

Dr. Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare is a classic of literary criticism. It displays all Johnson's gift 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 concept 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 teacher 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 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." Johnson led Shakespearean criticism back from paths 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.

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 individualized 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.

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