

# AGE OF DRYDEN SUMMARY

**John Dryden**, (born August 9 [August 19, New Style], 1631, Aldwinkle, Northamptonshire, England—died May 1 [May 12], 1700, London), English poet, dramatist, and literary critic who so dominated the literary scene of his day that it came to be known as the Age of Dryden.

The son of a country gentleman, Dryden grew up in the country. When he was 11 years old the Civil War broke out. Both his father's and mother's families sided with Parliament against the king, but Dryden's own sympathies in his youth are unknown.

About 1644 Dryden was admitted to Westminster School, where he received a predominantly classical education under the celebrated Richard Busby. His easy and lifelong familiarity with classical literature begun at Westminster later resulted in idiomatic English translations.

In 1650 he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, where he took his B.A. degree in 1654. What Dryden did between leaving the university in 1654 and the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 is not known with certainty. In 1659 his contribution to a memorial volume for Oliver Cromwell marked him as a poet worth watching. His “heroic stanzas” were mature, considered, sonorous, and sprinkled with those classical and scientific allusions that characterized his later verse. This kind of public poetry was always one of the things Dryden did best.

When in May 1660 Charles II was restored to the throne, Dryden joined the poets of the day in welcoming him, publishing in June Astraea Redux, a poem of more than 300 lines in rhymed couplets. For the coronation in 1661, he wrote *To His Sacred Majesty*. These two poems were designed to dignify and strengthen the monarchy and to invest the young monarch

with an aura of majesty, permanence, and even divinity. Thereafter, Dryden's ambitions and fortunes as a writer were shaped by his relationship with the monarchy. On December 1, 1663, he married Elizabeth Howard, the youngest daughter of Thomas Howard, 1st earl of Berkshire. In due course she bore him three sons.

Dryden's longest poem to date, *Annus Mirabilis* (1667), was a celebration of two victories by the English fleet over the Dutch and the Londoners' survival of the Great Fire of 1666. In this work Dryden was once again gilding the royal image and reinforcing the concept of a loyal nation united under the best of kings. It was hardly surprising that when the [poet laureate, Sir William Davenant](#), died in 1668, Dryden was appointed poet laureate in his place and two years later was appointed royal historiographer.

Soon after his restoration to the throne in 1660, Charles II granted two patents for theatres, which had been closed by the Puritans in 1642. Dryden soon joined the little band of dramatists who were writing new plays for the revived English theatre. His first [play](#), *The Wild Gallant*, a farcical [comedy](#) with some strokes of humour and a good deal of [licentious dialogue](#), was produced in 1663. It was a comparative failure, but in January 1664 he had some share in the success of *The Indian Queen*, a [heroic tragedy](#) in rhymed couplets in which he had [collaborated](#) with [Sir Robert Howard](#), his brother-in-law. Dryden was soon to successfully exploit this new and popular [genre](#), with its conflicts between love and honour and its lovely heroines before whose charms the blustering heroes sank down in awed submission. In the spring of 1665 Dryden had his own first outstanding success with *The Indian Emperour*, a play that was a sequel to *The Indian Queen*.

In 1667 Dryden had another remarkable hit with a tragicomedy, *Secret Love, or the Maiden Queen*, which appealed particularly to the king. The part of Florimel, a gay and witty maid of honour, was played to perfection by the king's latest mistress, Nell Gwynn. In

Florimel's rattling exchanges with Celadon, the Restoration aptitude for witty repartee reached a new level of accomplishment. In 1667 Dryden also reworked for the stage Molière's comedy *L'Étourdi* (translated by William Cavendish, duke of Newcastle) under the title *Sir Martin Mar-all*.

