in carmine non ego paucis

Offendar maculis

[where many things shine in a poem, I am not offended
by a few blemishes—ed.]

—if in consideration of their many and great beauties, we can wink at some slight, and little imperfections; if we, I say, can be thus equal to our selves, I ask no favor from the French. And if I do not venture upon any particular judgment of our late Plays, ’tis out of the consideration which an Ancient Writer gives me; *Vivorum, ut magna admiratio ita censura difficilis* [in proportion as admiration for the living is great, finding fault with them is difficult—ed.] betwixt the extremes of admiration and malice, ’tis hard to judge uprightly of the living. Only I think it

may be permitted me to say, that as it is no lessening to us to yield to some Plays, and those not many of our own Nation in the last Age, so can it be no addition to pronounce of our present Poets that they have far surpassed all the Ancients, and the Modern Writers of other Countries.”

This, my Lord, was the substance of what was then spoke on that occasion; and Lisideius, I think was going to reply, when he was prevented thus by Crites: “I am confident,” said he, “the most material things that can be said, have been already urged on either side; if they have not, I must beg of Lisideius that he will defer his answer till another time: for I confess I have a joint quarrel to you both, because you have concluded, without any reason given for it, that Rhyme is proper for the Stage. I will not dispute how ancient it hath been among us to write this way; perhaps our Ancestors knew no better till Shakespeare’s time. I will grant it was not altogether left by him, and that Fletcher and Ben Jonson used it frequently in their Pastorals, and sometimes in other Plays. Farther, I will not argue whether we received it originally from our own Countrymen, or from the French; for that is an inquiry of as little benefit, as theirs who in the midst of the great Plague were not so solicitous to provide against it, as to know whether we had it from the malignity of our own air, or by transportation from Holland. I have therefore only to affirm, that it is not allowable in serious Plays, for Comedies I find you already concluding with me. To prove this, I might satisfy my self to tell you, how much in vain it is for you to strive against the stream of the peoples inclination; the greatest part of which are prepossessed so much with those excellent Plays of Shakespeare, Fletcher, and Ben Jonson, (which have been written out of Rhyme) that except you could bring them such as were written better in it, and those too by persons of equal reputation with them, it will be impossible for you to gain your cause with them, who will still be judges. This it is to which in fine all your reasons must submit. The unanimous consent of an Audience is so powerful, That even Julius Cæsar (as Macrobius reports of him) when he was perpetual Dictator, was not able to balance it on the other side. But when Laberius, a Roman Knight, at his request contended in the Mime with another Poet, he was forced to cry out, *Etiam favente me victus es Laben* [Even with me favoring you, Laberius, you are beaten—ed.]. But I will not on this occasion, take the advantage of the greater number, but only urge such reasons against Rhyme, as I find in the Writings of those who have argued for the other way. First then I am of opinion, that Rhyme is unnatural in a Play, because Dialogue there is presented as the effect of sudden thought. For a Play is the imitation of Nature; and since no man, without premeditation speaks in Rhyme, neither ought he to do it on the Stage; this hinders not but the Fancy may be there elevated to a higher pitch of thought than it is in ordinary discourse: for there is a probability that men of excellent and quick parts may speak noble things *extempore*: but those thoughts are never fettered with the numbers or sound of Verse without study, and therefore it cannot be but unnatural to present

