

## Johnson on Shakespeare- The Preface, a Unique Critical Document

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### Abstract

Johnson led Shakespearean criticism, back from paths that led to nowhere, and suggested directions in which discoveries might be made. He was the first to emphasise the historical and comparative point of view in criticism. He says in the Preface, "every man's performances, to be rightly estimated, must be compared with the state of the age in which he lived and with his own particular opportunities." It was he who, "stemmed the tide of rash emendation, and the ebb which began with him has continued ever since. With great shrewdness and acuteness, he states in the Preface that, "they who had the copy before their eyes were more likely to read it right than we who read it only by imagination." Therefore, the reading of the earliest editions must be true, and it should not be disturbed without sufficient reason.

**Key words:** Realism, unities, defence, psychology, dogma

### Introduction

It was quiet early in his literary career that Johnson began to take interest in Shakespeare. In 1745, he published Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth which was warmly praised by no less a critic than Warburton. Since this date he continued to brood over a new edition of the plays of Shakespeare. His Proposals for a new edition of the works of Shakespeare, published in 1756, are magnificent in their range and discernment." He explains the entire duty of an editor and critic of Shakespeare ; the complete collation of the early editions, the elucidation of obscurities, the comparison of Shakespeare's works with other dramatists, both ancient and modern, etc. He originally intended to bring out the edition in 1757, but indolence, interruptions and other difficulties came in the way, and the work could be published only in 1765. He had worked over the edition for full nine years, and its Preface has been warmly praised by all. Adam Smith styles it, "the most manly piece of criticism that was ever published in any country", John Bailey praises it saying that the world cannot, "show any sixty pages about Shakespeare exhibiting so much truth and wisdom as these". Augustine Birrell is equally warm in his eulogy when he writes, "nobody else has ever written about Shakespeare one-half so entertainingly."

## **Preface to Shakespeare : Brief Synopsis**

### **(A) Truth to Nature-Realism---Practical wisdom-Knowledge of human psychology-Characterisation**

1. Shakespeare is great because in his work there is a just representation of general human nature. His characters are the faithful representations of humanity. He deals with passions and principles which are common to humanity. His characters are universal, but they are individual also. The speech of one cannot be placed in the mouth of another, and they can easily be differentiated from each other by their speeches.

They are also true to the age, sex or profession to which they belong. They are also true to type.

2. His works are a storehouse of practical axioms and domestic wisdom. From them can be formulated a philosophy of life of great practical value in real life.

3. That his plays are a just representation of human nature is also seen in the fact that love is not all in all in his plays. Love is only one of the many passions and as his plays mirror life, they represent other passions as well. Undue importance is not attached to any one passion.

4. His characters are not exaggerated : neither they have unexampled excellence nor depravity, they have the common feelings and virtues of humanity. He has no heroes, but only human beings. They all act and think in the way in which the reader himself would act and think under the circumstances. "Even when the agency is supernatural, the dialogue is level with life." Shakespeare thus familiarises the wonderful.

5. Thus his plays increase our knowledge of human nature. He presents human sentiments in human language, from his plays even a hermit may estimate the transactions of the world.

6. His adherence to general human nature has exposed him to some criticism, for his Romans or kings are human beings first and kings and Romans afterwards. They are true to human nature, though in petty matters they may not agree with our conception of kings and Romans.

### **(B) Tragi-Comedy-Johnson's Defence of It**

Shakespeare has been much criticized for mixing comic and tragic scenes. But Johnson defends him as follows :

1. In this respect also he is true to nature. In real life also there is a mingling of the good and evil, joy and sorrow, tears and smiles and so in mixing tragedy and comedy Shakespeare merely holds a mirror to nature. This may be against rules but "there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature".

2. Tragi-comedy is nearer to life than either tragedy or comedy, and so it combines within itself the pleasure as well as the instruction of both. In tragi.comedy the high and the low combine both for instruction and pleasure.,

3. The interchange of the serious and the gay, of the comic and tragic, does not interrupt the progress of the passions, i.e. it does not result in any weakening of effect.

4. Moreover, it should be remembered that all pleasure consists in variety. Tragi-comedy can satisfy a greater variety of tastes, and continued, "melancholy is often not pleasing". Shakespeare can always move whether to tears or to laughter.

### **(C) Shakespeare's Comic Genius–Faults of His Tragedies**

1. Comedy came natural to him, and not tragedy. In tragedy he writes with great appearance of toil and study what is written at last with little felicity ; but in comic scenes he seems to produce without labour what no labour can improve. In his tragic scenes, there is something always wanting, but his comedy often surpasses expectation or desire.' "His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy to be instinct".

2. His comic scenes are natural and, therefore, durable ; hence this popularity has not suffered with the passing of time.

