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Chapter 1
Critical Approaches to Shakespeare.
From Ben Jonson (1572/73-1637)
to Cleanth Brooks (1906-1994)

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1.1. THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY: NEOCLASSICAL CRITICISM

The seventeenth century does not offer many critical writings on Shakespeare's works, however the critical stance of authors and critics such as Ben Jonson (1572/73-1637), John Dryden (1631-1700), and Thomas Rymer (1641-1713), constitute the critical basis of the more prolific eighteenth-century Shakespearean criticism. These critics abide by neoclassical norms drama was measured by during that century. Neoclassicism revered the classics and tradition and valued literary rules, conventions, and decorum. The scholars of this era describe what poetry should be by applying 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." He also declares that the playwright's work clearly shows how he knew "Small Latin and less Greek." Jonson's famous quip sparked a scholarly debate about Shakespeare's cultural background that has lasted till today. In *Discoveries* (1640) Jonson clarifies his view about Shakespeare's work. He denounces frequent careless writing and Shakespeare's neglect of Aristotelian classical dramatic rules, a fact that would be widely debated during the eighteenth century to then admit 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

¹ See *Selection of Texts* 1.

terms such as “Nature” and “Fancy,” which were closely related to concepts like verisimilitude, inspiration, intuition, and knowledge of the human condition. These terms will be central to critical evaluations of the eighteenth century, as will be noted in the next section.

Dramatist, poet and literary critic John Dryden’s criticism is clearly influenced by the social and theatrical changes of his time. After the civil war, the closing of the theatres and the Restoration, Dryden is immersed in a literary period that favors French and classical theatre.² In *Of Dramatick Poesie* (1668), he also sets the basis for the main 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).³ 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 faults 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. This 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*, often taken to be his best play.

In *The Tragedies of the Last Age* (1678), literary critic and historiographer Thomas Rymer, whose critical work presents a mixture of obtuseness and perceptiveness, avers that 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

² See *Selection of Texts* 3.

³ See *Selection of Texts* 2.

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, and boasted such Monuments of wit as Greece or Rome never knew in all their glory. (1956: 21)

In *Short View of Tragedy* (1693) Rymer is constantly alluding to Shakespeare's dramatic incompetence. Accordingly, he harshly censures the fact that, with the exception of *The Tempest*, Shakespeare does not follow the classical unities of time, action, and place. 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 disapproves of the linguistic irregularities that he often finds when analysing the texts. Though in a softer tone, all these characteristics will be highlighted by eighteenth-century criticism.

SELECTION OF TEXTS

In **Text 1** 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 of 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 a single 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 an appropriate diction, that is, the expression of such thoughts, in the play.

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,
 To life again, to hear thy buskin tread,
 And shake a stage; or, when thy socks were on,
 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 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 **tragical**, 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 times in the Tragical flights of *Shakespear*. (1956: 135-36)

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 publications are:

- Nicholas Rowe (1709, 1714).
- Alexander Pope (1723, 1728).
- Lewis Theobald (1733, 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. Their work consisted of organizing the playwright's texts by establishing what words were actually Shakespeare's and by finding textual later textual modifications or additions and their origins. When a play was being printed, compositors were working with manuscripts that were difficult to understand. They might have been reading the copy very rapidly and a word might have slipped in. Sometimes they might have also misread the punctuation. The editor had to detect those misprints 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. 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.