the most free way of speaking, in that which is the most constrained. For this Reason, says Aristotle, 'tis best to write Tragedy in that kind of Verse which is the least such, or which is nearest Prose: and this amongst the Ancients was the Iambic, and with us is blank verse, or the measure of verse, kept exactly without rhyme. These numbers therefore are fittest for a Play; the others for a paper of Verses, or a Poem. Blank verse being as much below them as rhyme is improper for the Drama. And if it be objected that neither are blank verses made *extempore*, yet as nearest Nature, they are still to be preferred. But there are two particular exceptions which many besides my self have had to verse; by which it will appear yet more plainly, how improper it is in Plays. And the first of them is grounded upon that very reason for which some have commended Rhyme: they say the quickness of repartees in argumentative Scenes receives an ornament from verse. Now what is more unreasonable than to imagine that a man should not only light upon the Wit, but the Rhyme too upon the sudden? This nicking [striking—ed.] of him who spoke before both in sound and measure, is so great an happiness, that you must at least suppose the persons of your Play to be born Poets, *Arcades omnes et cantare pares et respondere parati* [in Virgil, *Arcades ambo* ..., Dryden's translation: Both young Arcadians, both alike inspired / To sing, and answer as the song requir'd—ed.]: they must have arrived to the degree of *quicquid conabar dicere* [singing whatever they attempted—ed.]: to make Verses almost whether they will or no: if they are any thing below this, it will look rather like the design of two than the answer of one: it will appear that your Actors hold intelligence together, that they perform their tricks like Fortune-tellers, by confederacy. The hand of Art will be too visible in it against that maxim of all Professions; *Ars est celare artem*. That it is the greatest perfection of Art to keep it self undiscovered. Nor will it serve you to object, that however you manage it, 'tis still known to be a Play; and consequently the Dialogue of two persons understood to be the labor of one Poet. For 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 Canvass: 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? since the mind of man does naturally tend to, and seek after Truth; and therefore the nearer any thing comes to the imitation of it, the more it pleases.

"Thus, you see, your Rhyme is incapable of expressing the greatest thoughts naturally, and the lowest it cannot with any grace: for what is more unbefitting the Majesty of Verse, than to call a Servant, or bid a door be shut in Rhyme? And yet this miserable necessity you are forced upon. But Verse, you say, circumscribes a quick and luxuriant fancy, which would extend itself too far

on every subject, did not the labor which is required to well turned and polished Rhyme, set bounds to it. Yet this Argument, if granted, would only prove that we may write better in Verse, but not more naturally. Neither is it able to evince that; for he who wants judgment to confine his fancy in blank Verse, may want it as much in Rhyme; and he who has it will avoid errors in both kinds. Latin verse was as great a confinement to the imagination of those Poets, as Rhyme to ours: and yet you find Ovid saying too much on every subject. *Nescivit* (says Seneca) *quod bene cessit relinquere* [He did not know how to leave off when it was proper to do so—ed.]: of which he gives you one famous instance in his Description of the Deluge:

Omnia pontus erat, deerant quoque Litora Ponto.

Now all was Sea, Nor had that Sea a shore. [trans. Dryden's]

Thus Ovid's fancy was not limited by verse, and Virgil needed not verse to have bounded his.

"In our own language we see Ben Jonson confining himself to what ought to be said, even in the liberty of blank Verse; and yet Corneille, the most judicious of the French Poets, is still varying the same sense an hundred ways, and dwelling eternally upon the same subject, though confined by Rhyme. Some other exceptions I have to Verse, but being these I have named are for the most part already public; I conceive it reasonable they should first be answered."

"It concerns me less than any," said Neander, (seeing he had ended) "to reply to this Discourse; because when I should have proved that Verse may be natural in Plays, yet I should always be ready to confess, that those which I have written in this kind come short of that perfection which is required. Yet since you are pleased I should undertake this Province, I will do it, though with all imaginable respect and deference both to that person from whom you have borrowed your strongest Arguments, and to whose judgment when I have said all, I finally submit. But before I proceed to answer your objections, I must first remember [remind—ed.] you, that I exclude all Comedy from my defense; and next that I deny not but blank verse may be also used, and content my self only to assert, that in serious Plays where the subject and characters are great, and the Plot unmixed with mirth, which might allay or divert these concernments which are produced, Rhyme is there as natural, and more effectual than blank Verse.

