BEFORE THE «CRITICK», JOHN DENNIS: THOMAS RYMER'S FIRST VOLLEY IN THE 'BATTLE OF THE HANDKERCHIEF'

Abstract – In 1693 Thomas Rymer, a barrister by education but critic by profession, published *A Short View of Tragedy*, a tract which still deserves attention mainly because, nearly a century before Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry*, it provides the first approach to a history of western literature. What shocked polite society at the time, however, was its savage attack on Shakespeare's *Othello* and on the playwright himself: the sixty pages devoted to a scene-by-scene analysis of the tragedy reveal an unusually arrogant attitude of scathing censure and sarcasm. Appealing to the reader's common sense and in close adherence to French formalist theory, Rymer criticises the play for being "full of improbabilities", with an "unsubstantial" plot, unnatural characters, vulgar, bombastic language, and utter disregard for the principles of poetic justice, eliciting not pity and fear but horror and disgust. He ends by pouring scorn on the role that such an insignificant item as a handkerchief performs in a play that would be more appropriately entitled *The Tragedy of the Handkerchief*, thus reiterating his previous point that the moral of the play, "a Bloody Farce, without salt or savour", was that wives should "look well to their linen". Savaging *Othello*, which Rymer had once defined the "choicest" of Shakespeare's plays, was tantamount to destroying Shakespeare himself. What could have lain at the origin of such a scathing attack? It might be that Rymer's "murderous" criticism against the acknowledged father of English drama was the unconscious repetition, on a literary level, of a tragedy involving Rymer's own family, when his elder brother had betrayed their father by bringing a charge against him, as a result of which the unfortunate man was hanged, drawn, and quartered.

This essay will sideline the Restoration «Critick» par excellence, John Dennis, to focus on another, less amiable man of letters, Thomas Rymer (1641-1713). His family had undergone a terrible trauma when Thomas was about twenty. Between 1662 and 1663 his father and elder brother were involved in plans for uprisings against the recently restored Stuart monarchy. The plots came to nothing and some ninety conspirators,

including the two Rymers, were caught. At this point a family drama was added to the political one: in prison Thomas' father was betrayed by his son and, as a consequence, sentenced to be «hanged, drawn and quartered» [1], while Thomas' brother, condemned to life imprisonment, was released two years later and lived a good old age. The events are never mentioned by Rymer or his opponents, yet they must have branded the young man, stimulated his interest in justice, cross-examination and disparagement, and in the long run inspired the ferocious attack he was eventually to level at Shakespeare.

In December 1692 Thomas published a work that stormed into the so-to-speak "half-schizophrenic" world of English Restoration, torn between past and present, between the impulse to be faithful to its Elizabethan, *Gothic* tradition with its marks of excess, irregularity and overwhelming power, and the desire to start afresh from the orderliness, educated elegance and polite rationality of French neoclassicism.

The work I am referring to is the disturbing tract *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693), which gained instant notoriety because it included a savage attack on *Othello*. One of the few Shakespearean plays still in repertory before the Civil War, *Othello* had been revived three times in 1660 and, together with *Julius Caesar*, *I Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, had become a cornerstone of the repertoire of the King's Company. Having acquired the status of a classic and being seen as a domestic drama, it had escaped the common Restoration practice of adaptation and rewriting, dictated as much by political and lucrative interests as by aesthetic ones. Except for a few emendations and cuts, the tragedy had remained «relatively unscathed» [2] and kept a strong hold on the audience thanks to the acting ability of Nicholas Burt, Charles Hart, Thomas Betterton and Samuel Sandford.

The *View* sheds light on two crucial cores of aesthetics in the 1690s: the diatribe concerning drama reform before the slashing attack by Jeremy Collier, the only English critic to echo Rymer [3], and the evaluation of Shakespeare, inevitable stumbling block in the tortuous path of Restoration dramatic theory.

Initially a barrister of good education and small means, then a Whig historian [4] and writer, Rymer was by passion and profession a critic until

[1]) Zimansky 1956, pp. x-xi.

[2]) Vaughan 1996, p. 93.

[3]) The French one being Voltaire in his *Lettres à l'Académie* (1774).

