

Dr. Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* is a classic of literary criticism. It displays all Johnson's gifts at their best—the lucidity, the virile energy, the individuality of his style; his sturdy commonsense and discernment; and his massive knowledge of the English language and literature. In his criticism of Shakespeare he is above his usual political, personal, religious and literary prejudices.

His judgement here is impartial and objective. He mentions both the merits and faults of Shakespeare like a true critic. He is very honest and sincere in his estimate of Shakespeare. He is able to free himself from the shackles of classical dogma and tradition. In an age of classicism he dismisses the classical concepts of the unities of Time and Place. He tests Shakespeare by fact and experience, by the test of time, nature and universality. His defence of tragi-comedy is superb and still unsurpassed. He has excelled his *guru* Dryden. He finds Shakespeare great because he holds a mirror to nature. In minimizing the importance of love on the sum of life, Johnson anticipates Shaw.

His enumeration of faults in Shakespeare in itself is a classic piece of criticism. 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.” Shakespeare's obscurities 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 the necessities of stagecraft and not to the man. “In my opinion,” concludes Johnson, “very few of his lines were difficult to his audience, and that he uses such expressions as were then common, though the paucity of contemporary writers makes them now seem peculiar.

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. “Johnson's strong grasp of the main thread of the discourse, his sound sense, and his wide knowledge of humanity, enables him, in a hundred passages, to go straight to Shakespeare's meanings.” (Raleigh). 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 emphasize 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 in imagination.” Therefore, the readings of the earliest editions must be true, and should not be disturbed without sufficient reason.

In short, to quote John Bailey again, "Shakespeare has had subtler and more poetic art 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).

"Johnson's *Preface*" writes E. E. Halliday, "is remarkable not so much for what it says as for what it is, the judicial summing up of the opinion of a century; it is the impartial estimate of Shakespeare's virtues and defects by a powerful mind anxious not to let his prejudices prevent the defects as he saw them from weighing too lightly in the balance. It is the final verdict of an epoch."

There are a few limitations of the *Preface* too. Johnson could not fathom the depths of Shakespeare's poetic genius. Nor could he think of the psychological subtleties of his characterization. He was equally deaf to "the overtones of Shakespeare's poetry at its most sublime. His criticism of Shakespeare's verbal quibbling shows the deficiency of his perceptive powers. The mystery of a Shakespearean tragedy was beyond the reach of his common sense. No wonder then if he feels that Shakespeare was at his best in comedy; 'In tragedy he often writes with great appearance of toil and study, what is written at last with little felicity; but in his comic scenes, he seems to produce without labour, what no labour can improve.' He could not see "how truth may be stated in myth or symbol, how *The Tempest* and *Winter's Tale*, for instance, are more than pleasant romantic pieces: significantly, he says of the latter that 'with all its absurdities, it is very entertaining. The limitations of his critical sensibility are nowhere more prominent than in his complaint that Shakespeare "seems to write without any moral purpose." He fails to see the hidden morals of Shakespeare's plays; to him only the explicitly stated morals are the only morals. Thus some of the most conspicuous virtues of Shakespeare, for example, his objectivity and his highly individualised treatment of his dramatic characters, are treated by Johnson as his "defect." These defects are certainly not Shakespeare's, but Johnson's.

But these shortcomings do not mar the basic merits of his *Preface*. His *Preface* is as immortal as the plays of Shakespeare. They demonstrate to the best his mature and profound sense of the human situation, his study and erudition. The tests of Shakespeare provided by him are valid even today.

Eighteenth-century writer Samuel Johnson ((1709-1784) is one of the most significant figures in English literature. His fame is due in part to a widely read biography of him, written by his friend James Boswell and published in 1791. Although probably best known for compiling his celebrated dictionary, Johnson was an extremely prolific writer who worked in a variety of fields and forms.

Chief Critical Approaches of Dr. Johnson are:

Johnson tried teaching and later organized a school in Lichfield. His educational ventures were not successful, however, although one of his students, David Garrick, later famous as an actor, became a lifelong friend.

Johnson, having given up teaching, went to London to try the literary life. Thus began a long period of hack writing for the *Gentleman's Magazine*.

He founded his own periodical, *The Rambler*, in which he published, between 1750 and 1752, a considerable number of eloquent, insightful essays on literature, criticism, and moral

Beginning in 1747, while busy with other kinds of writing and always burdened with poverty, Johnson was also at work on a major project—compiling a dictionary commissioned by a group of booksellers. After more than eight years in preparation, the *Dictionary of the English Language* appeared in 1755. This remarkable work contains about 40,000 entries elucidated by vivid, idiosyncratic, still-quoted definitions and by an extraordinary range of illustrative examples.