3. The language of his comic scenes is the language of real life neither gross nor over-refinement, and hence it has not grown obsolete. His language is nearer to us than that of any other poet of his age. He is one of the great original masters of the language.

### **(D) Faults of Shakespeare**

Shakespeare has serious faults, serious enough to obscure his many excellencies :

1. He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct that he seems to write without any moral purpose. There is no poetic justice in his plays. This fault cannot be excused by the barbarity of his age, for justice is a virtue independent of time and place. It is the duty of a writer to make the world better.

2. His plots are loosely formed. A very little thought would have improved them. He follows the easiest path and neglects the opportunities of instruction which his plots offer him.

The later parts of his plays are often neglected, as if he shortened the labour" to snatch the profits. His catastrophes often seem forced and improbable.

3. There are many faults of chronology and many anachronisms in his plays. However, in this respect Shakespeare alone was not at fault, it was a fault common to the age ; Sidney in his *Arcadia* is also guilty of such faults.

4. Often his jokes are gross and licentious. This might have been a fault of age, but there must have been other forms of gaiety as well, and it is a writer's duty to represent the best.

5. In his narration there is much pomp of diction and *cumlocution*. Narration in drama is always tedious, and so it should be brief, rapid and to the point. His set speeches are cold and weak. They are often verbose, 'being too large for the thought. Trivial ideas are clothed in sonorous epithets. There is disproportionate pomp of diction and bombast.

6. What he does best, he soon ceases to do. The readers are disappointed to find him falling down at moments of highest excellence. Some contemptible conceit spoils the effect of his pathetic and tragic scenes.

7. He is too fond of puns and quibbles which frequently engulf him in the mire. For a pun he sacrifices reason, propriety and truth.

#### **(E) The Unities : Johnson's Defence**

1. His histories being neither comedies nor tragedies are not subject to the 'classic' rules of criticism which were devised for tragedies and comedies. The only Unity they need is consistency and naturalness in character, and this Shakespeare has imparted to them.

2. In his other works, he has well maintained the Unity of action. He is the poet of nature, "and his plots have the complexity and variety of nature. There might also be certain incidents which are superfluous. But his plots have a beginning, a middle, and an end one event is logically connected with another, and the plot makes gradual advances towards the denouement.

3. He shows no regard for the unities of Time and Place, and in the opinion of Johnson, these unities have given more trouble to the poet than pleasure to the auditor

The observance of the Unity of time and place is considered necessary in the interest of the credibility of the drama. It is said that fiction should be as near to reality as possible.

But it is wrong to suppose that any dramatic performance is credited with reality. When a spectator can imagine the stage to be Alexandria and the actors to be Antony and Cleopatra, he can surely imagine much more. Drama is a delusion and delusion has no limits. The spectators do not count the clock or look at the calendar. They are all in their senses, they know the stage is a stage, and the actors are actors. There, therefore, is no absurdity in showing different actions at different places. If they can imagine the stage to be Athens, they can also imagine it to be Sicily.

The Unity of time also has no validity. A drama imitates successive actions, and just as they may be represented at successive places, so also they may be represented at different period, separated by several years. The only condition is that the events so represented should be connected with each other with nothing but time intervening between them. "In contemplation we easily connect the time of real actions, and, therefore, willingly permit it to be contracted when we only see their imitations." Just as the reader of a book does not demand any adherence to the unities, so also the spectator does not demand it.

"Drama moves us not because it is credited; but because it makes us feel that the evils which are represented may happen to ourselves." (In other words they must be possible evils). "Imitations produce pain or pleasure, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind."

Unity of action alone is essential, the other two unities arise from false assumptions and circumscribe the drama and lessen its variety. Hence, it is good that Shakespeare violates them. Their violation becomes his comprehensive genius.

To conclude : The unities are not essential to drama. Their violation often results in variety and instruction. The rules may be against Johnson but he justifies Shakespeare on grounds of nearness to life and nature.

#### **(F) Shakespeare Justified by Historical Context**

Dr. Johnson's sound commonsense and intelligence are seen in the way by which he justifies Shakespeare by judging him with reference to his age. Hero-worship does not blind him to his faults, but he knows that many of his faults are the faults of his age. (Thus he is often ungrammatical and verbose). The nation was in its infancy, yet struggling to emerge from barbarity. It believed in (1) the magic and the supernatural, hence Shakespeare's use of the marvellous in his plays. (2) It was not interested in narration or declamation, whatever may be its merits, but it wanted event and incident, thrill and sensation. Hence it is that Shakespeare's plots are crowded with incident. (3) Shakespeare has borrowed his plots from popular novels, from history, or from such translations were known to the people, for an entirely novel plot would have taxed their brains and confused them. His audiences would not have followed it in the theatre. But such is Shakespeare's skill that he always succeeds in creating suspense and exciting the curiosity. (4) There are many extravagancies in his plays, but they are justified by the requirement of his audiences. (G) Merits of Shakespeare—Their Secret—His Achievement

Shakespeare's plays are pure gold, they have many excellencies. It is a measure of Shakespeare's genius that he could achieve so much without the advantage of any education, and despite poverty and other obstacles and hindrances. The excellencies in his works result not from a study of books, but from his keen observation of life and nature, so much so that his plays can increase our knowledge of human nature. Maxims of much practical wisdom are scattered all over his

works. Dr. Johnson quotes Dryden with approval that he was, "naturally learned". He does not copy others but writes from his own observation.