In 1668 Dryden published *Of Dramatick Poesie, an Essay*, a leisurely discussion between four contemporary writers of whom Dryden (as Neander) is one. This work is a defense of English drama against the champions of both ancient Classical drama and the Neoclassical French theatre; it is also an attempt to discover general principles of dramatic criticism. By deploying his disputants so as to break down the conventional oppositions of ancient and modern, French and English, Elizabethan and Restoration, Dryden deepens and complicates the discussion. This is the first substantial piece of modern dramatic criticism; it is sensible, judicious, and exploratory and combines general principles and analysis in a gracefully informal style. Dryden's approach in this and all his best criticism is characteristically speculative and shows the influence of detached scientific inquiry. The prefaces to his plays and translations over the next three decades were to constitute a substantial body of critical writing and reflection.

In 1668 Dryden agreed to write exclusively for Thomas Killigrew's company at the rate of three plays a year and became a shareholder entitled to one-tenth of the profits. Although Dryden averaged only a play a year, the contract apparently was mutually profitable. In June 1669 he gave the company *Tyrannick Love*, with its blustering and blaspheming hero Maximin. In December of the next year came the first part of *The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards*, followed by the second part about a month later. All three plays were highly successful; and in the character Almanzor, the intrepid hero of *The Conquest of Granada*, the theme of love and honour reached its climax. But the vein had now been almost worked out,

as seen in the 1671 production of that witty burlesque of heroic drama *The Rehearsal*, by George Villiers, 2nd duke of Buckingham, in which Dryden (Mr. Bayes) was the main satirical victim. *The Rehearsal* did not kill the heroic play, however; as late as November 1675, Dryden staged his last and most intelligent example of the genre, *Aureng-Zebe*. In this play he abandoned the use of rhymed couplets for that of [blank verse](#).

In writing those heroic plays, Dryden had been catering to an audience that was prepared to be stunned into admiration by drums and trumpets, rant and extravagance, stage battles, rich costumes, and exotic scenes. His abandonment of crowd-pleasing rant and bombast was symbolized in 1672 with his brilliant comedy [Marriage A-la-Mode](#), in which the Restoration battle of the sexes was given a sophisticated and civilized expression that only [Sir George Etherege](#) and [William Congreve](#) at their best would equal. Equally fine in a different mode was his [tragedy All for Love](#) (1677), based on Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and written in a flowing but controlled blank verse. He had earlier adapted *The Tempest* (1667), and later he reworked yet another Shakespeare play, *Troilus and Cressida* (1679). Dryden had now entered what may be called his Neoclassical period, and, if his new tragedy was not without some echoes of the old extravagance, it was admirably constructed, with the action developing naturally from situation and character.

By 1678 Dryden was at loggerheads with his fellow shareholders in the Killigrew company, which was in grave difficulties owing to mismanagement. Dryden offered his tragedy *Oedipus*, a collaboration with [Nathaniel Lee](#), to a rival theatre company and ceased to be a Killigrew shareholder.

Since the publication of *Annus Mirabilis* 12 years earlier, Dryden had given almost all his time to playwriting. If he had died in 1680, it is as a dramatist that he would be chiefly

remembered. Now, in the short space of two years, he was to make his name as the greatest verse satirist that [England](#) had so far produced. In 1681 the king's difficulties—arising from political misgivings that his brother, [James](#), the Roman Catholic duke of York, might succeed him—had come to a head. Led by the earl of [Shaftesbury](#), the Whig Party leaders had used the [Popish Plot](#) to try to exclude James in favour of [Charles](#)'s illegitimate Protestant son, the duke of [Monmouth](#). But the king's shrewd maneuvers eventually turned [public opinion](#) against the Whigs, and Shaftesbury was imprisoned on a charge of high treason.

