

## II MA

### SUB CODE: 18PEL8LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM-I

#### PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE -- SAMUEL JOHNSON

Dr. Samuel Johnson is a self-made genius who faced the material challenges of life with grit and determination and rose by sheer merit and ended up as the literary dictator of his times. He wrote prose, poetry, translated and wrote literary criticism. His English Dictionary and his biography by Boswell immortalized him. He wrote an insightful Preface to an edition of Shakespeare's plays. In it he analyzes the merits and shortcomings of Shakespeare's plays.

According to Johnson, 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 defence of Shakespeare's use of the Three 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.

**shortcomings 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. His jokes are often gross and licentious. In his narration, there is much pomp of diction and circumlocution. Narration in his dramas is often tedious. His set speeches are cold and weak. They are often verbose and too large for thought. Trivial ideas are clothed in sonorous epithets. He is too fond of puns and quibbles which engulf him in mire. For a pun, he sacrifices reason, propriety and truth. He often fails at moments of great excellence. Some contemptible conceit spoils the effect of his pathetic and tragic scenes.

Speaking overall, Shakespeare's merits easily outweigh his shortcomings. As a creative genius, Shakespeare has enthralled generations of audience while the critical genius of Johnson makes the connoisseurs of Shakespeare feel proud.

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## PREFACE TO FABLES -- JOHN DRYDEN

John Dryden is a literary genius. He has written satires, plays and has translated classical texts. Also, he has written Essay on Dramatic Poesy and Preface to Fables which mark the arrival of English Literary Criticism. Matthew Arnold calls him as the Father of English Criticism.

The celebrated Preface to the Fables, one of Dryden's most important essays, is commonly regarded as one of the masterpieces of English criticism, and appeared a few months before Dryden's death in 1699. This was prefixed to a volume of translations and adaptations, which bore the title *Fables, Ancient and Modern, translated into Verse from Homer, Ovid, Boccaccio, and Chaucer: with Original Poems*. The Preface as it stands is chiefly a criticism of Chaucer, renowned for its catholicity of taste, but it contains also comparisons of the different poets named in the title, and a defence of his own conduct from charges made against him by Blackmore, Milbourn, and, particularly, Jeremy Collier, whose *Short View of the Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698) had attacked the plays of Dryden, among others.

The Preface illustrates the general character of Dryden's criticism; like all his other pieces, it is occasional, and seems to indicate the things that he was interested in and the principles that he devised and employed. It is a very interesting study to trace the change in material and the critical principles which these prefaces show, and for this study Mr. W. P. Ker's *Essays of John Dryden* is a valuable book.

In this particular essay are to be noted the pleasure that Dryden evidently has in literature, his desire to show the letters of his country in the best light, his catholicity of temper, and the gentlemanly discursiveness of his style. The principles which he enunciates in passing are interesting: the favor of the reader, common-sense, and moderation, are evidently the Chief court of appeal, but he also recognized ideas of growth in language and the necessity of moral

standards. Once only, and then in a vague way (p. 198) he cites authority that of Aristotle.

Dryden employs a method of comparison, balancing Homer and Virgil, Chaucer and Ovid, Chaucer and Boccaccio, Chaucer and Horace and Virgil. The material comprises facts of life, of personality, of time and place, of character, of learning, of style, of invention, of imagination, of structural design (which Dryden regards as very important in the determination of the result), of understanding of the subject, of verisimilitude, of dramatic naturalness and taste, of good sense and judgment, the "following of nature," of style and verse and harmony, and such things. Under some of these heads his facts are wrong, as in his attributing of Piers Ploughman to Chaucer, and his strictures on Chaucer's verse, and, in general, his knowledge does not, in all ways, correspond to our own, but wherein he fails is because of deficient knowledge rather than by reason of unsound judgment on the evidence ; in both knowledge and taste he was, as we are fond of thinking, far in advance of his age.

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Chaucer's Superiority Over Ovid:

In this Preface Dryden deliberately compares Ovid to Chaucer as he believes these two poets have a great deal in common, and for this reason he chose to translate examples of the work of both poets to enable his reader of this work to draw their own conclusions about the relative merits of these poets. However, in his Preface, he clearly states that he favours Chaucer over Ovid. Dryden is very clear to

state that he is biased towards Chaucer, but he also appeals to the reader to support his view that Chaucer is superior.

Dryden thus argues that both Ovid and Chaucer are distinguished in their understanding of the different emotions and characteristics belonging to humans, and both are able to create characters so convincing that the reader feels as if they are known to them personally. However, the crucial difference, for Dryden, is that the characterisation of Chaucer's characters are that much more vivid than Ovid's characterisation, as good as it is. Dryden therefore bases his opinion that Chaucer is superior on this argument, even though he states he has "not time to prove" it. What is clear, however, is that Dryden offers his opinion up to the reader and gives them the chance to make their own mind up; the subsequent text of which this is the preface includes examples of both poets' work and the reader is thus free to "clear" Dryden from "partiality" or not, as the case may be.