"And now having laid down this as a foundation, to begin with Crites, I must crave leave to tell him, that some of his Arguments against rhyme reach no farther than from the faults or defects of ill rhyme, to conclude against the use of it in general. May not I conclude against blank verse by the same reason? If the words of some poets who write in it, are either ill chosen, or ill placed, which makes not only rhyme, but all kind of verse in any language unnatural, shall I, for

their vicious affectation condemn those excellent lines of Fletcher, which are written in that kind? Is there anything in rhyme more constrained than this line in blank verse? "I Heav'n invoke, and strong resistance make," where you see both the clauses are placed unnaturally; that is, contrary to the common way of speaking, and that without the excuse of a rhyme to cause it: yet you would think me very ridiculous, if I should accuse the stubbornness of blank Verse for this, and not rather the stiffness of the Poet. Therefore, Crites, you must either prove that words, though well chosen, and duly placed, yet render not Rhyme natural in it self; or, that however natural and easy the rhyme may be, yet it is not proper for a Play. If you insist upon the former part, I would ask you what other conditions are required to make Rhyme natural in itself, besides an election of apt words, and a right disposing of them? For the due choice of your words expresses your sense naturally, and the due placing them adapts the rhyme to it. If you object that one verse may be made for the sake of another, though both the words and rhyme be apt; I answer it cannot possibly so fall out; for either there is a dependence of sense betwixt the first line and the second, or there is none: if there be that connection, then in the natural position of the words, the latter line must of necessity flow from the former: if there be no dependence, yet still the due ordering of words makes the last line as natural in itself as the other: so that the necessity of a rhyme never forces any but bad or lazy Writers to say what they would not otherwise. 'Tis true, there is both care and Art required to write in Verse; A good Poet never concludes upon the first line, till he has sought out such a rhyme as may fit the sense, already prepared to heighten the second: many times the close of the sense falls into the middle of the next verse, or farther of, and he may often prevail himself of the same advantages in English which Virgil had in Latin. He may break off in the Hemistich, and begin another line: indeed, the not observing these two last things, makes Plays which are writ in verse so tedious: for though, most commonly, the sense is to be confined to the Couplet, yet nothing that does *perpetuo tenore fluere*, run in the same channel, can please always. 'Tis like the murmuring of a stream, which not varying in the fall, causes at first attention, at last drowsiness. Variety of cadences is the best rule, the greatest help to the Actors, and refreshment to the Audience.

"If then Verse may be made natural in itself, how becomes it improper to a Play? You say the Stage is the representation of Nature, and no man in ordinary conversation speaks in rhyme. But you foresaw when you said this, that it might be answered; neither does any man speak in blank verse, or in measure without rhyme. Therefore you concluded, that which is nearest Nature is still to be preferred. But you took no notice that rhyme might be made as natural as blank verse, by the well placing of the words, etc. All the difference between them when they are both correct, is the sound in one, which the other wants; and if so, the sweetness of it, and all the advantage resulting from it, which are handled in the Preface to *The Rival Ladies*, will

