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SHAKESPEAREAN CRITICAL HISTORY

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Unit 1

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO SHAKESPEARE.
FROM BEN JONSON (1572/3-1637)
TO E. M. W. TILLYARD (1889-1962)

PROGRAMME

- 1.1. The seventeenth century: Neo-classical criticism.
- 1.2. The eighteenth century: Editorial criticism.
 - 1.2.1. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784).
- 1.3. The nineteenth century: The Romantics.
 - 1.3.1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834).
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- 1.5. First half of the twentieth-century.
 - 1.5.1. The emphasis on poetry and language: Wilson Knight, Caroline Spurgeon, Wolfgang Clemen.
 - 1.5.2. The play as theatrical artifice: Harley Granville-Barker and Muriel C. Bradbrook.
 - 1.5.3. The Historical Approach: Hardin Craig, Theodore Spencer and E. M. W. Tillyard.
 - 1.5.4. New Criticism: Cleanth Brooks (1906-1994).

INTRODUCTION

Aims and Objectives

Before focusing our study on the main critical approaches to Shakespeare during the second half of the twentieth century, it is advisable for you to become acquainted with the main lines of study devoted to Shakespeare since the seventeenth century. The familiarity with leading Shakespearean critical figures such as Samuel Johnson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Bradley or Wilson Knight is essential in order to acquire a necessary overview of the Shakespearean critical world. This unit aims to show you how, since the seventeenth century, Shakespeare's artistic legacy has been appropriated and adapted according to the conception of

shows us, not just the various ways of approaching Shakespeare's texts, but also how the rich complexity of his art is able to evoke different responses over the centuries.

Study Guidelines

Throughout the different sections of this unit there are recurrent themes such as the ideas that the critics have about Shakespearean characterisation, the use of the classical unities or the relevance of imagery. You are encouraged to make constant links between sections and between critics belonging to different periods, or even to the same critical view, in order to establish as many differences and similarities as possible. By doing so, you will acquire a more general and adequate sense of the development of critical views on Shakespeare. The Selection of Texts section is essential in order to complement the explanations about each critical line and to help us to make those links more easily. The book by D. F. Bratchell, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1990), is strongly recommended. In it you can find very useful introductions to all the critical approaches analysed in this unit. Also, you can find additional information about most of the critics and texts mentioned in the unit in the Recommended Websites section.

1.1. THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY: NEO-CLASSICAL CRITICISM

The seventeenth century does not offer many critical writings on Shakespeare's works. However, it is necessary to know the Critical stance of authors and critics such as Ben Jonson (1572/3-1637), John Dryden (1631-1700) or Thomas Rymer (1641-1713), since they constitute the critical basis from which the more prolific eighteenth-century Shakespearean criticism would arise. These critics abide by neo-classical norms against which drama is measured during that century. Neo-classicism revered the Classics and the tradition and put value on literary rules, conventions and decorum. These critics describe the prescriptions of what poetry should be by implementing Aristotelian and Horatian dramatic rules.

In 1623, Ben Jonson wrote "To the memory of my beloved, The Author Mr. William Shakespeare, and what he left us."¹ In this poem, prefixed to the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's works, Jonson defines Shakespeare as a poet "not of an age, but for all time." At the same time, he also declares that the playwright's work clearly shows how he knew "Small Latin and less Greek." Jonson's famous statement turned into the starting point of a scholarly debate about Shakespeare's cultural background that has lasted till nowadays. In *Discoveries* (1640) Jonson clarifies his view about Shakespeare's work. On the one hand, he denounces frequent careless writing and the neglecting of Aristotelian classical dramatic rules, a fact that would be widely debated during the eighteenth century. On the other hand, he finally admits that, despite all his irregularities, Shakespeare's literary virtues surpassed his vices. The playwright is described by Jonson as "indeed, Honest, and of an open and free Nature, had an Excellent Fancy, brave Notions, and gentle Expressions; wherein he flow'd with that Facility, that sometimes it was necessary he should be stopp'd" (in Rowe 1709: vol. I,

xxxix). As we can see, in describing the Shakespearean universe, Jonson already uses terms such as “Nature” and “Fancy”, which were closely related to concepts such as verisimilitude, inspiration, intuition and knowledge of the human condition.² Such terms will be central in the critical evaluations of the eighteenth century, as we will see in the next section.

