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Samuel Johnson and his "Preface to Shakespeare" : A Critical Study

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Abstract. Between 1750 and 1765 there appeared a remarkable body of criticism—the work of Lowth and Young of Gray, the Wartons and Hurd—works which suggested a fresh approach concerned with the art of interpreting literature and by the development and refining of contemporary taste and the established neo-classical possession was gradually shaken and undermined. So, we have the growing challenge to that body of neo-classical doctrine which had originated in France and was generally, if tacitly, accepted in England as the orthodox literary creed. Signs of independence, already betrayed by Addison, Pope, and others, were succeeded by a widening outlooks where literature was concerned, a development inspired partly by the influence by "Longinus" and certain French writers, by an awakening merits of earlier native literature and by notable advance in the appreciation of Shakespeare's art. And it yet remained to realize the actual part played by Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-84) in this general development. His importance as literary dictator of the age has since been freely and generally recognized. Yet his critical work has been subjected to a surprising and confusing variety of estimates. He has been hailed, for instance, as a champion of established conventions as the high priest of classicism. Johnson now raises a whole question a new but from a somewhat different angle. Treating the enquiry in more ample and reasoned fashioned, he deals at length, first, which current critical abuses and then supplies in addition certain positive view. To the question of what was wrong with contemporary criticism, he returns again and again, more especially in "the Rambler" and "Idler papers". In short, in the period represented by Dryden, Addison, Gray, the Wartons, Johnson and the rest, a new aesthetic was in the making and the foundations of 19th century criticism were being laid.

Keywords: Neo-classical; conventions; eccentric; dictatorship, esteem; stability, endurance.

An integral dimension of Johnson's literary output and personality was his literary criticism which was to have a huge impact on English letters. His famous "Preface" to and edition of Shakespeare's plays played a large part in establishing Shakespeare's reputation. His critical insights were witty, acerbic provocative, sometimes radical and always grounded on the enormous range of reading. Three basic concerns informs this

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preface: how a poet's reputation is established; the poet's relation to nature; and the relative virtues of nature and experience of life as against a reliance on principles established by criticism and convention. Johnson kicks off his preface by intervening in the debate on the relative virtues of ancient and modern writers. He affirms that the excellence of the ancient authors is based on a "gradual and comparative" estimate, as tested by "observation and experience". If we judge Shakespeare by these criteria - "length of duration and continuance of esteem"- we are justified, in allowing Shakespeare "to assume the dignity of the ancient"(60-61), since this reputation has survived the customs, opinions, and circumstances of his time.

Inquiring into the reasons behind the Shakespeare's enduring success, Johnson makes an important general statement, "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representation of general nature"(61). Once again, by general nature, Johnson refers to the avoidance of particular manners and passing customs and the foundation of one's work on the "stability of truth", that is to say, truths that are permanent and universal. Johnson would have us believe that it is Shakespeare above all writers who is "the poet of nature: the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life". His characters are not moulded by the accidents of time place, and local custom; rather they are "genuine progeny of common humanity" and they " act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated". Other poets present a character as an individual. In Shakespeare character "is commonly a species". It is virtue of these facts that Shakespeare's plays are filled with "practical axioms and domestic wisdom … from his works may be collected a system of civil and economical prudence"(62). In contrast with the "hyperbolical or aggravated characters" of most playwrights, Shakespeare's personages are not heroes but men. His character expresses "human sentiments in human language", using common occurrences. Indeed, in virtues of his use of durable speech derived from "the common intercourse of life", Johnson view's Shakespeare as " one of the original masters of our language". Though Shakespeare approximates the remote, and familiarizes the wonderful"(64-65), the events he portrays accord with probability. In view of these qualities, Shakespeare's drama "is the mirror of life".

Johnson defends Shakespeare against charges brought by critics and writers such as John Dennis, Thomas Rymer and Voltaire. These critics argue that Shakespeare's characters insufficiently reflect their time period and status, that his Romans, for example , are not

sufficiently Romans, and his kings not sufficiently royal Johnson expresses in vehement words that Shakespeare "always makes nature predominate over accident and…he preserves the essential character extricated from accidental conventions and the "casual distinction of country and condition"(65-66). A censure goes that Shakespeare's mixing of comic and tragic scenes, violate the classical distinction between tragedy and comedy. Johnson avers that Shakespeare's plays "are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies ir comedies, but composition of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature which partakes good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination"(65). The ancient poets selected certain aspect of this variety which they restricted to tragedy and comedy respectively; whereas Shakespeare "has united the powers of exiting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition". In defense of tragic-comedy, Johnson appeals to nature as a higher authority than precedent. He affirms that Shakespeare's practice is "contrary to the rules of criticism…but there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature. The end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing. That the mingled drama may convey all the instruction of tragedy or comedy cannot be denied … and approaches nearer than either to the appearance of life ".Johnson further says that the mixed genre makes for greater variety and "all pleasures consist in variety". Johnson then says that when Shakespeare's plays were first "edited" in 1623 by members of his acting company, these editors, though they divided the plays into comedies, histories and tragedies, did not distinguish clearly between these three types. Through all of these three forms Shakespeare's "mode of composition is the same; an interchange of seriousness and merriment", and he "never fails to attain his purpose"(68).