Character and dialogue were not known in the age, he introduced them both and in some of his happiest scenes carried them to perfection. In his age, the study of mankind was superficial. Only actions were studied and causes were omitted. Shakespeare studies those causes.

He also perfected the English blank verse, imparted to it diversity and flexibility and brought it nearer to the language of prose are that of every day conversation. With Spenser, he discovered the harmony of the English tongue, and imparted to it both softness and vigour.

### **(H) The Problems of Shakespeare Emendation-Johnson's Warning**

Johnson's remarks on the emendation of the texts of Shakespeare's plays also reveal his sound commonsense. He is against any hasty emendation (i.e. correction, modification, etc). Conjectural emendation should only be given by way of marginal notes, and the text should not be corrupted in this way. Many of the so-called obscure passages can be explained away with reference to the customs, manners, sports, etc., of the age, and efforts should be made to explain them in this way. As a general rule, the copy which is nearest to Shakespeare must be accepted as the correct one. Those who had the copy before them while preparing an edition have greater chances of being in the right.

Further, Dr. Johnson's commonsense is seen in the advice that a play of Shakespeare should be read as a whole, for a concentration on particular passages is likely to weaken the effect of the whole. Parts should be examined only after the whole has been surveyed.

The Critical Value of the Preface'-its many meritsits place in the history of Shakespearean Criticism Some Blemishes

The Preface is a classic of criticism. It displays all Johnson's gifts at their best : the lucidity, the virile energy, the individuality of his style ; his unique power of first placing himself on the level of the plain man and then lifting the plain man to his sturdy commonsense and discernment; and his massive knowledge of English language and literature. Much of the great Cham's criticism is marred by his literary, personal, religious and political prejudices, as in the case of Milton, but while dealing with Shakespeare he rises above all such narrow-mindedness and is fair and impartial in his judgment. There is, no doubt, that occasionally his criticism is vitiated by a singular perverseness or incapacity. For example, he shows a surprising insensibility to the dramatists higher flights of imagination and poetic gifts. Instead of admiring the beauty of his descriptive passages, he finds them dull and monotonous. He is wrong-headed enough to write that his comedies are superior to his tragedies which he seems to write laboriously and painstakingly, and not with natural ease and grace, and that the evolution of the tragic emotions

of pity and terror is frequently interrupted. But such blemishes are only rare ; on the whole contact with the world's immortal poet inspires him with even more than his usual sanity, and he writes as with a pen of fire.

### **Freedom from Classical Dogma**

(1) The Unities : In his criticism of Shakespeare, Dr. Johnson breaks entirely free from the shackles of classical dogma and tradition. In an age of classicism, when everything was judged by certain set rules derived from the ancients, he dismisses the claims of the classical unities of Time and Place as being necessary to create dramatic illusion. He tests them by fact and experience and finds that the unity is required not for the sake of "deceiving the spectators, which is impossible, but for the sake of bringing order into chaos, art into nature, and the immensity of life within limits that can be compassed by the powers of the human mind." He finds the unities of Time and Place as sheer imposters, for, writes, he, "the truth is that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first Act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and the players only players", and further that, "the delight proceeds from our consciousness of fiction : if we thought murders and treasons real, they would please no more.'

(2) Justification of Tragi-Comedy : Another specially famous passage, in an essay full of matter from first to last, is Johnson's justification of the dramatist's habitual mixing of the tragic and the comic. Johnson knew that this was against the rules, but he appeals from books to nature and finds that, "pleasure consists in variety", and that tragedy becomes all the more grim by a touch of the comic. Shakespeare was imitating life and nature when he mixed tragedy with comedy. Raleigh, praising Johnson in this connection, writes, "he passes over to the side of the enemy and almost becomes a romantic".

(3) Appreciation of Shakespeare's Merits : What is the secret of Shakespeare's greatness, permanence and universality of appeal ? "He tries Shakespeare", says John Bailey, "by the tests of time, of nature, of universality, and finds him supreme in all". "This, therefore, is the praise of Shakespeare" he writes, "that his drama is the mirror of life". The dramatist is great because he holds a mirror to nature, and passes from a representation of the particular to that of the general. "He eschewed, "particular manners", and took up, "representation of general nature". His characters, for example, are moved by passions common to all humanity. "In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual ; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species". Moreover, his personages are real human beings, and not improbable and fantastic beings from some other world. The language they speak is the language of ordinary Elizabethan men and women, and not artificial or fantastic invention of the author. Hence it is that there is so much of colloquialism in Shakespeare's playe.

