

JOHN DENNIS; HIS LIFE AND CRITICISM

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John Dennis; his life and criticism by H. G. Paul

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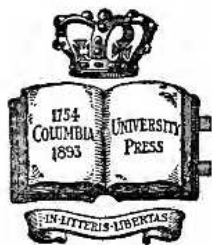


J. Van Gucht Sculp.

Mr. John Dennis

JOHN DENNIS
HIS LIFE AND CRITICISM

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A. H. THORNDIKE,
Secretary.

PREFACE

John Dennis's career was one of prolonged and various activities, covering a period of nearly a half century. He associated with some of the wits of the time of Charles II; he was on intimate terms with Dryden; he was a notable figure in the age of the so-called Augustans; and he lived to be pitied and befriended by Thomson and Mallet. The study of such a career of diverse and extended activity should be of value in promoting a clearer understanding of the literary relations of that interesting age. One of Dennis's manifold activities is worthy of especial consideration—namely, his labors as a critic. For nearly two centuries he has been remembered chiefly as the severe judge and foe of some of the great writers of the first quarter of the eighteenth century and has been cited as a horrible example of the race of critics by a host of biographers and admirers of Addison and Steele, of Swift and Pope. In the last twenty years, however, something of a reaction has begun in Dennis's favor; and while no one finds in his dramas or poems much that deserves immortality, many students of his period are coming to recognize in him "a serious and well equipped critic" and one whose beliefs are of especial interest as belonging to the period when English criticism was young. By many of his contemporaries Dennis was regarded as the foremost English critic of his times, and few or none of the writers of his age can be considered so fully representative of the manifold critical tendencies then struggling for supremacy.

In attempting this study of Dennis I have limited myself to what seemed best worth while, that is, to a discussion of his biography and of his work as a critic. In tracing the course of his life I have been obliged in large measure to break new ground, for practically the only study of Dennis's career is the useful but necessarily brief article in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The life itself seems to fall naturally into three fairly well marked divisions—the first to the death

of Dryden in 1700, the second through the first decade of the eighteenth century, and the last from 1710 to the time of his death in 1734, a period characterized by his well known literary quarrels. In dealing with Dennis as a judge of letters I have first outlined the chief critical tendencies of his time and have afterwards attempted to indicate his relations with these various schools as shown in his attitude toward the great questions then debated in the republic of letters. I have tried to point out how Dennis anticipated some ideas that have generally been credited to later critics, and how his appreciation of the great national writers was truer and keener than that of most of his contemporaries. I have also attempted to study the question of his influence upon subsequent criticism.

The subject of this dissertation was suggested to the writer by Professors W. P. Trent and A. H. Thorndike, of Columbia University, who have been unfailing in their helpfulness, giving generously of their time and scholarship and counsel through all the different stages of the growth of the thesis. The writer realizes only too keenly how inadequate must be any acknowledgment of his indebtedness to both of them. To Professor J. E. Spingarn thanks are due both for the books he loaned and for the still more valuable assistance of his advice from time to time and his suggestions for revision. Professor C. N. Greenough of Harvard kindly loaned some rare books from his private library; and Mr. Carl VanDoren called attention to one of Dennis's belated publications. Mr. William Roberts, Dennis's first careful biographer, has also encouraged the writer and offered some valuable hints. Acknowledgment is also due many librarians both in America and in England who have aided in the search for Dennis's scattered writings.