yet stand good. As for that place of Aristotle, where he says Plays should be writ in that kind of Verse which is nearest Prose; it makes little for you, blank verse being properly but measured Prose. Now measure alone in any modern Language, does not constitute verse those of the Ancients in Greek and Latin, consisted in quantity of words, and a determinate number of feet. But when, by the inundation of the Goths and Vandals into Italy new Languages were brought in, and barbarously mingled with the Latin (of which the Italian, Spanish, French, and ours, [made out of them and the Teutonic] are Dialects): a new way of Poesy was practiced; new, I say in those Countries, for in all probability it was that of the Conquerors in their own Nations. This new way consisted in measure or number of feet and rhyme. The sweetness of Rhyme, and observation of Accent, supplying the place of quantity in words, which could neither exactly be observed by those Barbarians who knew not the Rules of it, neither was it suitable to their tongues as it had been to the Greek and Latin. No man is tied in modern Poesy to observe any farther rule in the feet of his verse, but that they be disyllables; whether Spondee, Trochee, or Iambic, it matters not; only he is obliged to rhyme: Neither do the Spanish, French, Italian or Germans acknowledge at all, or very rarely any such kind of Poesy as blank verse amongst them. Therefore at most 'tis but a Poetic Prose, a *Sermo pedestris* [prose discourse—ed.], and as such most fit for Comedies, where I acknowledge Rhyme to be improper. Farther, as to that quotation of Aristotle, our Couplet Verses may be rendered as near Prose as blank verse it self, by using those advantages I lately named, as breaks in a Hemistich, or running the sense into another line, thereby making Art and Order appear as loose and free as Nature: or not tying our selves to Couplets strictly, we may use the benefit of the Pindaric way, practiced in *The Siege of Rhodes*; where the numbers vary and the rhyme is disposed carelessly, and far from often chiming. Neither is that other advantage of the Ancients to be despised, of changing the kind of verse when they please with the change of the Scene, or some new entrance: for they confine not themselves always to Iambics, but extend their liberty to all Lyric numbers, and sometimes, even to Hexameter. But I need not go so far to prove that Rhyme, as it succeeds to all other offices of Greek and Latin Verse, so especially to this of Plays, since the custom of all Nations at this day confirms it: All the French, Italian and Spanish Tragedies are generally writ in it, and sure the Universal consent of the most civilized parts of the world, ought in this, as it doth in other customs, include the rest.

“But perhaps you may tell me I have proposed such a way to make rhyme natural, and consequently proper to Plays, as is unpracticable, and that I shall scarce find six or eight lines together in any Play, where the words are so placed and chosen as is required to make it natural. I answer, no Poet need constrain himself at all times to it. It is enough he makes it his general Rule; for I deny not but sometimes there may be a greatness in placing the words otherwise; and sometimes they may sound better, sometimes also the variety itself is excuse

enough. But if, for the most part, the words be placed as they are in the negligence of Prose, it is sufficient to denominate the way practicable, for we esteem that to be such, which in the Trial oftener succeeds than misses. And thus far you may find the practice made good in many Plays; where you do not, remember still, that if you cannot find six natural Rhymes together, it will be as hard for you to produce as many lines in blank Verse, even among the greatest of our Poets, against which I cannot make some reasonable exception.

“And this, Sir, calls to my remembrance the beginning of your discourse, where you told us we should never find the Audience favourable to this kind of writing, till we could produce as good Plays in Rhyme, as Ben Jonson, Fletcher, and Shakespeare, had writ out of it. But it is to raise envy to the living, to compare them with the dead. They are honored, and almost adored by us, as they deserve; neither do I know any so presumptuous of themselves as to contend with them. Yet give me leave to say thus much without injury to their Ashes, that not only we shall never equal them, but they could never equal themselves, were they to rise and write again. We acknowledge them our Fathers in wit, but they have ruined their Estates themselves before they came to their children’s hands. There is scarce an Humor, a Character, or any kind of Plot, which they have not blown upon: all comes sullied or wasted to us: and were they to entertain this Age, they could not make so plenteous treatments out of such decayed Fortunes. This therefore will be a good Argument to us either not to write at all, or to attempt some other way. There is no bays to be expected in their Walks; *Tentanda via est quàm me quoque possum tollere humo* [New ways I must attempt, my grov’ling name / To raise aloft—trans. Dryden’s].

