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**ENGLISH CRITICISM IN THE TIME OF THE
RENAISSANCE**

No critical work worth mentioning appeared in England till the middle of the 16th century. It was only after the Renaissance, when the classical Greek and Latin treatises on criticism were made available to English scholars as they began to apply their minds to criticism in general. The first critics to do so were the three Cambridge friends Sir John Cheke, Roger Ascham, and Thomas Wilson. On the one hand, they were devoted scholars of the Classics, on the other; they were equally devoted to the native English tradition like the poetry of Chaucer. Thus, you should note that in their critical discussion, two things become apparent: On the one hand, they adore the classics as model for guidance, and on the other, they advocate the purity of the native tongue from foreign influences like Latin, French and Italian. One may also argue that the birth of Renaissance criticism begins with the recovery of classical texts, most notably, Giorgio Valla's Latin translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The work of Aristotle, especially *Poetics*, was the most important influence upon literary criticism until the late 18th century. Lodovico Castelvetro was one of the most influential Renaissance critics who wrote commentaries on Aristotle's *Poetics* in 1570.

English criticism, during the 16th and 17th centuries, passed through many distinct stages of development, which may be seen as the following:

- a. The first stage was characterised by a purely rhetorical study of literature, probably beginning with Leonard Coxe's *Arte or Crafte of Rhetoryke* (1524), a handbook for young students. This was followed by Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorike* (1553), a more extensive and certainly more original text than Coxe's. Warton calls it "the first book or system of criticism in our language." It was at this time that English writers for the first time began to appreciate form and style to be the distinguishing features of literature. This appreciation led to the formation of an English prose style.
- b. The second stage of English criticism—a period of classification and especially of metrical studies—commences with Gascoigne's *Notes of Instruction concerning the making of Verse*, published in 1575. Besides this brief pamphlet, this stage also

includes Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie*, the first systematic classification of poetic forms and subjects, and of Rhetorical figures; Bullokar's *Brief Grammar*, the first systematic treatise on English grammar; and Harvey's *Letters* and Webbe's *Discourse of English Poetrie*, the first systematic attempts to introduce classical metres into English poetry. This stage was characterised by the study and classification of the practical questions of language and versification. The study of the verse-forms introduced into England from Italy helped materially to perfect the external side of English poetry. The Italian prosodists thus became the masters of the English students of this era.

c. The third stage is characterised by the period of philosophical and apologetic criticism as exemplified by Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy*, published posthumously in 1595, though probably written about 1583. Harington's *Apologie of Poetrie*, Daniel's *Defence of Ryme*, and a few others, are also contemporary treatises. These works, as their titles indicate, are all defenses or apologies, and were called forth by the attacks of the Puritans on poetry, especially dramatic poetry, and the attacks of the classicists on English versification and rhyme. Sidney's contemporaries had studied the general theory of poetry, not for the purpose of enunciating rules or dogmas of criticism, but chiefly in order to defend the poetic art, and to understand its fundamental principles.

d. The fourth stage of English criticism, of which Ben Jonson is the main exponent, occupies the first half of the 17th century. The period that preceded, it was in general romantic in its tendencies. The literary criticism of the Renaissance developed classical ideas of unity of form and content into literary neoclassicism, proclaiming literature as central to culture, entrusting the poet and the author with a responsibility to preserve a long literary tradition which grew directly from the recovery of classic texts and notably from Giorgio Valla's translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* into Latin in 1498. By 1549, the text of *Poetics* had been rendered into Italian as well. From this period until the later part of the 18th century, Aristotle was once again the most imposing presence behind literary theory. The most influential of Renaissance critic was probably Lodovico Castelvetro, whose 1570 commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* encouraged the writing of tightly structured plays.

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