[4]) His *General Draught and Prospect of Government in Europe*, upholding the rights of parliaments against royal prerogatives, was issued in 1681. In the tense years of the Exclusion Crisis (1679-1681) the opposition, the newly called *Whigs*, produced a number of propaganda tracts aiming to prevent the accession of Charles' Catholic brother, James, and shatter the King's divine-right theory of government.

1692, when he took on the post of historiographer royal. The apparently *sine cura* employment soon became a burden, as it involved the task of copying and publishing all past treaties entered into by the English government. The project produced an imposing collection of records, *Foedera* (1704-1735), but absorbed all Rymer's energies and economic resources, thus putting an end to his critical writing.

In a period when criticism had already been promoted to the rank of *tenth* muse in Italy and France but was only just beginning to make its voice heard in England, for twenty years Rymer acted as a gentleman of letters who displayed vigour, «arrogance» [5] and erudition in the analysis of the nature and workings of drama.

As an admirer of the French neo-classical school of thought, he is a spokesman for formal, rationalist criticism as well as its interpreter and "adjuster". Like Rapin, he believes that the function of poetry is moral instruction, but emphasizes that its chief end is pleasure. He agrees with the French that art is subject to rules, but maintains – in disagreement with them and in conformity with most English critics, from Dryden to Temple, Addison, Steele and Dennis himself [6] – that the unities of time and place are inessential to drama, since they only make up its *mechanical part* [7]. Akin to natural laws and universal in their application, the rules are nothing else but nature reduced to method – «Nature methodized». Besides codifying the practice of the ancients and thus proving that nature and the ancients are one and the same, they embody the final expression of «common sense» – the sound reasonableness common to all ages that determines the excellence of a work of art without any strenuous exertion of wit or learning [8]. Rymer's theoretical frame also includes the doctrine of poetic justice as well as the principles of plot verisimilitude and decorum, requiring the characters' conformity either with *ideal* types, as the *ideals* of art would require, or with average ones, as demanded by the concept of art imitating nature. These points are all shared by Dennis, who adds to them another essential concept: the idea of genius, the importance of passions, the conviction that poetry combines passion and judgement.

Having been shaped by the French school, Rymer is convinced that poets need to be kept under control and that the critic's duty is to pass

[5]) Rymer's arrogance is stigmatized by Dryden in a letter to Dennis (Ward 1942, p. 72).

[6]) Hooker 1943, pp. lxx-lxxiii.

[7]) Rymer 1956, p. 18.

[8]) Rymer's concept that in critical judgments «common sense suffices» (*ibid.*), persuades Spingarn (1968, I, p. lxiii) to postulate the existence of an anti-neoclassical School of Sense, born in England with Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* (1671) and developed by Rymer himself.

judgment on them. Just as Rapin had remonstrated against some practices of the French theatre, Rymer wages war on Beaumont and Fletcher, Jonson and Shakespeare. Ready to attack the playwrights of the previous generation in the name of common sense, decorum and poetic justice, he is happy to swim against the tide.

The most blatant expression of Rymer's criticism lies in his savaging of *Othello* in the seventh chapter of the *View*. The attack had always sounded like a case of baleful animosity or an excess of ranting meant to shock polite society. Nowadays it is rather considered an outcome of sheer unresponsiveness to beauty, combined with a stubborn attachment to neoclassical theories, a rigid view of the critic's judge-like function, an analytical skill honed through years of exercise and an absolute «determination to follow the argument wherever it led» [9].

As a matter of fact, apart from rare tributes paid to individuals, Rymer's observations are often marked by outrageous notes of censure or sarcasm.

Even in his first, mildest essay, *Preface to the Translation of Rapin's Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics*, the highly metaphorical language, both pithy and energetic, leaves no doubt as to his aggressive attitude to criticism – a combination of watching, warring and judging, where critics are either raised to the rank of a Minos or downgraded to the level of a wolf or insect. Rymer's truly provocative vein materializes in his second work, *The Tragedies of the Last Age* (1677), praised by Dryden as «the best piece of Criticism in the English tongue» [10] but ridiculed by Wycherley [11] as tasteless tavern work. Without hesitation it dismisses the plots of most pre-Restoration tragedies as «*brutish* and often worse than *brutish*» [12] and «tears in Pieces» (to repeat Wycherley's metaphor) three plays by Beaumont and Fletcher, still staged with success. Given this premise it is obvious that Rymer's critical vein found its natural outlet in the seismic havoc of the *View*.