John Dryden’s criticism is clearly influenced by the social and theatrical changes of its time. After the civil war, the closing of the theatres and the Restoration, Dryden is immersed in a literary period greatly inclined towards French and classical theatre.³ In *Of Dramatick Poesie* (1668), Dryden also sets the basis for the central critical positions during the eighteenth century. First of all he mentions Shakespeare’s “Images of Nature”, that is, “when he describes any thing, you more than see it, you feel it too” (1985: 197). As regards Shakespeare’s reading of the Classics, Dryden points out that “he needed not the spectacles of Books to read Nature; he look’d inwards, and found her there” (197).⁴ But in *Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy* (1679), Dryden also finds flaws in the playwright’s works, which are motivated by “the fury of his fancy [that] often transported him, beyond the bounds of Judgment” (in Bratchell 1990: 28). Dryden locates these blemishes mainly in Shakespeare’s sometimes obscure, unintelligible and over-metaphorical rhetoric and considers the language used by the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights as of an inferior quality to that of his age. Such an intellectual superiority would also be asserted by Shakespearean critics during the eighteenth century. But his interest in Shakespearean drama led him to adapt three of his plays: *The Tempest, or The Enchanted Island* (1670), *Troilus and Cressida or Truth Found too Late* (1679) and *All For Love* (1678), a new version of *Antony and Cleopatra*, acclaimed as his best play.⁵

Last of all, Thomas Rymer’s *Short View of Tragedy* (1693) is conceived as an attack against Shakespeare’s writings.⁶ According to Rymer, whose critical work presents a mixture of obtuseness and perceptiveness, the correctness of a piece of work hinges on the presence of classical rules:

The English want neither genius nor language for so great a work. And, certainly, had our Authors began with Tragedy, as Sophocles and Euripides left it; had they either built on the same foundation, or after their model; we might e’re this day have seen Poetry in greater perfection,

² The concept “Nature” is more explicitly defined in section 1.2.

³ See Selection of Texts 3.

⁴ See Selection of Texts 2.

⁵ See Recommended Bibliography and Recommended Web Sites.

and boasted such Monuments of wit as Greece or Rome never knew in all their glory. (in Smith 1928: 9-10)⁷

Rymer is constantly alluding to Shakespeare's dramatic incompetence. Accordingly, he harshly censures the fact that Shakespeare does not follow the classical unities of time, action and place.⁸ He also condemns the absence of a moral scope in certain Shakespearean characters. Rymer rejects the blending of comical and tragic elements in his plays. And finally he censures the linguistic irregularities that he often finds when analysing the texts. Though in a softer tone, all these characteristics will be highlighted by the eighteenth-century criticism.

SELECTION OF TEXTS

Observe in text 1 how Ben Jonson's commendatory verse for the First Folio reveres Shakespeare's art. The playwright's genius will eternally survive in his works. Despite his deficient classical background, Shakespeare's talent is said to exceed the artistic abilities of his contemporaries. Even ancient authors would admire his work. Shakespeare is portrayed as a symbol of national pride.

In text 2 John Dryden also argues that, despite his narrow education and his literary flaws, Shakespeare's innate literary greatness is evident.

In text 3 the critic follows the Aristotelian definition of tragedy. He approves the use of classical unities and, as an example of Shakespeare's abandonment of classical rules, makes reference to the absence of the unity of action in Shakespeare's history plays. Dryden also rejects Shakespeare's use of both tragic and comic elements in one play.

In text 4 Thomas Rymer dismissively comments on the inconsistency of Shakespeare's characters in *Othello*. Following the Aristotelian division of tragedy into six parts: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle and melody, Rymer concludes that the deficient traits of characters such as Iago or Desdemona result in the absence of noble thoughts and of an appropriate diction, that is, the expression of such thoughts, in the play.

⁷ "Want" in this context means "lack".

**1. Ben Jonson,
“To the memory of my beloved, The Author
Mr. William Shakespeare, and what he left us” (1623)**

I therefore will begin. **Soul of the age!**
 The applause, delight, **the wonder of our stage!**
 My Shakespeare, rise! I will not lodge thee by
 Chaucer, or Spenser, or bid Beaumont lie
 A little further, to make thee a room:
 Thou art a monument without a tomb,
 And art alive still while thy book doth live
 And we have wits to read and praise to give.
 That I not mix thee so, my brain excuses,
 I mean with great, but disproportion'd Muses,
 For if I thought my judgment were of years,
 I should commit thee surely with thy peers,
 And tell **how far thou didst our Lyly outshine,**
Or sporting Kyd, or Marlowe's mighty line.
 And though **thou hadst small Latin and less Greek,**
 From thence to honour thee, I would not seek
 For names; but call forth thund'ring [AE]schylus,
 Euripides and Sophocles to us;
 Pacuvius, Accius, him of Cordova dead,⁹
 To life again, to hear thy buskin tread,¹⁰
 And shake a stage; or, when thy socks were on,¹¹
 Leave thee alone for the comparison
 Of all that insolent Greece or haughty Rome
 Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come.
 Triumph, my Britain! Thou hast one to show
 To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe.
He was not of an age, but for all time! (17-43)

2. John Dryden, *Of Dramatick Poesie* (1668)

To begin then with Shakespeare. He was the man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the images of nature were still present to him, and he drew them not laboriously but luckily; **when he describes anything, you more than see it, you feel it too.** Those who accuse him to have wanted learning give him the greater commendation: he was **naturally learned**; he needed not the spectacles of books to read nature; he looked inwards and found her there. I cannot say he is everywhere alike; were he so, I

⁹ “Him of Cordova dead” is Seneca.