During the eighteenth century textual analysis is intimately connected to literary criticism since the editors also analyse the dramatic constituents of the play. Their critical approaches to Shakespearean tragedy are a mixture of reverence and condemnation. Shakespeare's plays are considered products of literary inspiration and intuition. It is believed that his genius, and not his cultural background, propels him to write plays that faithfully reflect the outside world. The eighteenth century sees in Shakespeare's works a clear association between art and life. The major feature in the playwright's stagecraft is the close relationship with what these critics call "Nature," namely, the real world as it is. "Nature" became an important term in 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 humanity, to common thoughts and feelings, that is, to a 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 can identify. Major poet of the age Alexander Pope (1688-1744) 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 literary decorum. 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 an indication of Shakespeare's ignorance of the classics and the Aristotelian definition of tragedy. For example, in 1747, Richard Farmer publishes *An Essay on the Learning of Shakespeare*, a comprehensive study of Shakespeare's classical education. Farmer concludes that Shakespeare's sources were mainly translations. Critics such as Nicholas Rowe, Lewis Theobald, and Samuel Johnson defended such a posture. On the other hand, Charles Gildon, Alexander Pope, and Edward Capell considered that Shakespeare was trained to read the classics. But they all boasted about their intellectual superiority by pointing out the dramatic ignorance of 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 people of the first condition" (in Vickers Vol. II 1995: 412-13).

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 reproaches the playwright's pompous diction which hinders the development of the action as a whole.

His frequent use of puns is considered 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 the critic, 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).⁴

But though Johnson follows certain neoclassical 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 neoclassical dictates. 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). Shakespeare's genius, Johnson argues, lies mainly in his literary open-mindedness and the abandonment of such rules.⁵

Johnson also opposes the general criticism of his time by accepting the Shakespearean blending of genres. According to the neoclassic view, the change of dramatic tone within a play, from tragic to comic and viceversa, 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 Johnson considers that the combination of tragic and comic elements helps to make the play instructive and entertaining. As he states, "all pleasure consists in variety" (102).⁶ Also, Johnson observes how, through a diversity of dramatic situations, Shakespeare makes the spectator feel a wide range of feelings but never indifference.

⁴ See *Selection of Texts* 1.

⁵ See *Selection of Texts* 2.

⁶ See *Selection of Texts* 3.

SELECTION OF TEXTS

In **Text 1**, Johnson describes Shakespeare's works as truthful reflections of real life. Note Johnson's description of Shakespearean characters as holding the essence of humankind.

In **Text 2**, Johnson ponders the use of classical unities. Though he acknowledges his ideas would trigger critical attacks from his contemporaries, he argues that the unities of time and place are not essential to enhance the artistic value of a play.

In **Text 3**, Johnson once more alludes to the instructive quality of art and reflects on the mixture of comic and tragic elements in a single play. He accepts the artistic interest of what he calls "mingled drama" since the fusion of laughter and sorrow makes the play more faithful to life.

Samuel Johnson, *Preface to The Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765)

Text 1

Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern 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 or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers; 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, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species. (1998: 98)

Text 2

Whether Shakespeare knew the **unities**, and rejected them by design, or deviated from them by happy ignorance, it is, I think, impossible to decide, and useless to inquire. We may reasonably suppose, that, when he rose to notice, he

did not want the counsels and admonitions of scholars and critics, and that he at last deliberately persisted in a practice, which he might have begun by chance. As nothing is essential to the fable, but unity of **action**, and as the unities of **time** and **place** arise evidently from false assumptions, and by circumscribing the extent of the drama, lessen its variety, I cannot think it much to be lamented, that they were not known by him, or not observed ... Such **violations of rules** merely positive, become the comprehensive genius of Shakespeare ... Yet when I speak thus slightly of dramatic rules, I cannot but recollect how much wit and learning may be produced against me ... the result of my inquiries, in which it would be ludicrous to boast of impartiality, is that the unities of time and place are not essential to a just drama, that, though they may sometimes conduce to pleasure, they are always to be sacrificed to the nobler beauties of variety and instruction. (1998: 111-12)

Text 3

Shakespeare has united the powers of exciting **laughter** and **sorrow** not only in one mind but in one composition. Almost all his plays are divided between **serious** and **ludicrous characters**, and in the successive evolutions of the design, sometimes produce seriousness and sorrow, and sometimes levity and laughter. That this is a practice **contrary to the rules of criticism** will be readily allowed; but there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature. **The end of writing is to instruct; 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 alternations of exhibitions, and approaches nearer than either to the **appearance of life**, by showing how great machinations and slender designs may promote or obviate one another, and the high and the low co-operate in the general system by unavoidable concatenation. (1998: 101-102)

