**Samuel Johnson: Preface to the Plays of Shakespeare**

Samuel Johnson ((1709-1784) is one of the most significant figures in **E**ighteenth-century English literature. His fame can be4 understood reading the biography of him, written by his friend James Boswell, published in 1791. Johnson is widely known for his compiling **Dictionary**, Johnson was an extremely prolific writer who worked in a variety of fields and forms.

**Johnson** partly has the same opinion of the 18th century critics that antiquity be honoured, particularly in the art, as opposed to the sciences because the only test that can be applied to the writer is the **length of duration and continuance of esteem**. He states that if a writer is respected and admired by posterity, it is a testimony of excellence and merit. he places the example of Homer. He says the ancients are to be honoured not merely because they are ancient but because the truths that they present have stood the test of time. He then applies this criterion to Shakespeare: Shakespeare **may now begin to assume the dignity of an ancient, and claim the privilege of established fame and prescriptive veneration. He has long outlived his century, the term commonly fixed as the test of literary merit**.

The Preface of Johnson has two sections:

1. dealing with critical analysis of Shakespeare as a dramatist.
2. an explication of the editorial methods used in his Edition of Shakespeare.

Johnson begins the Preface by asserting that people cherish the works of writers who are dead and neglect the modern. He says the ancients are to be honoured not merely because they are ancient but because the truths that they present have stood the test of time. He then applies this criterion to Shakespeare, **may now begin to assume the dignity of an ancient, and claim the privilege of established fame and prescriptive veneration. He has long outlived his century, the term commonly fixed as the test of literary merit**. In his analysis of Shakespeare, Johnson implements different features and approaches. He examines the bard’s (poet’s) works from different angles and presents him as timeless and universal, but he also presents him as a product of his age and time. As a neo-classicist, he tries to maintain a structural balance of praise and blame for Shakespeare. He adopts an **ahistorical and a historical** approach to our understanding of Shakespeare. He tries to make a distinction between the appeal of Shakespeare to his contemporaries and to future generations. He says that since times and customs have changed, the depiction of the particular manners of Shakespeare’s age, are no longer of interest to contemporary audiences.  [**Shakespeare’s plays**](http://ardhendude.blogspot.in/search/label/William%20Shakespeare)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 are mirror life.

In Johnson’s opinion, Shakespeare continues to be admired not for depicting the customs and manners of his own age but for the representation of universal truths; **nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature**. Shakespeare is **a poet of Nature**. In the first part of the Preface Johnson praises Shakespeare as **who holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life”: all his characters be they Romans, Danes or kings represent general human passions and principles common to all humans**. In Johnson’s view, Shakespeare’s plays are populated with scenes **only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion**. Another merit he finds in Shakespeare is that though Shakespeare’s characters depict universal human passions, yet they are distinctly individualized. He also appreciates Shakespeare for not focusing only on the passion of love but dealing with different kinds of passion exhibited by humankind. He refutes the charge levelled against Shakespeare by critics that Shakespeare represents noble characters of different nations as **buffoons and drunkards.** He considers these charges **petty cavils of petty minds**. He says Shakespeare **always makes nature predominate over accident; and that if he preserves the essential character, he is not very careful about the accidental distinctions**. He further adds, **a poet overlooks the casual distinctions of country and condition, as a painter, satisfied with a figure, neglects the tapestry**. He concludes with a metaphorical tribute to Shakespeare, **the stream of time, which is continually washing the dissoluble fabrics of other poets; passes by the adamant of Shakespeare**. 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.