As [poet laureate](#) in those critical months Dryden could not stand aside, and in November 1681 he came to the support of the king with his [Absalom and Achitophel](#), so drawing upon himself the wrath of the Whigs. Adopting as his framework the [Old Testament](#) story of King David (Charles II), his favourite son Absalom (Monmouth), and the false Achitophel (Shaftesbury), who persuaded Absalom to revolt against his father, Dryden gave a satirical version of the events of the past few years as seen from the point of view of the king and his Tory ministers and yet succeeded in maintaining the heroic tone suitable to the king and to the seriousness of the political situation. As anti-Whig [propaganda](#), ridiculing their leaders in a succession of ludicrous satirical portraits, Dryden's poem is a masterpiece of confident denunciation; as pro-Tory propaganda it is equally remarkable for its serene and persuasive affirmation. When a [London grand jury](#) refused to indict Shaftesbury for treason, his fellow Whigs voted him a medal. In response Dryden published early in 1682 *The Medall*, a work full of unsparing invective against the Whigs, prefaced by a vigorous and plainspoken prose "Epistle to the Whigs." In the same year, anonymously and apparently without Dryden's authority, there also appeared in print his famous extended lampoon, [Mac Flecknoe](#), written about four years earlier. What triggered this devastating attack on the Whig playwright [Thomas Shadwell](#) has never been satisfactorily explained; all that can be said is that in *Mac Flecknoe* Shadwell's abilities as a literary artist and critic are ridiculed so ludicrously and with

such good-humoured contempt that his reputation has suffered ever since. The basis of the satire, which represents Shadwell as a literary dunce, is the disagreement between him and Dryden over the quality of Ben Jonson's wit. Dryden thinks Jonson deficient in this quality, while Shadwell regards the Elizabethan playwright with uncritical reverence. This hilarious comic lampoon was both the first English mock-heroic poem and the immediate ancestor of Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad*.

In 1685, after the newly acceded king James II seemed to be moving to Catholic toleration, Dryden was received into the Roman Catholic church. In his longest poem, the beast fable *The Hind and the Panther* (1687), he argued the case for his adopted church against the Church of England and the sects. His earlier *Religio Laici* (1682) had argued in eloquent couplets for the consolations of Anglicanism and against unbelievers, Protestant dissenters, and Roman Catholics. Biographical debate about Dryden has often focused on his shifts of political and religious allegiance; critics, like his hostile contemporaries, have sometimes charged him with opportunism.

The abdication of James II in 1688 destroyed Dryden's political prospects, and he lost his laureateship to Shadwell. He turned to the theatre again. The tragedy *Don Sebastian* (1689) failed, but *Amphitryon* (1690) succeeded, helped by the music of Henry Purcell. Dryden collaborated with Purcell in a dramatic opera, *King Arthur* (1691), which also succeeded. His tragedy *Cleomenes* was long refused a license because of what was thought to be the politically dangerous material in it, and with the failure of the tragicomedy *Love Triumphant* in 1694, Dryden stopped writing for the stage.

In the 1680s and '90s Dryden supervised poetical miscellanies and translated the works of Juvenal and Persius for the publisher Jacob Tonson with success. In 1692 he published *Eleonora*, a long memorial poem commissioned for a handsome fee by the husband

of the Countess of Abingdon. But his great late work was his complete translation of [Virgil](#), contracted by Tonson in 1694 and published in 1697. Dryden was now the grand old man of English letters and was often seen at Will's Coffee-House chatting with younger writers. His last work for Tonson was *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700), which were mainly verse adaptations from the works of [Ovid](#), [Geoffrey Chaucer](#), and [Giovanni Boccaccio](#), introduced with a critical preface. He died in 1700 and was buried in [Westminster Abbey](#) between Chaucer and [Abraham Cowley](#) in the Poets' Corner.

Besides being the greatest English poet of the later 17th century, Dryden wrote almost 30 tragedies, comedies, and dramatic operas. He also made a valuable contribution in his commentaries on [poetry](#) and [drama](#), which are sufficiently extensive and original to entitle him to be considered, in the words of Dr. [Samuel Johnson](#), as “the father of English criticism.”

After Dryden's death his reputation remained high for the next 100 years, and even in the Romantic period the reaction against him was never so great as that against Alexander Pope. In the 20th century there was a notable revival of interest in his poems, plays, and criticism, and much scholarly work was done on them. In the late 20th century his reputation stood almost as high as at any time since his death.