1.3. THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY: THE ROMANTICS

By the end of the eighteenth century several critical essays argued that Shakespeare's genius was primarily in his superb characterisation. Two of those were Maurice Morgann's "An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff" (1777) and Thomas Whately's "Remarks of Some of the Characters of Shakespeare" (1785). Both critics disregard

the absence of neoclassical rules in Shakespeare's plays and they develop an idea that critics such as Pope, Guthrie, Theobald, Gildon, and Johnson had already pointed out. Shakespeare's characters, as Whately remarks, "are masterly copies from nature; differing each from the other, and animated as the originals though correct to a scrupulous precision" (in Bratchell 1990: 42). Essays, such as Whately's and Morgann's, set the basis for a critical approach to Shakespearean tragedy that would be fully developed by the Romantics during the early nineteenth century. The character would turn into the central element of the critical analysis and would be envisioned as a real human being with whom the spectator could easily identify. The main Shakespearean Romantic critics are: A. W. Schlegel and his *On Dramatic Art and Literature* (1815); William Hazlitt and his work *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817); and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) and his *Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare* (1818).

1.3.1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the most accomplished British poets of the Romantic era, was also an insightful critic. "The stage in Shakespeare's time was a naked room with a blanket for a curtain; but he made it a field for monarchs" (1985: 232). This statement, from his influential *Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare* (1818), exemplifies Coleridge's reverence for Shakespeare's works.

Coleridge rejects the neoclassical idea that Shakespeare's work was the product of mere inspiration, intuition, and ignorance of rules. He opposes those who describe Shakespeare as "'wild', 'irregular', 'pure child of nature'" (236) since he does not imitate the classics. To Coleridge, only reverential criticism is valid. As an obvious response to the eighteenth-century emphasis on classical unities and attacks on Shakespeare's use of them or lack thereof, Coleridge observes in Shakespeare's works what he considers a more important law of unity. He calls it a unity of feeling, which "has its foundations, not in the factitious necessity of custom, but in nature itself" (232). Coleridge argues that this unity pervades Shakespeare's works. The critic also describes

these works as organic. He compares poetry with a living body that “must of necessity circumscribe itself by rules” and “is of necessity an organised one; and what is organization but the connection of parts in and for a whole, so that each part is at once end and means?” (239). Coleridge concludes that Shakespeare’s works have their own form and are not lawless but he distinguishes between organic and mechanic form. The form is mechanic when a “pre-determined form” is given to the work. The form is organic when the work is generated by the poet’s “Imagination.” This form is drawn from within. It “is innate; it shapes as it develops from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form” (239). That is, the organic form is governed by the essence, the intrinsic quality of a thing, and all its parts grow according to an internal law.

Coleridge observes in the playwright’s plays and poems intellectual work, so close to human nature that he compares Shakespeare’s creative process with the working of the human mind. For Coleridge “Imagination” in Shakespeare is the way the playwright manipulates images in the plays in order to modify and create new images, ideas, and emotions. The combination of these concepts aims to provoke a certain effect. Coleridge compares it to the functioning of human mental operations provoked by certain stimuli, feelings, and emotions.

Coleridge describes the playwright’s characters “like those in life, to be inferred by the reader, not told to him” (235).⁷ His works and characters are the result not of mere observation but also of the playwright’s meditation. The immediate consequence of meditation is the creation of characters that are “at once true to nature” (231) and reflections of the playwright’s wisdom, intuition, and, in Coleridge’s words, “oceanic mind” (230). The plot is interesting when it affects characterisation. Therefore, characters are, according to Coleridge, crucial to the play whereas plot is “a mere canvas, no more” (234).

⁷ See *Selection of Texts* 1.