Johnson does concede, however, that Shakespeare had many faults; First, he is "more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose". We may cull a "system of social duty" from Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare's "percepts and axioms drop casually from him. He makes no just distribution of good or evil", leaving his examples of good and bad actions to operate by chance. It is always writer's duty to make the world better. Among other faults of Shakespeare cited by Johnson are the "looseness of his plots" (71), whereby he "omits opportunities of instructing or delighting"; the lack of regard for distinction of time or place, such that persons from one age or place are indiscriminately given attributes pertaining to other eras and

locations; the grossness and licentiousness of his humor, "the coldness and pomp of his narrations and set speeches; the failure to follow through with scenes that evoke terror and pity; and a perverse and digressive fascination with quibbles and wordplay" (71-72).

There is another kind of defects from which Johnson remits Shakespeare; neglect of the classical unities of drama. Johnson then tries to make clear on his earlier cynicism regarding these ancient rules. Johnsons exempts Shakespeare's histories from any requirement of unity on the plea that these are neither tragedies nor comedies, they are not subject to the laws, governing these genres. What is imperative in the histories is that "the changes of action be so prepared as to be understood, that the incidents be various and affecting, and the characters consistent, natural and distinct. No other unity is intended. Johnson defends Shakespeare that he does observe unity of action: his plots are not structured by a complication and denouement "for this is seldom the order of real events and Shakespeare Is the poet of nature". But he does observe Aristotle's requirement that a plot has a beginning, middle and end. Like Corneille, Johnson views these unities as having "given more trouble to the poet, than pleasure to the auditor". Johnson views these unities as arising from "the supposed necessity of making the drama credible"(75). And such a requirement is swung on to the view that the mind of the spectator or reader "revolts from evident falsehood, and fiction loses his force when it departs from the resemblance of reality". The unity of place is merely in influence from the unity of time, since in a short period of time, spectators cannot believe that given actors have traversed impossible distances to remote locations. Such are the grounds on which critics have objected to the irregularities of Shakespeare's drama. Johnson has the courage of conviction that such premises are themselves spurious. In a striking counter-argument he appeals to Shakespeare himself as a counter authority, asserting: "It is false, that any representation is mistaken for reality; that any dramatic fable in its materiality was ever credible"(76). Johnson observes that spectators are always aware, in their very trip to the theatre, that they are subjecting themselves to a fiction, to a form of temporary self-delusion. And we must acknowledge "if delusion be admitted" it has "no certain limitation". If we can believe that the battle being enacted in stage is real, why would we be counting the clock or dismissing the changing of places as unreal?

We are pretty sure, however, that "the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players"(77). Johnson will tell us that the imitations give us pleasure "not because they are mistaken for realities

but because they bring the realities to mind”. Johnson, however, infers that “nothing is essential to the fable, but unity of action” and that the unities of time and place both arise from “false assumptions” and diminish "the variety of drama" (79). Hence, these unities are to be sacrificed to the nobler beauties of variety and instruction”, the greatest virtues of the play being “to copy nature and instruct life” (80). Johnson knows full well that the forces heaped against him on these points have no force. Johnson distinctly recalls “the principles of drama to a new examination”. Yet his strategy is both to argue logically against the incoherence of the unities of time and place and to set up Shakespeare as an alternative source of authority as against the classical tradition. No wonder his own views are thus sanctioned by a playwright to whom he himself has laboriously accorded the dignity of a classic. However, there is no denying the fact that Shakespeare lacked formal learning. The greater part of his excellence “was the product of his own genius”. Shakespeare directly obtained “an exact knowledge of many modes of life “as well as in an in animate world, gathered by contemplating things as they really exist”. He reiterates that “he has seen with his own eyes; he gives the image which he receives, not weakened or distorted by the intervention of other mind”. (89)

All said and done, the “form, the characters, the language, and the shows of the English drama are his”. Johnson acquiesces that Shakespeare’s reputation owes something to his audience; to its willingness to praise his graces and overlook his defects. Johnson’s appeal to nature and direct experience and observation over classical precedents and rules as well as his assessments of Shakespeare is heralding a new tradition, effectively sets the stage for multiple various perspectives of the role of the poet, the poet’s relation to tradition and classical authority and the virtues of individualistic poetic genius. Needless to say, Johnson’s assessment of Shakespeare is leveraged by a laborious editing of his plays.

With all the care and devotion shown to Shakespeare, there was a tendency to judge him by the standard of taste and of poetry peculiar to the period and if Shakespeare’s work fell short of the 18th century standard the failure was attributed to the uncultivated audience which gave the law to the great dramatist. The entire attitude is summed up in the criticism of Johnson, a towering figure of the period whose opinions are still quoted with respect whether one agrees with him or not. Johnson has been described as a neo-classical critic, but, we must remember, that he always made a distinction between rules that are accidental and those

that are essential. But the rules that he held as essential were as unalterable for him as the postulates of science and formed the standard which he used in his estimate of Shakespeare in his great "PREFACE". Johnson's criticism is a curious mixture of sturdy commonsense and unwavering dogmatism.

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