Johnson published another periodical, *The Idler*, between 1758 and 1760.

In 1764 he and the eminent English portraitist Sir Joshua Reynolds founded the Literary Club; its membership included such luminaries as Garrick, the statesman Edmund Burke, the playwrights Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and a young Scottish lawyer, James Boswell.

Johnson's last major work, *The Lives of the English Poets*, was begun in 1778, when he was nearly 70 years old, and completed—in ten volumes—in 1781. The work is a distinctive blend of biography and literary criticism.

Johnson's points to remember in Preface to Shakespeare

Shakespeare's characters are a just representation of human nature as they deal with passions and principles which are common to humanity. They are also true to the age, sex, profession to which they belong and hence the speech of one cannot be put in the mouth of another. His characters are not exaggerated. Even when the agency is supernatural, the dialogue is level with life.

Shakespeare's plays are a storehouse of practical wisdom and from them can be formulated a philosophy of life. Moreover, his plays represent the different passions and not love alone. In this, his plays mirror life.

Shakespeare's use of tragic comedy: Shakespeare has been much criticized for mixing tragedy and comedy, but Johnson defends him in this. Johnson says that in mixing tragedy and comedy, Shakespeare has been true to nature, because even in real life there is a mingling of good and evil, joy and sorrow, tears and smiles etc. this may be against the classical rules, but there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature. Moreover, tragic-comedy being nearer to life combines within itself the pleasure and instruction of both tragedy and comedy.

Shakespeare's use of tragicomedy does not weaken the effect of a tragedy because it does not interrupt the progress of passions. In fact, Shakespeare knew that pleasure consisted in variety. Continued melancholy or grief is often not pleasing. Shakespeare had the power to move, whether to tears or laughter.

Shakespeare's comic genius: Johnson says that comedy came natural to Shakespeare. He seems to produce his comic scenes without much labour, and these

scenes are durable and hence their popularity has not suffered with the passing of time. The language of his comic scenes is the language of real life which is neither gross nor over refined, and hence it has not grown obsolete.

Shakespeare writes tragedies with great appearance of toil and study, but there is always something wanting in his tragic scenes. His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy instinct.

Shakespeare's histories are neither tragedy nor comedy and hence he is not required to follow classical rules of unities. The only unity he needs to maintain in his histories is the consistency and naturalness in his characters and this he does so faithfully. In his other works, he has well maintained the unity of action. His plots have the variety and complexity of nature, but have a beginning, middle and an end, and one event is logically connected with another, and the plot makes gradual advancement towards the denouement.

Shakespeare shows no regard for the unities of Time and place, and according to Johnson, these have troubled the poet more than it has pleased his audience. The observance of these unities is considered necessary to provide credibility to the drama. But, any fiction can never be real, and the audience knows this. If 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. Therefore, there is no absurdity in showing different actions in different places.

As regards the unity of Time, Shakespeare says that 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 days. The only condition is that the events must be connected with each other.

Johnson further says that drama moves us not because we think it is real, but because it makes us feel that the evils represented may happen to ourselves. Imitations produce pleasure or pain, not because they are mistaken for reality, but because they bring realities to mind. Therefore, unity of Action alone is sufficient, and the other two unities arise from false assumptions. Hence it is good that Shakespeare violates them.

Faults of Shakespeare: Shakespeare writes without moral purpose and is more careful to please than to instruct. 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.

Next, his plots are loosely formed, and only a little attention would have improved them. He neglects opportunities of instruction that his plots offer, in fact, he very often neglects the later parts of his plays and so his catastrophes often seem forced and improbable.

There are many faults of chronology and many anachronisms in his play.

His jokes are often gross and licentious. In his narration, there is much pomp of diction and circumlocution. Narration in his dramas is often tedious. His set speeches are cold and weak. They are often verbose and too large for thought. Trivial ideas are clothed in sonorous epithets. He is too fond of puns and quibbles which engulf him in mire. For a pun, he sacrifices reason, propriety and truth. He often fails at moments of great excellence. Some contemptible conceit spoils the effect of his pathetic and tragic scenes.

Merits of Shakespeare: He perfected the blank verse, imparted to it diversity and flexibility and brought it nearer to the language of prose.