¹⁰ “Buskin” is a high-heeled boot, worn by classical actors of tragedy.

¹¹

should do him injury to compare him with the greatest of mankind. He is **many times flat, insipid**; his **comic wit** degenerating into clenches, his **serious swelling** into bombast. But he is **always great** when some great occasion is presented to him. No man can say he ever had a fit subject for his wit and did not then raise himself as high above the rest of poets. (1985: 197-98)

3. John Dryden, *Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy* (1679)

Tragedy is thus defined by **Aristotle** ... It is an **imitation** of **one** entire, **great** and probable **action**; not told, but represented; which, by moving in us **fear** and **pity**, is conducive to the purging of those two passions in our minds. More largely thus: tragedy describes or paints an action, which action must have all the properties named above. First, it must be one or single; that is, it must not be a history of one man's life, suppose of Alexander the Great, or Julius Caesar, but one single action of theirs. This condemns all **Shakespeare's** historical plays, which are rather chronicles represented, than tragedies; and all **double action** of plays ... The natural reason of this rule is plain; for two different independent actions distract the attention and concernment of the audience, and consequently destroy the intention of the poet; if his business be to move terror and pity, and one of his actions be **comical**, the other **tragic**, the former will divert the people, and utterly make void his greater purpose. Therefore, as in perspective, so in tragedy, here must be a point of sight in which all the lines terminate; otherwise the eye wanders, and the work is false. (in Bratchell 1990: 24)

4. Thomas Rymer's, *Short View of Tragedy* (1693)

Shakespeare knew his **Character** of *Iago* was **inconsistent**. In this very play he pronounces: *If thou dost deliver more or less than Truth, / Thou art no Souldier*. This he knew; but to entertain the Audience with something new he would pass upon us a close, dissembling, false, insinuating rascal instead of an open-hearted, frank, plain-dealing Souldier; a character constantly worn by them for some thousand of years in the World ... Nor is our Poet more discreet in his *Desdemona*. He had chosen a Souldier for his Knave; And a Venetian Lady is to be the Fool. This Senators Daughter runs away to a Carriers Inn, the *Sagittary*, with a Black-amoor; is so sooner wedded to him, but the very night she Beds him is importuning and teizing him for a young smock-fac'd Lieutenant, *Cassio*. And tho' she perceives the *Moor* Jealous of *Cassio*, yet will she not forbear, but still rings *Cassio, Cassio*, in both his Ears ... **So there can be nothing in the characters, either for the profit or to delight an Audience.** The third thing to be consider'd is the *Thoughts*. But from such characters we need not expect many that are either true, or fine, or noble. And without these, that is, without sense or meaning, the fourth part of the Tragedy, which is the *expression*, can hardly deserve to be treated on distinctly. The verse rumbling in our Ears are of good use to help off the action. In the *Neighing* of an Horse, or in the *growling* of a Mastiff, there is a meaning, there is as lively expression, and, may I say, more humanity, than many

1.2. THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: EDITORIAL CRITICISM

The eighteenth century is the age of the major editions of Shakespeare's complete works. The main editors and the dates of their editions are:

Nicholas Rowe (1709, 2nd 1709, 3rd 1714).

Alexander Pope (1723, 2nd 1728).

Lewis Theobald (1733, 2nd 1740).

Sir Thomas Hanmer (1744).

William Warburton (1747).

Samuel Johnson (1765).

Edward Capell (1768).

Edmund Malone (1790).

George Steevens (1793).

They were the founders of Shakespeare textual criticism. Even now we can see their names mentioned in annotated editions of Shakespeare's plays. Their work consisted of organizing the playwright's texts by establishing what words were actually Shakespeare's and by finding out textual mistakes and how these could have been made. When a play was being printed, compositors were writing from manuscripts that were difficult to understand. They could have been reading the copy very rapidly and a word might have slipped in. Sometimes they could have also misread the punctuation. The editor had to detect those mistakes in the texts. Act and scene division also derive from the early editions since, in the Quartos and the Folios, some acts are not divided into scenes.¹² Additionally, sometimes the editor had to decide who said certain lines in the play since some of them appeared erroneously assigned. The same was the case with the stage directions.¹³

During the eighteenth century textual analysis is intimately intermingled with literary criticism since the editors also analyse the dramatic constituents of the play. Their critical approaches to Shakespearean tragedy present a mixture of reverence and condemnation. Shakespeare's plays are considered as products of literary inspiration and intuition. It is believed that his genius, and not his cultural background,

¹² See the difference between Folio edition and Quarto edition in *Literatura inglesa hasta el siglo xvii* (2002: 285).