Greatly influenced by A. W. Schlegel, Coleridge considers that the reader must analyse the characters' psychological conflicts in order to discover the real motive of the disorder. He argues that, Shakespeare's poetry is, at the same time, philosophical since it reflects the constituents of the entire human universe and of the human mind.⁸ The critic believes that Shakespeare's poetry provokes an emotional and psychological effect that helps the reader to discover his or her real self and helps us all to become aware of our inward nature. As opposed to the ancient stage and its use of classical unities, which, according to Coleridge, are mainly addressed to the senses, Shakespearean drama excites the imagination, reason, and the passions.

SELECTION OF TEXTS

As Johnson already argued, in **Text 1**, Coleridge asserts that Shakespeare's genius lies in his ability to reflect nature, human passions, and affections. Characters resemble real human beings.

In **Text 2**, Hamlet is analysed following what Coleridge calls mental philosophy. He analyses the character's behaviour according to the mechanisms of the human mind. To Coleridge, mental health depends on a balance between impressions from outside objects and the inner workings of the mind. In Hamlet, this balance is upset.

<p>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, <i>Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare (1818)</i></p>
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Text 1

Lastly, in Shakespeare the heterogeneous is united, as it is in **nature**. You must not suppose a pressure or **passion** always acting on or in the character; passion in Shakespeare is that by which the individual is distinguished from others, not that which makes a different kind of him. Shakespeare followed the main march of the **human affections**. He entered into no analysis of the

⁸ See *Selection of Texts 2*.

passions or faiths of men, but assured himself that such and such passions and faiths were grounded in our common nature, and not in the mere accidents of ignorance or disease. This is an important consideration, and constitutes **our Shakespeare the morning star, the guide and the pioneer, of true philosophy**. (1985: 235)

Text 2

I believe the character of **Hamlet** may be traced to Shakespeare's deep and accurate science in **mental philosophy**. Indeed, that this character must have some connection with the **common fundamental laws of our nature** may be assumed from the fact, that Hamlet has been the darling of every country in which the literature of England has been fostered. In order to understand him, it is essential that we should reflect on the **constitution of our minds**. Man is distinguished from the brute animals in proportion as thought prevails over sense: but in the healthy processes of the mind, a balance is constantly maintained between the impressions from outward objects and the inward operations of the intellect; – for if there be an overbalance in the contemplative faculty, man thereby becomes the creature of mere meditation, and loses his natural power of action

... In Hamlet he seems to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to the objects of our senses, and our meditation on the workings of our minds, – an *equilibrium* between the real and the imaginary worlds. In Hamlet this balance is disturbed: his thoughts, and the images of his fancy, are far more vivid than his actual perceptions, and his very perceptions, instantly passing through the *medium* of his contemplations, acquire, as they pass, a form and a colour not naturally their own. Hence we see a great, an almost enormous, intellectual activity, and a proportionate aversion to real action consequent upon it, with all its symptoms and accompanying qualities. (1985: 272)

1.4. THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY: THE VICTORIANS

The most important landmarks in Shakespearean criticism written during the Victorian age were: Edward Dowden's *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art* (1875) and A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904).

1.4.1. Edward Dowden (1843-1913)

As well as a biographer and poet, Irish Edward Dowden was also an influential critic. *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art* (1875) turned into the first study of Shakespeare's artistic development that used a chronological and biographical analysis. Dowden links Shakespeare's personality and his evolution as a writer and considers 1590, 1600, and 1610 crucial dates in the playwright's life and, consequently, dramatic career. Like the Romantics, Dowden continues to explore characters' feelings and thoughts as real human traits and his studies have a clear biographical touch.