In fact, *A Short View of Tragedy* immediately triggered off public response. The first – and most interesting – reaction came from John Dennis himself, whose dialogue *The Impartiall Critick* shows an entertaining "give and take" between two friends who, first in a London street, then in an inn over generous draughts of "blushful Hippocrene" and finally at table in the privacy of their own homes, exhaustively discuss the main points of Rymer's book and poke fun at it.

After such negative reactions to his book, Rymer gained some grudging respect from his contemporaries on account of his coherence and

[9]) Alexander 1968, p. 67.
[10]) Ward 1942, p. 13.
[11]) Zimansky 1956, p. 193.
[12]) Rymer 1956, p. 18.

learning, but he went on to receive little appreciation from posterity. If T.S. Eliot in 1932 noticed that no «cogent refutation» of his objections to *Othello* had ever been advanced, George Saintsbury [13], reiterating Thomas Macaulay, defined him the worst critic he had ever come across: a radical verdict that most modern readers are more than willing to subscribe to when approaching the *View.* Ironically, Rymer is remembered not for enlightened appreciation but for sneering insensitiveness, not for bold intuitions but for scathing insults punctuated by the odd flash of insight.

According to some modern scholars, however, – Cannan being the most convinced of them – the *View* should not be dismissed as an infamous piece of badly-written criticism. Two reasons justify this viewpoint. First, the central chapters, II-VI, make up Rymer's pioneering attempt to write a history of literature. Though irritatingly garbled, they outline a chronological development of tragedy which starts from the classical era (Aeschylus), meanders through the Middle Ages with deviations into the domain of poetry and ends up in the Elizabethan age (*Gorboduc*), thus providing an *excursus* that is historically significant as a crude anticipation of Thomas Warton's seminal work, *The History of English Poetry* (1774-1781). Second, chapter one is not only the anachronistic plea to introduce the chorus into English drama that Dennis will ridicule. It is primarily a strong appeal to the government – with which Dennis himself will agree – to regulate, support economically and thus revitalize «the drooping stage», since the masterpieces produced in classical Greece and modern France prove that a supportive government policy is vital to the theatre. According to Cannan, in order to prod an unwilling William III into showing an interest in the theatre, promoting morality and correcting public response to drama, Rymer «expos[ed] the negative example of *Othello*, a play that he believed catered to the crudest audience tastes and exemplified the excesses of an unregulated stage» [14].

It is hard to say whether Rymer actually intended to make a proposal of this kind and convince the government to play its part by putting money into the theatre. It is even harder to say whether the attack on *Othello* was instrumental in this.

The *View* is made up of three sections. The first (the plea for drama to return to its origins) easily merges into the second (the sketchy history of tragedy) and the two could well serve Rymer's double aim as advanced by Cannan. The third, however, focusing on the scene-to-scene analysis of *Othello* followed by passing remarks on *Julius Caesar* and Jonson's *Catiline*, stands apart, only loosely connected to the others by the disdainful

[13]) On scholars' opinions of Rymer see Cannan 2001, pp. 207-208, and Zimansky 1956, pp. xlvii-li.

[14]) Cannan 2001, p. 16.

judgement, *In Tragoedia maxime claudicamus, vix levem consequimur umbram* [15]. The title of the tract itself, so neatly divided into two segments [16], corroborates the idea that a previously written section (chapts. VII-VIII) was appended to the new one (chapts. I-VI). Moreover, while the extravagant request to introduce the chorus into modern drama – which Dennis is the first to laugh at – finds a remote justification in his appeal to the English government, the sixty pages on *Othello* reveal no ideal principle, no *ultima ratio* coming to balance the defiant invective. They rather seem to be prompted by sheer destructiveness, carried out with heavy sarcasm, witty mockery and dry humour – all features in contrast with Dennis' benevolent half-smile – as well as with blatant racist spirit [17].