“This way of writing in verse they have only left free to us; our age is arrived to a perfection in it, which they never knew; and which (if we may guess by what of theirs we have seen in verse, as *The Faithful Shepherdess*, and *Sad Shepherd*) ’tis probable they never could have reached. For the Genius of every Age is different; and though ours excel in this, I deny not but that to imitate Nature in that perfection which they did in Prose, is a greater commendation than to write in verse exactly. As for what you have added, that the people are not generally inclined to like this way; if it were true, it would be no wonder, that betwixt the shaking off an old habit, and the introducing of a new, there should be difficulty. Do we not see them stick to Hopkins and Sternhold’s Psalms, and forsake those of David, I mean Sandys’s Translation of them? If by the people you understand the multitude, the *hoi polloi* [the multitude, the many; since *hoi* means “the,” Dryden’s “the” is superfluous, but the usage is general in English; this is the first recorded use of the phrase in English, with or without the superfluous article—ed.]. ’Tis no matter what they think; they are sometimes in the right, sometimes in the wrong; their judgment is a mere Lottery. *Est ubi plebs rectè putat, est ubi peccat* [There are times when the people think rightly and times when they err—ed.], Horace says it of the vulgar, judging Poesy.

But if you mean the mixed audience of the populace, and the Noblesse, I dare confidently affirm that a great part of the latter sort are already favorable to verse; and that no serious Plays written since the King's return have been more kindly received by them, than *The Siege of Rhodes*, the *Mustapha*, *The Indian Queen*, and *Indian Emperor*.

"But I come now to the inference of your first Argument. You said the Dialogue of Plays is presented as the effect of sudden thought, but no man speaks suddenly, or *extempore* in Rhyme: And you inferred from thence, that Rhyme, which you acknowledge to be proper to Epic Poesy cannot equally be proper to Dramatick, unless we could suppose all men born so much more than Poets, that verses should be made in them, not by them.

"It has been formerly urged by you, and confessed by me, that since no man spoke any kind of verse *extempore*, that which was nearest Nature was to be preferred. I answer you therefore, by distinguishing betwixt what is nearest to the nature of Comedy, which is the imitation of common persons and ordinary speaking, and what is nearest the nature of a serious Play: this last is indeed the representation of Nature, but 'tis Nature wrought up to an higher pitch. The Plot, the Characters, the Wit, the Passions, the Descriptions, are all exalted above the level of common converse, as high as the imagination of the Poet can carry them, with proportion to verisimilitude. Tragedy we know is wont to image to us the minds and fortunes of noble persons, and to portray these exactly, Heroic Rhyme is nearest Nature, as being the noblest kind of modern verse.

Indignatur enim privatis, et prope socco.

Dignis carminibus narran cœna Thyestæ

[For the banquet of Thyestes should not

Be narrated in casual verses, almost suitable for comedy—ed.]

says Horace: And in another place,

Essutire leveis indigna tragœdia versus.

[Tragedy improper for the bubbling forth of light verses—ed.]

Blank Verse is acknowledged to be too low for a Poem, nay more, for a paper of verses; but if too low for an ordinary Sonnet, how much more for Tragedy, which is by Aristotle in the dispute betwixt the Epic Poesy and the Dramatick; for many reasons he there alleges ranked above it.

"But setting this defense aside, your Argument is almost as strong against the use of Rhyme in Poems as in Plays; for the Epic way is every where interlaced with Dialogue, or discursive Scenes; and therefore you must either grant Rhyme to be improper there, which is contrary to

your assertion, or admit it into Plays by the same title which you have given it to Poems. For though Tragedy be justly preferred above the other, yet there is a great affinity between them as may easily be discovered in that definition of a Play which Lisiideius gave us. The Genus of them is the same, a just and lively Image of human nature, in its Actions, Passions, and traverses of Fortune: so is the end, namely for the delight and benefit of Mankind. The Characters and Persons are still the same, viz. the greatest of both sorts, only the manner of acquainting us with those Actions, Passions and Fortunes is different. Tragedy performs it *viva voce*, or by action, in Dialogue, wherein it excels the Epic Poem which does it chiefly by narration, and therefore is not so lively an Image of Humane Nature. However, the agreement betwixt them is such, that if Rhyme be proper for one, it must be for the other. Verse 'tis true is not the effect of sudden thought; but this hinders not that sudden thought may be represented in verse, since those thoughts are such as must be higher than Nature can raise them without premeditation, especially to a continuance of them even out of verse, and consequently you cannot imagine them to have been sudden either in the Poet, or the Actors. A Play, as I had 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.