Johnson also has the discernment to know that, "all pleasure consists in variety", and points out that the appeal of Shakespeare is so universal because his themes and characters are so varied. While the love motif predominates in the works of other contemporary dramatists: it, "has little

operation in the drama of a poet (Shakespeare) who caught his idea from the living world." The learned critic then proceeds to analyse the motif of some of his principal dramatic personages and finds that Macbeth is moved by ambition, Brutus by patriotism, Othello by jealousy, and King Lear by affection. In this way, his personages and themes are as varied as life itself; there are many plays in which the love interest hardly appears. In thus minimising the importance of love on the sum of life, Johnson anticipates Bernard Shaw. The literary dictator of the 18th century also praises Shakespeare's supernatural characters and says they are so vivid and real for, "Shakespeare approximates the remote, and familiarises the wonderful", or, in the words of Shelley, he makes the unfamiliar look familiar.

Having thus tried Shakespeare by the tests of truth and universality, Johnson pronounces him a, "transcendent and unbounded genius". And still there are critics who say that Johnson's criticism of Shakespeare is merely a lifeless application of mechanical rules.

### **Balanced View-Faults of Shakespeare**

The fact is that just as Johnson could rise above a slavish adherence to classical traditions, he could also rise above blind hero worship. Even in the age of Johnson, Shakespeare worship had become the order of the day, and any criticism of the Bard of Avon or even a mention of his faults was regarded as sacrilege: "Discipleship is a necessary stage in the study of any great poet; it is not a necessary qualification of the mature critic" (Raleigh). Johnson does not write himself down of the tribe of Shakespeare; there is nothing sectarian about his praise of the dramatist. He is never hyperbolic, like the romantics, whose panegyrics often have a touch of insincerity. That is why his criticism is often called cold. He writes like an independent man of letters and with great boldness and foresight proceeds to enumerate the faults of Shakespeare. These faults he finds are owing to two causes: (a) carelessness (b) excess of conceit. "The detailed analysis of the faults", says Raleigh, "is a fine piece of criticism, and has never been seriously challenged."

His account of the principal causes of Shakespeare's obscurities has never been bettered. These obscurities, according to the critic, mainly arise from,

- (a) the careless manner of publication.
- (b) the shifting fashions and grammatical licence of Elizabethan English.
- (c) the use of colloquial English.
- (d) the use of many allusions, references, etc., to topical events and personalities.
- (e) the rapid flow of ideas which often hurries him to a second thought before the first has been fully explained.



Thus many of Shakespeare's obscurities belong either to the age or to the necessities of stagecraft and not to the man. opinion”, concludes Johnson, “very few of his lines were difficult to his audience, and that he used such expressions as were then common, though the paucity of contemporary writers makes them now seem peculiar." Johnson's Services to Shakespeare

The object of all criticism is to make the obscure and the confused, clear and understood and it is this service which Johnson has performed to Shakespeare. Most of the really difficult passages in his dramas are obscure not from the rarity of words used, but from the confused and rapid syntax. “Johnson's strong grasp of the main thread of the discourse, his sound sense, and his wide knowledge of humanity, enable him, 'in a hundred passages, to go straight to Shakespeare's meanings" (Raleigh). Whole pages of complicated and minute controversy are often rendered useless by the few brief sentences which recall the reader's attention to the main drift, or remind him of some perfectly obvious circumstance. Often in passing, he has dropped a seed which has ripened in other minds to the great increase of our knowledge. For example, he has emphasised that, “Shakespeare has more allusions than other poets to the traditions and superstitions of the vulgar, which must there. fore he traced before he can be understood." Few critical seeds have had a larger growth than this one.

In the same way, he directed Shakespearean criticism along right lines when he said that for the meaning of many of his passages we must look, "among the sports of the fields". All this has done much to clear away many a obscurity from the works of the world's immortal poet.

## Conclusion

In short, to quote John Bailey again, "Shakespeare has had subtler and more poetical critics than Johnson ; but no one has equalled the insight, sobriety, lucidity and finality which Johnson shows in his own field." Johnson's work on Shakespeare has not been superseded. “He has been depreciated and neglected ever since the 19th century brought in the new aesthetic and philosophical criticism. The 20th century, it seems likely, will treat him ‘more respectfully”— (Raleigh). A general estimate of Johnson as literary critic-his achievement-permanent value of his criticism-his limitations-his real greatness.

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