

PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE: DR. JOHNSON AS AN EDITOR OF SHAKESPEARE'S WORKS

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Samuel Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* is a significant achievement in the realm of literary criticism in general as well as in the field of Shakespearian criticism. It is an important specimen of eighteenth century prose style too. Though he uses Latin diction and the sentences are often involved, Dr. Johnson's style as a whole is lucid. Dr. Johnson's Shakespearian criticism is free from the kind of personal prejudices that mars his criticism of Milton. The Preface, unarguably, is a brilliant exercise in descriptive criticism with some sound observations in the field of theoretical criticism and a long appendix on editorial method. Brilliant perception and acute logical reasoning is to be seen in Dr. Johnson's defiance of Shakespeare's mingling of the comic and the serious. Dr. Johnson shows a sound historical understanding. He appeals to the study of background as an antidote to the Neo-Classical rule of thumb. Indeed, in his support for artistic freedom and in his historical understanding, Dr. Johnson goes beyond his age and foreshadows the Romantic critical ideas. Dr. Johnson's Notes on the plays of Shakespeare - though not a part of the Preface - are remarkable because they stand at the beginning, of a whole new tradition of Shakespearian criticism, which after Dr. Johnson's death was to proliferate into a substantial literature of its own: the criticism of character. It is undeniable that the central praise of Shakespeare, as the master of truth and universality has been well set out by Dr. Johnson.

Key words: Neo- classical, theoretical, prejudices, substantial, universality.

Among the most renowned critics Dr. Samuel Johnson's position is second to none. He is generally regarded as a pillar of the Neo-Classical school. Dr. Johnson as a critic is unmistakably a moralist, but he does not seem incapable of enjoying and valuing works of pure literary qualities. As a critic and prose-writer and also as an editor of Shakespeare's plays his influence on the later critics was deep and enduring . In 1765 he wrote *Preface to Shakespeare* which was considered a manifesto of Neo-Classical critical credo. The work established its author as a critic of higher rank in the whole range of English literature. The eighteenth century is known for the new experiments carried out by various authors in literature. Apart from novel writers the others gave inputs to a new genre literary criticism. Dr. Johnson is one of the pioneers of literary criticism. His contribution to literary criticism even today cannot be ignored. His theories are relevant today as they were in eighteenth century. Without studying Dr. Johnson's critical works, the study of studying criticism

remains incomplete. He revives the rules laid down for the poets by the Greeks and Roman critics. He intelligently applies those theories on the literature available at the time.

Preface to Shakespeare is a remarkable critical commentary on Shakespeare. He places Shakespeare in literature where no other critics were able to place him. It is he who compelled critics to study Shakespeare by various new angles. Angles provided by Johnson even today are relevant; it will be apt to say that Johnson makes Shakespeare immortal by highlighting Shakespeare's works in a right perspective. The preface is remarkable for its honesty in recognizing Shakespeare's faults, and is remarkable as it defends him against the charge of ignoring Neo-classical unities. All the Neo-classicists were very particular about the rules of writing literature. But Johnson enlarged his attitude about rules. Johnson tries to justify Shakespeare on the ground of nature and common life. Before Johnson no one had ever praised Shakespeare as the great poet of truth and universality. Johnson tries at best to prove Shakespeare a great poet of nature by the test of time and of Universality. Johnson's praise of Shakespeare is essentially Neo-classical. It does not passively accept the decision of generation after generation. According to him "nothing can please many and please long, but just representations of general nature"(p.25) Shakespeare has no equals in the English literary persons. According to Johnson: "Shakespeare is above all writers at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular place, practiced by the rest of the world;or by transient fashions or temporary opinion"(p.25)

Further Johnson praises Shakespeare's scheme of mixing the comic scenes with the tragic. This mingling of the tragic and comic scenes was condemned by the strict Neo-classical theory. But Johnson defends Shakespeare's plan by saying that the imitation of general human nature demanded the mingling of comic and tragic because life is both smile and tear. One cannot separate them. Shakespeare's plays combining comedy and tragedy. Dr. Johnson, as we have noted, praises Shakespeare for offering a mirror up to nature in his plays to life and manners. However, nature in him as in Dryden and Pope, is not the same; it has its different laws or rules. For example, while Dryden's praise of Shakespeare was that the dramatist looked inward and found nature there, Dr. Johnson regarded Shakespeare as the greatest among the modern dramatists because he relied on his external observation of nature. Dr. Johnson is a great critic, despite his Neo-Classical critical credo, he as an individual, tried as he did to create a dynamic critical view of nature /art relationship. If art becomes restrictive, he appeals to nature and vice versa.

