

## C. L. R. JAMES PREFACE TO CRITICISM (1955)

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C. L. R. James starts by stating that literary criticism is only appreciated by literary critics. There is no formal method of criticism or any single way of critical theory. However literary criticism has progressed over time in its field. Some critics reject the views of other critics completely as seen in the critiquing of Shakespeare's works.

James argues the general concept of Shakespeare is that his plays were made for dramatic performance. However people such as L. C. Knights, F. R. Leavis and other critics of Shakespeare argue that it is his work's structure that is important.

One example that was brought out was that of Marlon Brando playing as Anthony in Julius Caesar. He argues that Brando was unable to play the part well as would have been if it was one that focused on Shakespeare. He was therefore unable to perform the part or capture the essence of the character because he was unable to adapt to the dramatic structure of the play.

An editorial in the Times Literary Supplement argues literary criticism has changed. "What has Aristotle today to teach such a reader? . . . perhaps he would learn . . . of the primary importance, in much literary creation, of construction and design" (256). The article pushes the concept that Aristotle's poetics cannot fit today's literary situation. Literature has therefore changed since his time as argued by the article.

James argues differently. He sees Aristotle as the foundation of literary criticism. Aristotle's method is seen as completely comprehensive and integrated by James. "Modern critics do not understand him because they do not root their criticism in the world which they live in" (256).

He sees Aristotle's premise having two parts. The first is catharsis and the second is plot. To him modern commentators do not know what to do with them. It is because of this, he argues that Hollywood and Dorothy Sayers have been able to justify what they practice.

James argues that Aristotle only knew of the popular audience and he would therefore not know of the movie audience. Aristotle's concepts were shaped by the technology of that time and so to have ours.

James saw Aristotle's theory in this way. The actors created action and this was the start of the plot. The middle creates tension and emotion which creates suspense. After this build up comes the solution or dénouement. He argues that Aristotle would only award merit to Sayers because of her plot. This is because it would not involve the social units. To him the contemporary critic would argue that Aristotle is limited in his construct of literature.

James then turns his attention on literature as philosophy, modern critics such as Sainte Beuve and T. S. Elliot, look at literature as "a form of culture for the cultivated and popular art as a form of relaxation or anodyne for common people" (257). Aristotle, he argues, sees the creation of plot as important. He argues poetry because of this it is higher in value than history. He considers the concept that poetry would at this point to Aristotle be what his time would have been like.

Sir Gilbert Murray in his book looked at Aeschylus argued that "Greek tragedians as a whole were poets of ideas, and of bold ideas; poets like Milton, Shelly or Victor Hugo, not like Shakespeare" (257). James however rejects that concept. James points to the work of Milton or Shelly as being inferior because they use their poetry as conduits for their ideas.

G. D. Thompson in his book Aeschylus and Athens argued that the plays of Greek times were a collective ritual. He argues that Shakespeare's plays did not "immediately apply to the social movement of the times" (257). To James, Thompson may have been seeing Greek plays as a form of propaganda. He sees literature being used as a vehicle of propaganda of economical and political programme.

I. A. Richards another critic who discovered the popular audience aimed not to free it

by abolition of private property but by using literature to bring order to it of its impulses.

It is the revolt against these critics back to the value in itself which made magists textualists, metamorphicals, cultists of ambiguity and the whole formalist school. By defending the work they alienate it from social movement and they end by destroying it. (258)

He argues when Empson has analysed the significance of the word 'all' in Paradise Lost or when Wilson Knight or Derek Traversi analysed the plot of Lear as an "expanded image" the only thing left is the critic. By analyzing the work, stripping it we reduce the work to what we analyse leaving no substance.

James believes that through this reduction of literature the modern critic is able to relate to it. He argues that we (our generation) cannot understand the grasp of Greek or Shakespearean literature of their time. He therefore points to the difference of consciousness between timelines.

He continues his thesis by arguing that great works carry meaning with them. This meaning changes over time. Actors in those timelines understood the work and did not have to interpret them like us today. He argues contemporary critics cannot agree on what Lear means because they are outside that timeline.

In Hamlet, he argues that one can see Hamlet's trouble of loving his mother. He sees Hamlet as a popular play because everyone saw its meaning. He posits that meaning may differ but this is a weakness of the play. James then looks at the concept of restoring the popular audience by making plays or literary work more visible in meaning to all. To James, Shakespeare's plays are in a state of restoration but the original audience cannot be restored. However, "the popular audience of today" (258) is its substitute.

James argues the modern audience goes to film and this is where he returns to the film version of Julius Caesar. The audience is kept up until Mark Anthony's oration. In his view the producers knew the film would fail after that point so they relied on a battle scene. For this mistake he does not blame the producers. He considers the concept that Shakespearean critics have never known what to do with the last two acts.

One view is the concept of the "spirit of Caesar" (259) dominating after his death. But he states that popular audience would see the play then as a washout. He says arguing Shakespeare wrote a bad play would be a last resort. The solution to him is found in the Elizabethan audience. The audience shared at that point a certain understanding between themselves and the author. Another concept that comes out is the "safety and stability of the state and the influence of great persons on the state" (259). He argues that characters such as Cassius and Brutus would be followed by the audience but they would be focused on solving the problem of Rome. James argues that over time we have lost that kind of consciousness. However, he sees it returning in totalitarian states and he sees the Elizabethan audience as closer to the modern popular audience of that type of state than one of a democracy.

Nineteenth century critics see Shakespearean characters as individuals and follow them in that way. If you see Brutus and Cassius as individuals then he argues the play at the end is a failure. Shakespeare and his audience did not see it so. The characters were there to be seen as having a larger purpose such as saving Rome from chaos.

James closes by stating that "the modern audience turned away from the last act of Julius Caesar and in doing so, it was right, and the producers following the critics, were wrong" (260). He argues Shakespeare placed the state in crisis in the start of his serious works. It is because we are accustomed to individual characters and our remoteness with "the fate of the state" that we are not able to fully understand the last acts of Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Julius Caesar and King Lear are works that if we see society or the fate of society involved in the play then we would understand the last act. James therefore ends with the concept that if we do not see ourselves separated from the state then plays such as Julius Caesar would be easier to comprehend in their meaning and application.