Othello, Rymer observes, the most popular Shakespearean tragedy, the one that «bears the Bell away» [18], is actually defective from all view-points. Everything is monstrous, unnatural and ludicrous: in other words, «[f]oul disproportion, thoughts unnatural» (*Oth.* 3.iii.237). The plot is «unsubstantial» as it depends on one event that the reckoning of time proves impossible but, as Rymer says with a sneer, the moral – warning ladies off eloping with Moors, advising wives to «look well to their Linnen» [19], teaching jealous husbands to search for «mathematical» proofs – is indeed «very instructive». The top scene, the one «that raises *Othello* above all other Tragedies on our Theatres» [20], wholly relies upon the leading actor's proficiency at «Grimace, Grins and Gesticulation». As to the scene where Othello watches the exchange between Iago and Cassio, it could be reasonably acted «in *Southwark* Fair» [21].

The violation of the unities is a minor fault, though it compels the reader to undertake an inter-act voyage at a time when there is «no *Moses* to bid the Waters *make way*» [22], and puzzles him with a palpable discrepancy in time, as the action covers less than two days, while several situations suggest a much longer time span.

The play is then full of «improbabilities». A girl of rank would never fall in love with a Negro, the *supersubtle venetians* [23] would never

[15]) Rymer 1970, p. 85.

[16]) *A Short View of Tragedy; Its Original, Excellency, and Corruption with some Reflections on «Shakespear», and other Practitioners for the Stage*.

[17]) «With us [in England] a Black-a-moor might rise to be a Trumpeter […]. With us a *Moor* might marry some little drab, or Small-coal Wench» (Rymer 1970, pp. 91-92). No surprise for us if we consider, for example, Stanley Kramer's film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1968).

[18]) Rymer 1970, p. 86.

[19]) *Ivi*, p. 89.

[20]) *Ivi*, p. 118.

[21]) *Ivi*, p. 126.

[22]) *Ivi*, p. 106.

[23]) *Ivi*, p. 91.

confer the title of General on a Moor and employ him against Muslim Turks; the «ridiculous» speech «I spake of most disastrous chances […]» (*Oth.* 1.iii.135) would never convince anyone; finally a woman in love would never joke while waiting for news of her husband's fate. Neither would a woman speak after being stifled to death.

Similarly the characters, both unnatural and inconsistent, afford the audience neither profit nor pleasure. Othello, a soldier, never shows his soldiership except when he kills himself. Iago, an «insinuating rascal» developing into a monster [24], intolerably contradicts the traditional image of the plain-dealing soldier. Desdemona is «a Fool» [25] and shows nothing «that is not below any Countrey Chamber-maid with us» [26]. Roderigo is a dupe, with no dramatic function but making «*Jago*'s hands […] the more in Blood» [27].

Being unnatural, the characters in *Othello* violate decorum, as their improper language shows. Iago's words to Brabantio are insulting without reason and betray the principle of the theatre as a «School of good manners» [28]; Cassio's lines to Montano at his arrival in Cyprus are bombastic and out of character; Othello's public speeches are tedious or inert: forced out of bed on his first night with Desdemona, he does not swear as a soldier would do but phlegmatically proceeds to investigate the riot.

Given these inconsistencies, the "expression" is senseless and unnatural. At their best, passages such as «O now for ever / Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content! […]» (*Oth.* 3.iii, 351) can only please for their «sound». To conclude,

> In the *Neighing* of an Horse, or in the *growling* of a Mastiff, there is a meaning, there is as lively expression, and, may I say, more humanity, than many times in the Tragical flights of *Shakespeare.* [29]

Yet the truly unforgivable circumstance of *Othello* is that by having innocents die it tramples on the principle of poetic justice through which catharsis is achieved – the strong point in Dennis' theories on drama – and therefore makes no contribution to the advancement of morality. Far from raising pity and fear, the tragedy elicits horror and disgust while making people doubt poetic Providence: «If this be our end, what boots it to be Vertuous?» [30].

[24]) *Ivi*, p. 95.
[25]) *Ivi*, p. 137.
[26]) *Ivi*, p. 91.
[27]) *Ibidem*.
[28]) *Ivi*, p. 100.
[29]) *Ivi*, pp. 95-96.
[30]) *Ivi*, p. 138.

Moreover, what marks the height of absurdity is that the murder is triggered off by a trifle, and what trifle! nothing more than a handkerchief.

> Had it been *Desdemona*'s Garter, the Sagacious Moor might have smelt a Rat: but the Handkerchief is so remote a trifle, no Booby, on this side *Mauritania*, could make any consequence from it. [31]

Well, as Desdemona must die because of a «napkin», «[w]hy was not this call'd the *Tragedy of the Handkerchief*?» [32].

