

Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare - II

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Date _____
Page _____

Demerits of Shakespeare

Dr Johnson's analysis of Shakespeare is very judicious. It analyses both the merits and demerits of Shakespeare's plays. Dr. Johnson praises Shakespeare for his faithful depiction of human nature. He found that Shakespeare made nature predominate over accident, that he depicted the influence of the general passions, and that he successfully presented life in its native colours. Shakespeare offers characters who think, speak and act as normal human beings in like situations. The dialogue is level with life because he "approximates the remote and familiarises the wonderful." The language of the characters is natural and as such truthful.

Then Johnson turns to the weakness of Shakespeare. In this part of the preface we have Johnson the neo-classicist and the moralist. He finds the following faults in Shakespeare plays :-

1. Lack of morality :-

Dr. Johnson accuses Shakespeare of lacking in morality. He "sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose. From his writings indeed a system of social duty may be selected, for he that thinks reasonably must think morally; but his precepts and axioms drop casually from him; 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 persons indifferently through right and wrong, and at the close dismisses them without further care, and leaves their example to operate by chance; for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent of time or place.

Lack of Propriety :-

Johnson attacks Shakespeare's anachronisms as violating probability. Decorum is upheld as he speaks of the futility of the "reciprocations of smartness and contents of sarcasm". Shakespeare's jest, we read, are commonly gross, and their pleasantness licentious. And the dramatist had not chosen the best modes of gaiety. Propriety too has been ignored in the matter of diction, for there are "the language and the set speeches in tragedy, and the excessive use of conceits and quibbles throughout his plays."

Lapses in Dramatic Composition :-

Then Johnson proceeds to discuss Shakespeare's lapses in dramatic composition. First there are tragi-comedies which are neither tragedies nor comedies. These plays are not in accordance with rules. But they are true to human nature and fulfil the set goals of the dramatist. Secondly, the loose construction of some plots, and thirdly the improbable endings in some plays are some glaring defects of the plays of Shakespeare.

Lack of Poetic Justice —

In the plays of Shakespeare, especially in his tragedies there is a lack of poetic justice, that he sacrifices virtue to convenience, and that the major figures suffer more than they deserve because of their faults. The punishment inflicted on them is disproportionate to their sins or wrongs.

Violation of History —

Dr. Johnson also objects to Shakespeare's anachronisms or violations of chronology. There are no clear-cut distinctions between history and tragedy in the plays of Shakespeare.

Loose Structures of His Plots —

"The plots are often so loosely formed, that a very slight consideration may improve them, and so carelessly pursued, that he seems not always fully to comprehend his own design. He omits opportunities of instructing or delighting which the train of his story seems to force upon him and apparently rejects those exhibitions which would be more affecting, for the sake of those which are more easy."

He had no regard to distinction of time or place, but gives to one age or nation, without scruple, the customs, institutions, and opinions of another, at the expense not only of likelihood, but of possibility.

Faults in His Comedies —

In his comic scenes he is seldom very successful when he engages his characters in reciprocations of smartness and contests of sarcasms; their jests are commonly gross, and their pleasantry licentious; neither his gentlemen nor his ladies have much delicacy nor are sufficiently distinguished from his clowns by any appearance of refined manners.

Faults in Tragedies —

In tragedy his performance seems constantly to be worse, as his labour is more. The effusions of passion which exigence forces out are for the most part striking and energetic; but whenever he solicits his invention or strains his faculties, the offspring of his theories is humour, meanness, tediousness, and obscurity."

• Other Faults —

Other faults of Shakespeare relate to his declamations. His declamations are commonly 'cold and weak'. He uses tiresome quibbles in his plays. "A quibble is to Shakespeare, what luminous vapours are to the traveller, he follows it at all adventures; it is sure to lead him out of his way, and sure to engulf him to the mire.... A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it." He also neglects unities of time and place. His histories are not subject to the law of unity, as they are neither tragedies nor comedies.

Yet these faults in Dr. Johnson's views do not lessen Shakespeare's greatness as a unique dramatic genius.