In *Preface to Shakespeare*, Dr. Johnson has hammered out this point in saying that Shakespeare appeals to our essential humanity. He also uses the word commonsense at quite a few places to suggest that Shakespeare's greatness lies in accommodating his sentiment to real life. In comparison, other authors chose fanciful things which the world does not show. For example, the declamation of the ancient schools is misplaced because the student does not find the same happening in life. Harry H. Clark remarks that Johnson's

comment on Shakespeare are less touched by prejudice than much of his other criticism, which was sometimes weakened by his other criticism. In his Preface to Shakespeare, Dr. Johnson's abilities as an editor, critic, essayist and stylist are all evident. Preface is a critique of Shakespeare's dramas and it also provides us with valuable principles on the editing of Shakespeare's plays. At the same time, it is a noteworthy essay in literary criticism with some important theoretical issues. The prose style of the preface is remarkable as its contents. Finally, Dr. Johnson's essay reveals its author's personality in its treatment of the subject.

It is the just representation of general nature that brings immortality and enduring approbation to literary works. A faithful portrayal of the prevailing manners or combinations of fanciful inventions is insufficient to confer immortality upon a work of art. Such pieces can only evoke pleasure or wonder which is soon exhausted. It is only truth that can afford consistent place for the mind to rest upon. Shakespeare is, more than anyone else, a poet of nature. Through his works he reflects life. Shakespeare's characters do not belong to the society of a particular place or time; they are universal, representing every man. They are the genuine progeny of common humanity such, as will always remain in this world and whom our eyes will always continue to meet. What motivates his characters to speak and act are those general principles and emotions which stir all hearts; whereas in the works of other poets a character is often an individual, in Shakespeare it is commonly a species. The wide expanse of Shakespeare's design is the main source of the wealth of instruction that his plays convey and owing to this fact they are filled with practical axioms and domestic wisdom. Critics used to say that every verse of Euripides is essentially a precept in itself and it may be said of Shakespeare's plays that a whole pantheon of civil and economic prudence may be collected from them. Still it is not in the grandeur of particular passages but in the total progress of the fable and the tenor of the dialogue that Shakespeare's spontaneity is unfolded. To reveal his genius through singled out passages is like describing the endurance and beauty of a house by showing a brick.

In fact, Dr. Johnson is not a dogmatic critic laying down rules and laws and insisting on their being followed. On the contrary, he is a descriptive, investigative, historical or comparative critic, though he is certainly not free of Neo-Classical influences. In his preface we see him adopting an approach which has caught the favour and praise of many a modern critic. One of the most celebrated sayings of Johnson is that there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature. Johnson is great lover of truth.

Dr. Johnson's criticism has its own shortcomings. The faults that he enumerates in his assessment of Shakespeare no longer all appear as faults to us. He is not much interested in the chronological order of Shakespeare's plays. His emphasis on the moral purpose of literature and castigation of Shakespeare on lack of such purpose is not acceptable to the modern mind. His attitude towards Shakespeare's tragedies is, to say the least, surprising. His denigration of the tragedies can be based only on personal preferences, for no standard critical principle can vindicate it. Nor is Dr. Johnson seem to be appreciative of the people sublimity of Shakespeare. In many ways, the preface is at once one of the noblest monuments of Neo-Classical criticism

and an exposure of some of the weaknesses and avoidable rigidities of Neo-Classical tenets. Dr. Johnson always sought to express balanced views, and in such a context, inconsistencies are bound to occur.

Dr. Johnson possessed a clear idea of the responsibilities of an editor. He clearly stated that the duty of an editor was to establish as far as possible what an author had-written rather than what, in the opinion of the editor or his contemporaries, he ought to have written. The business of republishing an ancient book involves the correction of what is corrupt and the explanation of what is obscure. But in correcting one must avoid the method of conjecture as far as possible. Conjecture is to be adopted only if all the other methods have proved futile. Wherever Dr. Johnson confronts a serious difficulty in a passage he offers a good selection of notes by previous editors. In his selection of these notes he is judicious and impartial. Besides giving his own notes in a particular context, he also seeks out other editors' opinion and notes, and in this aspect of his performance as an editor he is wise and scholarly. It helped other later editors to a great extent and it is not rare to see that many modern editors have reproduced some part of these notes in their annotations of Shakespeare's plays. Those editors who followed Dr. Johnson, especially those who accepted him as an ideal model, have paid him valuable tributes.

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