“Perhaps I have insisted too long upon this objection; but the clearing of it will make my stay shorter on the rest. You tell us Crites, that rhyme appears most unnatural in repartees, or short replies: when he who answers, (it being presumed he knew not what the other would say, yet) makes up that part of the verse which was left incomplete, and supplies both the sound and measure of it. This you say looks rather like the confederacy of two, than the answer of one.

“This, I confess, is an objection which is in every ones mouth who loves not rhyme: but suppose, I beseech you, the repartee were made only in blank verse, might not part of the same argument be turned against you? for the measure is as often supplied there as it is in Rhyme. The latter half of the Hemistich as commonly made up, or a second line subjoined as a reply to the former; which any one leaf in Jonson’s Plays will sufficiently clear to you. You will often find in the Greek Tragedians, and in Seneca, that when a Scene grows up in the warmth of repartees (which is the close sighting of it) the latter part of the Trimeter is supplied by him who answers; and yet it was never observed as a fault in them by any of the Ancient or Modern Critics. The case is the same in our verse as it was in theirs; Rhyme to us being in lieu of quantity to them. But if no latitude is to be allowed a Poet, you take from him not only his license of *quidlibet audendi* [daring what he wills—ed.], but you tie him up in a straighter compass than you would a Philosopher. This is indeed *Musas colere severiores* [to cultivate the muses intensely—ed.]: You would have him follow Nature, but he must follow her on foot: you have dismounted him from his Pegasus. But you tell us this supplying the last half of a verse, or

adjoining a whole second to the former, looks more like the design of two than the answer of one. Suppose we acknowledge it: how comes this confederacy to be more displeasing to you than in a Dance which is well contrived? You see there the united design of many persons to make up one Figure: after they have separated themselves in many petty divisions, they rejoin one by one into a gross: the confederacy is plain amongst them; for chance could never produce any thing so beautiful, and yet there is nothing in it that shocks your sight. I acknowledge the hand of Art appears in repartee, as of necessity it must in all kind of verse. But there is also the quick and poignant brevity of it (which is an high imitation of Nature in those sudden gusts of passion) to mingle with it: and this joined with the cadency and sweetness of the Rhyme, leaves nothing in the soul of the hearer to desire. 'Tis an Art which appears; but it appears only like the shadowings of Painture, which being to cause the rounding of it, cannot be absent; but while that is considered they are lost: so while we attend to the other beauties of the matter, the care and labor of the Rhyme is carried from us, or at least drowned in its own sweetness, as Bees are sometimes buried in their Honey. When a Poet has found the repartee, the last perfection he can add to it, is to put it into verse. However good the thought may be; however apt the words in which 'tis couched yet he finds himself at a little unrest while Rhyme is wanting: he cannot leave till that comes naturally, and then is at ease, and sits down contented.

"From Replies, which are the most elevated thoughts of Verse, you pass to the most mean ones; those which are common with the lowest of household conversation. In these, you say, the Majesty of Verse suffers. You instance in the calling of a servant, or commanding a door to be shut in rhyme. This, Crites is a good observation of yours, but no argument: for it proves no more but that such thoughts should be waved, as often as may be, by the address of the Poet. But suppose they are necessary in the places where he uses them, yet there no need to put them into rhyme. He may place them in the beginning of Verse, and break it off, as unfit, when so debased for any other use: or granting the worst, that they require more room than the Hemistich will allow; yet still there is a choice to be made of the best words, and least vulgar (provided they be apt) to express such thoughts. Many have blamed Rhyme in general, for this fault, when the Poet, with a little care, might have redressed it. But they do it with no more justice, than if English Poesy should be made ridiculous for the sake of the Water Poet's Rhymes. Our language is noble, full and significant; and I know not why he who is Master of it may not clothe ordinary things in it as decently as the Latin; if he use the same diligence in his choice of words. *Delectus verborum Origo est Eloquentiæ* [the picking of words is the source of eloquence—ed.]. It was the saying of Julius Cæsar, one so curious in his, that none of them can be changed but for a worse. One would think "Unlock the door" was a thing as vulgar as could be spoken; and yet Seneca could make it sound high and lofty in his Latin:

