

### **SAMUEL JOHNSON PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE (1765)**

In his preface to his edition of the collected works of Shakespeare, Johnson begins by noting that we often seem to cherish the works of the past and to neglect the present. Praises, he writes, are often “without reason lavished on the dead” (320) as a result of which it sometimes seems that the “honours due only to excellence are paid to antiquity” (320). Everyone, Johnson suggests, is “perhaps . . . more willing to honour past than present excellence; and the mind contemplates genius through the shades of age” (320). Time is the test of genius, Johnson contends:

To works . . . of which the excellence is not absolute and definite, but gradual and comparative; to works not raised upon principles demonstrative and scientific, but appealing wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem. What mankind have long possessed they have often examined and compared; and if they persist to value the possession, it is because frequent comparisons have confirmed opinion in its favour. . . . [I]n the productions of genius, nothing can be styled excellent till it has been compared with other works of the same kind. (320)

With this test in mind, Johnson suggests that Shakespeare meets these criteria and “may now begin to assume the dignity of an ancient, and earn the privilege of established fame and prescriptive veneration” (321) because he has “long outlived his century, the term commonly used as the test of literary merit” (321). That he deserves such acclaim can be verified by “comparing him with other authors” (321). The question which arises, given the fallibility of “human judgment” (321), is “by what peculiarities of excellence Shakespeare has gained and kept the favour of his countrymen?” (321).

Johnson argues that Shakespeare’s perhaps most important skill concerns accurate characterisation: he offers “representations of general nature” (321) rather than of “particular manners” (321) peculiar to individuals or particular places and times. In a view of Shakespeare that has come to be constantly regurgitated, he praises the Bard’s characterisation in particular for its fidelity to human nature in general:

Shakespeare is above all writers . . . the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies and professions . . .; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated. . . . In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species. (321)

Where other dramatists offer “hyperbolic or aggravated characters” (322), Shakespeare’s “scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion” (322).

Characterisation “ample and general” (322) in this way, that is, his “adherence to general nature” (322), is supplemented by appropriate strokes of individuality: “no poet ever kept his personages more distinct from each other. . . . [T]hough some may be equally adapted to every person, it will be difficult to find any that can be properly transferred from the present possessor to another claimant” (322).

However, Johnson hastens to add, Shakespeare “always makes nature predominate over accident; and if he preserves the essential character, is not very carefully of distinctions superinduced and adventitious” (322).

Even when dealing with supernatural matters, Johnson stresses, Shakespeare “approximates the remote, and familiarises the wonderful; the event which he represents will not happen, but if it were possible, its effects would probably be such as he has assigned” (322). All in all, Shakespeare “has not only shewn human nature as it acts in real exigencies, but as it would be found in trials, to which it cannot be exposed” (322). Whatever his subject matter, as Shakespeare’s

personages act upon principles arising from genuine passion, very little modified by particular forms, their pleasures and vexations are communicable to all times and to all places; they are natural, and therefore durable; the adventitious peculiarities of personal

habits, are only superficial dies, bright and pleasing for a little while, yet soon fading to a dim tinct, without any remains of former lustre; but the discriminations fo true passion are the colours of nature; they pervade the whole mass, and can only perish with the body that exhibits them. (323-324)

As such, his “drama is the mirror of life” (322) from which other writers can learn much simply “by reading human sentiments in human language, by scenes from which a hermit may estimate the transactions of the world, and a confessor predict the progress of the passions” (322).

Moreover, if his characterisation is realistic, so too are his dialogues. Johnson, the editor of the first dictionary of the English language, argues that Shakespeare has captured the enduring spirit of the English language: there is

in every nation, a style which never becomes obsolete, a certain mode of phraseology so consonant and congenial to the analogy and principles of its respective language as to remain settled and unaltered; this style is probably to be sought in the common intercourse of life, among those who speak only to be understood, without ambition of elegance. The polite are always catching modish innovations, and the learned depart from established forms of speech, in hope of finding or making better; those who wish for distinction forsake the vulgar. . . . [B]ut there is a conversation above grossness and below refinement, where propriety resides, and where this poet seems to have gathered his comic dialogue. (324)

The speech of each of Shakespeare’s characters is “so evidently determined by the incident which produces it, and is pursued with so much ease and simplicity, that it seems scarcely to claim the merit of fiction, but to have been gleaned by diligent selection out of common conversation, and common occurrences” (321).

