

Preface to Shakespeare by Dr Samuel Johnson

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Aristotle Concept of Epic in
his Book Poetics Explained...

Samuel Johnson, often called Dr Johnson, was an English writer who made lasting contributions as a poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor, and lexicographer. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography calls him "arguably the most distinguished man of letters in English history".

Born: September 18, 1709, Lichfield, United Kingdom

Died: December 13, 1784, London, United Kingdom

Johnson's great contribution to the history of English lexicography was to conceive the dictionary, not as a schoolroom prop, but as a type of literary work. Johnson wrote only one dictionary, but in that one he initiated several dictionary genres.

In the preface, which begins Johnson's 1765 edition of Shakespeare's collected works, Johnson considers why Shakespeare has stood the test of time.

In accounting for this timeless quality, Johnson states that Shakespeare's virtue is that he accurately conveys human nature, action, and speech—in short, that he holds up a mirror to mankind.

Johnson also dismisses as irrelevant those critics who have criticized Shakespeare's breaking of the “unities” of time and place.

Johnson's 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.



Johnson's defense of Shakespeare's use of unities:

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.

He tells offensive and vulgar jokes. His storytelling is often overly elaborate and long-winded. The narration in his dramas can be dull and boring. His speeches are wordy and lack substance, with overly embellished language used to describe simple ideas. He relies too heavily on puns and wordplay, sacrificing logic and appropriateness for the sake of a joke. He often falls short in moments that should be impactful and moving. His use of conceited and boastful language detracts from the emotional impact of his sad or 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.



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