He views Shakespeare’s plays as neither tragedies nor comedies but as just representations **exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow**. While the ancients concentrated on producing either comedy or tragedy and no Greek or Roman author attempted to do both, Shakespeare possessed the genius to do both in the same composition. His mingled drama violated the rules of dramatic writing but for Johnson realism takes the place of the set rules: **there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature….The end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing.** He further states that **mingled drama may convey all the instruction of tragedy or comedy cannot be denied, because it includes both in its alterations of exhibition and approaches nearer than either to the appearance of life**. Johnson considers this mingling justified as Shakespeare’s plays both **instruct and delight**. Nor does he feel that the mixing of tragic and comic scenes in any way diminish or weaken the passions the dramatist aims at representing on the other hand he feels that variety contributes to pleasure. Johnson considers Shakespeare a genius in writing comedy. He agrees with Rhymer that Shakespeare possessed a natural flair for comedy. He thinks Shakespeare had to toil hard for the tragic scenes but the comic scenes appear to be written with great spontaneity: **His tragedy seems to be skill. His comedy to be instinct**. He asserts that Shakespeare obtained his comic dialogues from the common intercourse of life and therefore their appeal has not diminished over time. 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’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 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’s Faults** After his praise of Shakespeare, Johnson moves ahead to point out the faults of Shakespeare. Johnson distinguishes between art and life. He says the audience is always aware that they are watching a fictionalized representation and can enjoy tragedy only for this reason, although the enjoyment is directly proportional to the realism with which the characters are depicted. As a true neo-classicist, Johnson is extremely informative in his approach to Shakespeare. He believes that however true to life an artist proposes to be, the creative artist may not sacrifice **virtue to convenience**. Johnson thinks Shakespeare is more concerned about pleasing than instructing. In the eyes of Johnson, Shakespeare lacks a clear and distinct **moral purpose** and sometimes seems to write without any moral purpose at all. He condemns Shakespeare on moral grounds: **he makes no just distribution of good or evil, nor is always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked; he carries his person’s indifferently through right and wrong and at the close dismisses them without further care and leaves their examples to operate by chance**. This **barbarity** Johnson cannot pardon for he believes that it is always the duty of the writer **to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent on time or place**. In this connection, in his notes on King Lear, he condemns Shakespeare for sacrificing the virtue of Cordelier: **Shakespeare has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of chronicles**. He goes on to say: A play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of human life; but since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded, that the observation of justice makes a play worse; or, that if other excellencies are equal, the audience will not always rise better pleased from the final triumph of persecuted virtue. 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.

Johnson also finds faults with Shakespeare’s plots and thinks they are loosely formed and not pursued with diligence. He finds this reflected in Shakespeare’s neglect to utilize the opportunities that come his way to instruct and delight. Additionally, he adds that Shakespeare seems not to labour enough towards the ending of his plays such that **his catastrophe is improbably produced or imperfectly represented**. He also finds Shakespeare guilty of violating chronology and verisimilitude relating to time and place for he **gives to one age or nation, without scruple, the customs, institutions and opinions of another**. He criticizes Shakespeare for making Hector quote Aristotle in Troilus and Cressida and also assesses him for combining the love of Theseus and Hippolyta with that of the Gothic mythology of Fairies. Although Johnson lauds Shakespeare’s skill in writing comic scenes, yet he does not gloss over the faults. He finds Shakespeare’s language coarse and the jests gross in many comic dialogues. He comments that the gentlemen and ladies indulging in these coarse exchanges appear to be no different than the clowns. Johnson cannot excuse Shakespeare even if this coarseness was prevalent in Shakespeare’s time, for he thinks that as a poet he should have known better. The meanness, tediousness and obscurity in Shakespeare’s tragedies Johnson considers the undesirable effect of excessive labour. He finds Shakespeare’s narration often longwinded and wordy, making it excessive lengthy with unnecessary repetition. He also accuses Shakespeare of not matching his words to the occasion. His set speeches he finds **cold and weak** and designed by Shakespeare to show his knowledge but dislike by the reader. At times, he finds Shakespeare’s language high sounding and not appropriate to the sentiment or the thought he wishes to express. **Repeatedly Johnson finds Shakespeare’s tragic scenes marred by a sudden drop in emotional temperature caused by some infelicity of language – a pun, a conceit, a hyperbole**. Johnson directs a scathing attack on Shakespeare’s fondness for a quibble. He describes Shakespeare’s love for a quibble through various amusing analogies. He says a quibble was to him **the golden apple for which he will stoop from his elevation** or **the fatal Cleopatra for which he was willing to lose the world and was content to lose it**. Johnson’s expectations would have been proportionately modest. But with Shakespeare the potential is always so great; that fulfilment is sometimes inadequate. In short, Johnson’s criticism of Shakespeare’s tragic scenes is born out of his admiration for him. Shakespeare’s violation of **The Unities** Shakespeare violated the law of **the unities of time and place** established and recognized by both dramatists and critics. 18th century critics considered this violation a defect in Shakespeare. Johnson disagrees and thinks it is possible to defend Shakespeare on this account. He argues that the Histories by virtue of their very nature need to keep changing time and place and additionally since they are neither comedies nor tragedies, they remain outside the purview of violation. He believes that Shakespeare, apart from the Histories, maintains the unity of action and follows the Aristotelian rules (beginning, middle and end). His plots have a beginning, middle and an end and the plot also moves slowly but surely towards an end that meets the expectations of the reader. Johnson acknowledges that Shakespeare does neglect to follow the unities of time and place that have been held in high esteem since the time of Corneille, but according to him, the rules are not founded on tenable principles. His critical analysis reveals their irrelevance. He says that the critics insist on the observance of the unities of time and place, as they believe it contributes to dramatic credibility. They hold that the audience would find it difficult to believe in an action spread over many months and years when the actual stage performance lasts only three hours. In addition, since the audience is seated in the same place for the duration of the play, their belief would be strained if one action takes place in Alexandria and the other in Rome. To counter these arguments Johnson states that all art is deception and that the audience too is aware of this. His argument is that if the audience sitting in a theatre in London can believe in the reality of the first act taking place in Alexandria, then they can very well imagine the second act taking place in another country. By the same logic, the spectators can imagine the lapse of months or years between acts. However, he argues the audience is not totally dubious; rather, the audience is, as would be stated later by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in a **willing suspension of disbelief**. Johnson states that tragic actions would not give pleasure if the audience thought that it was all happening in reality on stage. The real source of pleasure lies in the fact that the enactment brings realities to mind. Johnson’s analysis of Elizabethan England, England emerges as a nation **just emerging from barbarity** where **literature was yet confined to professed scholars, or to men and women of high rank** **and the general public was raised on popular romances**. Johnson states that very often Shakespeare uses these familiar and popular romance sources as the building blocks for his plays so that the not-so-learned spectators could easily follow the story. In the absence of any established facts about Shakespeare’s learning, Johnson believes that Shakespeare did not know French and Italian and that what he borrowed from foreign sources was borrowed from English translations of foreign works. Johnson asserts that since English literature was yet in its infancy in Elizabethan England, Shakespeare had no English models of drama or poetry to follow - neither character nor dialogue was yet understood.