From the killing of Desdemona onwards the play is all blood and butchery, «a Bloody Farce, without salt or savour» [33] that will leave the audience – the same that Shakespeare meant to shock and surprise – with disordered thoughts and perverted emotions.

A damning conclusion, indeed. Moreover, Rymer's repeated inaccuracies or deliberate alterations of the plot [34] show that he is determined to do anything to discredit the author, guilty of turning morality into mockery, and stigmatize the play.

Savaging *Othello*, which in *The Tragedies of the Last Age* he rates the «choicest» of Shakespeare's plays, was tantamount to destroying Shakespeare himself.

But why did Rymer rail so much against Shakespeare?

Some time before 1674 he had written an heroic tragedy, *Edgar*, that had never been staged and, when printed in 1677, was derided. Rymer thus had to resign himself to being a failed dramatist, unworthy descendant of a highly successful one. It may have been unconscious envy that dictated his dismissal of play and playwright. Be that as it may, the bitterness revealed in the *View* is so violent and "potentially" murderous that it sounds like the literary repetition – a sort of tragic *mise en abîme* – of an actual event. The accusation that Thomas levelled at the father of English drama shadows the charge that Rymer's elder brother brought against their "father", as a result of which the man was killed and literally torn to pieces.

Sure of his ideas and depth of learning, strong in his logic and irony, cynical to the point of impudence and caustic to the point of vulgarity, Rymer shows he is proud both of his faultfinding, which shocked and worried Dryden himself [35], and of his ability to attack.

[31]) *Ivi*, p. 140.
[32]) *Ivi*, p. 135.
[33]) *Ivi*, p. 146.
[34]) An example will suffice: Othello kills himself «to avoid a death the Law was about to inflict upon him» (*ivi*, p. 92).
[35]) Ward 1942, p. 14.

Everything and everyone is targeted in *Othell*o: plot, characters and language. All the same, while condemning the plot as improbable and the characters as unnatural, he reveals his disregard for Aristotle's comments on «plausibile impossibilities in plot and "consistently inconsistent" characters» [36]. While scoffing at the impossible adultery, he does not perceive that it is «an extremely interesting example of the Aristotelian principle that a likely impossibility is to be preferred to an unlikely possibility» [37]. Moreover, when denouncing Iago as an improbable soldier, he fails to realize that the tragedy rests on this very improbability; when underlining the absurdity of a drama based on a handkerchief, he misses the point that the trifling object is anything but a trifle.

Admittedly, some of Rymer's fastidious observations are shared by modern critics and his clever intuition about the double-time scheme anticipates John Wilson's [38] observations. Besides, in dismissing the time element as irrelevant, he makes some interesting critical pronouncements.

If his eagerness to teach induces Rymer to propose a «satisfactory» conclusion to the tragedy [39], his rationalism makes him deaf to its beauties and «insensitive to the ambiguities in human behavior» [40]. As if doomed to repeat himself over and over, as the case of *Julius Caesar* proves, he revels in judging. He also revels in carrying out his painstaking post-mortem on the body of *Othello* – a body whose resurrection he would never have expected.

Were they alive today, Rymer and Dennis would have much to talk about. At a loss to understand the overwhelming success of *Othello*, Rymer would ask aghast, «How come?». Dennis would then smile, safe in the knowledge that his response to Rymer proclaiming Shakespeare's genius in 1712 [41] – over fifty years before Johnson's *Preface* – had been abundantly vindicated by posterity.

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[36]) Grace 1975, p. 47.
[37]) Alexander 1968, p. 68.
[38]) Sohmer 2002, p. 215.
[39]) As in the *Tragedies of the Last Age* Rymer puts forward the plan of a tragedy dealing with the defeat of the *Armada* and develops it act by act, here he imagines how *Othello* could have conformed to poetic justice. At the ending Desdemona might have fainted, Othello might have thought her dead and, taken by remorse, have «honestly cut his throat» (Rymer 1970, p. 138). In this case the audience would «have gone home with a quiet mind, admiring the beauty of Providence» (*ibid*.).
[40]) Grace 1975, p. 47.
[41]) His collection of letters to George Granville came out under the title *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespear.*

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