¹³ In *The Drama Handbook. A Guide to Reading Plays*, Johan Lennard and Mary Luckhurst explain what a stage direction is in these terms: "in printed dramatic texts an instruction for action or delivery. Explicit stage-directions are distinguished from dialogue by italics and/or brackets; embedded stage-directions are implicit in an actor's part, as 'They kneel' is when Volumnia says 'Down Ladies: let us shame him with our knees' (*Coriolanus*

propels him to write plays that faithfully reflect the outer world. The eighteenth century observes in Shakespeare's works a clear association between art and life. The major feature in the playwright's stagecraft is their close relationship to what these critics call "Nature", namely, the real world as it is. "Nature" turns into an important term in the eighteenth-century critical thought since it referred to the entire divinely ordered universe. It invoked concepts that alluded to the knowledge of human nature, to common humanity, to common thoughts and feelings, that is, to a common core of shared human experience. For these critics, the greatness of Shakespeare's genius is such that it exceeds nature's power through an exceptional imitation of reality that turns Shakespearean characters into human beings with whom the audience intimately identify. Alexander Pope (1688-1744), a major poet of the age, states:

If ever any Author deserved the name of Original, it was Shakespeare. Homer itself drew not his art so immediately from the fountains of Nature ... The Poetry of Shakespeare was Inspiration indeed: he is not so much an Imitator as an Instrument of Nature; and 'tis not so just to say that he speaks from her as that she speaks thro' him. (in Vickers Vol. II 1995: 403)

But on the contrary, and following Jonson, Dryden and Rymer's neo-classical position, some of these critics find errors in Shakespeare's plays that, in their opinion, infringe the literary decorum observed at the time. In reference to Aristotelian and Horatian dramatic rules, they once more condemn the absence of the three unities; they attack the intermingling of comic and tragic scenes; they frequently observe a lack of moral purpose in the plays; and they do not find a clear correspondence between language and state of affairs in certain scenes. To most eighteenth-century critics these literary flaws were the indication of Shakespeare's ignorance of the Classics and the Aristotelian definition of tragedy. For example, in 1747, Farmer publishes *An Essay on the Learning of Shakespeare*, an all-embracing study of Shakespeare's classical education. Farmer concludes that Shakespeare's sources were mainly translations. Critics such as Rowe, Theobald or Johnson defended such a posture. On the other hand, Gildon, Pope or Capell considered that Shakespeare was trained to read the Classics. But they all boasted about their intellectual superiority by pointing out the dramatic ignorance shown by Elizabethan and Jacobean actors, audience and playwrights. To Pope, for example, this lack of cultural background turned the actors into "meer Players, not Gentleman of the stage" that "were intirely depriv'd of those advantages they now enjoy in the familiar conversation of our Nobility, and an intimacy (not to say dearness) with

1.2.1. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

As a poet, novelist, critic and biographer, Samuel Johnson was the major literary figure of his time. In 1765 he wrote a *Preface to The Plays of William Shakespeare*. Like most critics of his age, he denounces the fact that Shakespeare “sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose” (1998: 105). He also censures the playwright’s pompous diction which hinders the development of the action as a whole. His frequent use of puns is considered as one of Shakespeare’s central literary errors that Johnson defines in his famous statement as “the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it” (107). Also, as most critics during that century pointed out, Johnson considers that Shakespearean characters are “the genuine progeny of common humanity” (98). To Johnson, Shakespeare “has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion” (98).¹⁴

But though Johnson follows certain neo-classical rules, he clearly questions some of them. His attitude towards the use of the classical unities, and the mixture of tragic and comic elements in the same play, differs from the general position of many critics that closely followed neo-classical directions. Johnson’s unorthodox position rejects the idea that dramatic unities are essential in a play in order to make it plausible to the spectator. He believes that drama is not synonymous with reality and that “the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage and the players are only players The delight of tragedy proceeds from our consciousness of fiction; if we thought murders and treasons real, they would please no more” (110-11). To Johnson, Shakespeare’s genius lies mainly in his literary open-mindedness and the abandonment of such rules.¹⁵

Johnson also opposes the general criticism of his time by accepting the Shakespearean confluence of genres. According to the neo-classic view, the change of dramatic tone within a play, from tragic to comic and vice-versa, blocks the natural development of human passions that drama should trigger in the audience. It also delays the development of the action as a whole and its final dramatic effect. But to Johnson, the combination of tragic and comic elements helps to make the play instructing and entertaining. As he states, “all pleasure consists in variety” (102).¹⁶ Also,

¹⁴ See Selection of Texts 1.

¹⁵ See Selection of Texts 2.