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 to be 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.

The 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 survivals in his play.

The 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.

Johnson says that not only did Shakespeare not care to leave authentic versions of his plays for posterity; rather, even the few that were published in his lifetime did not get his attention and scrutiny. As a result, corrupted texts with alterations and additions based on conjecture survived and created confusion and obscurity.

Johnson not only commented on the merits and faults of the earlier emendatory critics but also included the different versions of lines and passages of the available texts and the subsequent emendations along with his own notes and emendations. Johnson states that his edition of Shakespeare’s plays carries three kinds of notes (a) illustrative: to explain difficulties (b) judicial: to comment on **faults and beauties** (c) emendatory: to correct corruptions in the text. He acknowledges that he exercised restraint in making the emendations and was **neither superfluously copious nor scrupulously reserved**. Johnson states that he has been successful in shedding light on some obscure passages and made them more understandable to the readers. However, with great humility he accepts that there are many others passages that he himself was unable to understand and leaves their interpretation to posterity. Johnson also states that he treads the middle ground between **presumption and timidity** by trusting in those publishers **who had a copy before their eyes and also avoids too much conjectural criticism**. Johnson’s Advice to the Readers Johnson advises the readers to enjoy the complete play first without interruption and without thinking about the obscurities. Only when the pleasure of novelty ceases should the reader turn to his notes to understand and appreciate individual lines and passages and get more enjoyment. Johnson exhorts the readers to form their own judgement about Shakespeare’s plays. He thinks notes are **necessary evils** and proclaims that he wishes to serve only as a guide and instructor. He cautions the readers not to go by his judgement of praise or condemnation, as his judgement might be flawed. He also humbly acknowledges that his work is not perfect. Johnson ends his Preface by once again acknowledging Shakespeare’s greatness and dismissing the views of those who did not find him learned by stating that **he was naturally learned; he needed not the spectacles of books to read nature and that he possessed the largest and most comprehensive soul**.

Johnson’s **Preface to the plays of Shakespeare**, even by modern standards is an exemplary piece of literary criticism although it does have its limitations. Johnson boldly went against the grain of his time in defending Shakespeare for not following the unities of time and place and for mingling tragic and comic elements. He considered the text superior to any rules and his judgement depended on how the text affected him and not on whether it followed the rules or not. Johnson can also be credited with giving critics the comparative and historical basis of criticism. Many of his judgements of Shakespeare are so insightful that modern generations can only repeat his judgments on Shakespeare’s universality and in-depth understanding of human nature. Johnson’s editorial method though deficient by modern standards was yet way above that of the earlier editors and editors of his own time. The restraint he exercised in making emendations is indeed creditable. Many of Johnson’s pronouncements on Shakespeare reflect neo-classical beliefs, with which many today do not agree, especially the insistence on moral rectitude. Johnson has also come under criticism for preferring Shakespeare’s comedies to his tragedies. However, his achievements outdo his shortcomings and the greatest proof of his greatness is that his age is often called The Age of Johnson.