Johnson then turns his attention to the criticisms commonly made of Shakespeare’s plays, not least that he did not follow the prescribed rules. Firstly, he deals with the view that Shakespeare is guilty of blurring the genres of tragedy and comedy which ought to be distinct. Johnson argues that the ancient poets, out of the “chaos of mingled purposes and casualties” (322) and “according to the laws which custom had prescribed” (322), had “selected, some the crimes of men, and some their absurdities; some the momentous vicissitudes of life, and some the lighter occurrences; some th terrors of distress and some the gaieties of prosperity” (322). It was for this reason that there “rose two modes of imitation, known by the names of tragedy and comedy, compositions intended to promote different ends by contrary means, and considered . . . little allied” (322). More recently, Johnson contends, there has been a tendency to divide Shakespeare’s work into tragedies, comedies and histories but that these are not distinguished “by any very exact or definite ideas” (323). For these, comedy was defined simply as an “action which ended happily to the principal persons, however serious or distressful through its intermediate incidents” (323). To be a tragedy, similarly, “required only a calamitous conclusion” (323), as a result of which “plays were written, which, by changing the catastrophe, were tragedies today, and comedies tomorrow” (323). Histories were viewed as plays consisting of a “series of actions, with no other than chronological succession, independent on each other” (323). Histories, Johnson argues, are “not always very nicely distinguished from tragedy” (323).

Johnson argues that Shakespeare’s plays, however, through “all these denominations of the drama” (323), are neither tragedies nor comedies in the strict sense of these terms, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; and expressing the course of the world, in which the loss of the one is the gain of the other. (322)

Shakespeare has “united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind, but in one composition” (323) as a result of which almost all his plays are “divided between serious and ludicrous characters” (323). Shakespeare’s “mode of composition” (323) is always the same: an “interchange of seriousness and merriment, by which the mind is softened at one time, and exhilarated at another” (323).

Johnson justifies Shakespeare’s “mingled drama” (323) on the grounds that the mixture of sorrow and joy is more realistic and, thus, morally instructive:

there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature; . . . the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing. That the mingled drama may convey all the instruction of tragedy

or comedy cannot be denied, because it includes both in its alteration of exhibition and approaches nearer than either to the appearance of life. (323)

In response to the “specious” (323) view that the “change of scenes” (323) in this way causes the “passions” (323) to be “interrupted in their progression” (323) and “wants at last the power to move” (323), Johnson argues that the “interchanges of mingled scenes seldom fail to produce the intended vicissitudes of passion. Fiction cannot move so much, but that the attention may be easily transferred” (323). All “pleasure persists in variety” (323).

Johnson then proceeds to list all the defects which many have detected in Shakespeare’s plays. The most important of these is his failure to respect the unities of action, time and place. Johnson is on Shakespeare’s side in these respects. With regard to the unity of action, Johnson argues that the laws applicable to tragedies and comedies are not applicable to Shakespeare’s histories. All that is required of such plays is that the “changes of action be so prepared as to be understood, that the incidents be various and affecting, and the characters consistent, natural, and distinct. No other unity is intended, and therefore none is sought” (325). In the other plays, there is unity of action: “his plan has commonly what Aristotle requires, a beginning, a middle and an end; one event is concatenated with another, and the conclusion follows by easy consequence” (325). The “end of the play is the end of expectation” (325). With regard to the unities of time and place, Johnson argues that these “are not essential to a just drama” (327) even though they arise from the “supposed necessity of making the drama credible” (325). The argument is that the “mind revolts from evident falsehood, and fiction loses its force when it departs from the resemblance of reality” (326) as a result of which the failure to depict on stage one location and a duration corresponding to the length of the audience’s presence in the auditorium is dramatic heresy. All this does not matter, Johnson argues, because “spectators are always in their senses and know . . . that the stage is only a stage” (326). *Vraisemblance* is not adversely affected, firstly, by changes in location: the “different actions that complete a story may be in places very remote from each other; and where is the absurdity of allowing that space to represent first Athen, and then Sicily, which was always known to be neither Sicily nor Athens, but a modern theatre?” (326), he asks. Secondly, he argues, time is “obsequious to the imagination; a lapse of years is as easily conceived as a passage of hours. In contemplation we easily contract the time of real actions, and therefore willingly permit it to be contracted when we only see their imitation” (326). All in all, the “delight of tragedy proceeds from the *consciousness* of fiction; if we thought murders and treasons real, they would please no more” (my emphasis; 326). “Imitations produce pain or pleasure, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind” (326).