“But I turn from this exception, both because it happens not above twice or thrice in any Play that those vulgar thoughts are used; and then too (were there no other Apology to be made, yet) the necessity of them (which is alike in all kind of writing) may excuse them. Besides that the great eagerness and precipitation with which they are spoken makes us rather mind the substance than the dress; that for which they are spoken, rather than what is spoke. For they are always the effect of some hasty concernment, and something of consequence depends upon them.

“Thus, Crites, I have endeavored to answer your objections; it remains only that I should vindicate an Argument for Verse, which you have gone about to overthrow. It had formerly been said, that the easiness of blank verse, renders the Poet too luxuriant; but that the labor of Rhyme bound and circumscribes an over-fruitful fancy, The sense there being commonly confined to the couplet, and the words so ordered that the Rhyme naturally follows them, not they the Rhyme. To this you answered, that it was no Argument to the question in hand, for the dispute was not which way a man may write best: but which is most proper for the subject on which he writes.

“First, give me leave, Sir, to remember you that the Argument against which you raised this objection, was only secondary: it was built upon this Hypothesis, that to write in verse was proper for serious Plays. Which supposition being granted (as it was briefly made out in that discourse, by showing how verse might be made natural) it asserted, that this way of writing was an help to the Poet’s judgment, by putting bounds to a wild overflowing Fancy. I think therefore it will not be hard for me to make good what it was to prove: But you add, that were this let pass, yet he who wants judgment in the liberty of his fancy, may as well show the defect of it when he is confined to verse: for he who has judgment will avoid errors, and he who has it not, will commit them in all kinds of writing.

“This Argument, as you have taken it from a most acute person, so I confess it carries much weight in it. But by using the word Judgment here indefinitely, you seem to have put a fallacy upon us: I grant he who has Judgment, that is, so profound, so strong, so infallible a judgment, that he needs no helps to keep it always poised and upright, will commit no faults either in rhyme or out of it. And on the other extreme, he who has a judgment so weak and crazed that no helps can correct or amend it, shall write scurvily out of Rhyme, and worse in it. But the first of these judgments is no where to be found, and the latter is not fit to write at all. To speak therefore of judgment as it is in the best Poets; they who have the greatest proportion of it,

want other helps than from it within. As for example, you would be loth to say, that he who was endued with a sound judgment had no need of History, Geography, or Moral Philosophy, to write correctly. Judgment is indeed the Master-workman in a Play: but he requires many subordinate hands, many tools to his assistance. And Verse I affirm to be one of these: 'Tis a Rule and line by which he keeps his building compact and even, which otherwise lawless imagination would raise either irregularly or loosely. At least if the Poet commits errors with this help, he would make greater and more without it: 'Tis (in short) a slow and painful, but the surest kind of working. Ovid whom you accuse for luxuriancy in Verse, had perhaps been farther guilty of it had he writ in Prose. And for your instance of Ben Jonson, who you say, writ exactly without the help of Rhyme; you are to remember 'tis only an aid to a luxuriant Fancy, which his was not: As he did not want imagination, so none ever said he had much to spare. Neither was verse then refined so much to be an help to that Age as it is to ours. Thus then the second thoughts being usually the best, as receiving the maturest digestion from judgment, and the last and most mature product of those thoughts being artful and labored verse, it may well be inferred, that verse is a great help to a luxuriant Fancy, and this is what that Argument which you opposed was to evince."

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 it 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 upon the water, which the Moon-beams played upon, 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 Piazzes they parted there; Eugenius and Lysideius to some pleasant appointment they had made, and Crites and Neander to their several Lodgings.

FINIS.