1.4.2. A. C. Bradley (1851-1935)

A. C. Bradley was considered the foremost British Shakespeare academic of his age and *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) the most notable piece of criticism on Shakespearean tragedy from the end of the Victorian time. In the first chapter of his critical analysis, "The Substance of Shakespearean Tragedy," Bradley defines tragedy in Shakespeare. According to the critic, Shakespeare initially presents a moral order in his plays in which there is a clear struggle between good and evil. Shakespearean heroes are originally introduced as essential and positive constituents of that order. However, the fall of these heroes, due to their own errors and not to external forces such as the intervention of Fortune or Fate, bring about the hegemony of evil, chaos, and disorder in the play described by Bradley as "an intestinal struggle" (1992: 29).⁹ This struggle will conclude after a period of "self-torture and self-waste" (30). That is, the restoration of the initial order will come about after the destruction of evil but also after the death of the hero who is at first depicted as the image of stability and control. According to Bradley, "there is no tragedy in its expulsion of evil: the tragedy is that this involves the waste of good" (29).

Bradley perceives an intimate union between these tragical disorders, these "intestinal struggles," and the inward struggles of the characters. To him, the action is "essentially the expression of character" (13). When

⁹ See *Selection of Texts* 2.2.

developing the inner tensions of the characters, Shakespeare, “shows his most extraordinary power” (12). Consequently, Bradley centres a great deal of his analysis on the construction of the Shakespearean characters, whom he considers as “made of the stuff we find within ourselves and within the persons who surround them” (14). Bradley endeavours to analyse the obscure workings of the characters’ minds and to find the psychological motives and consequences of their actions as if he were analysing the behaviour of real human beings. Bradley writes in an age during which there was also a scientific interest in psychology. In fact, in 1904 Sigmund Freud published *Psychopatology of Everyday Life*. Bradley follows the character-criticism tradition that critics such as Morgann and Whately initiated at the end of the eighteenth century and that was continued by the Romantics. Bradley attempts to discover and describe the atmosphere and the unity of the plays by analysing the imagery and pointing out the whole effect of the dramas. However, despite the critical value of many of his assertions, Bradley’s analysis of Shakespeare’s tragedies has been widely and, on many occasions, unjustly rejected during the twentieth century due to his critical insistence on the application of psychological realism to character analysis.

SELECTION OF TEXTS

In Dowden’s introduction to his analysis of Shakespeare’s history plays in **Text 1**, the critic shows his interest in Shakespeare as a man not as an artist. He focuses on the playwright’s inner life. According to Dowden, the effects of the writing of the history plays are moral not political. To the critic, Shakespeare’s inner life was enriched by the study of English history.

In **Text 2.1** Bradley establishes the difference between outer and inner struggle. To Bradley, Shakespearean drama presents human forces at work in the characters’ souls, which generate discord between them, such as the one between Macbeth and Macduff. That would be the outer conflict. The conflict of human forces could also take place within the hero’s inner being, as in the case of Macbeth’s tribulations. That would be the inner struggle. Both are necessary in

the construction of the tragedy. Bradley also presents the interdependent relationship between action and character.

Text 2.2 analyses King Lear's error –the origin of his fall and the foundation for the inner and outer conflicts of the play– and the development of the spectator's response to King Lear's initial actions. Our early feeling of pity for Lear as an old man precedes our rejection of the protagonist's selfishness, moral blindness, authoritarianism, and unrestrained fury.

1. **Edward Dowden**, *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art* (1875)

The historical plays of Shakspeare may be approached from many sides. It would be interesting to endeavour to ascertain from them what was Shakspeare's political creed. It would be interesting to compare his method as artist when handling historical matter with that of some other great dramatist ... Shakspeare's opinions, however, and **Shakspeare's method as artist** are less than **Shakspeare himself**. It is **the man** we are still seeking to discover – behind his works, behind his opinions, behind his artistic process. Shakspeare's life, we must believe, ran on below his art, and was to himself of deeper import than his work as artist. Not perhaps his material life, though to this also he contrived to make his art contribute, but **the life of his inmost being** ... The main question therefore which it is desirable to put in the case of the historical plays now to be considered is this – What was Shakspeare gaining for himself of wisdom or of strength while these were the organs through which his faculties of thought and imagination nourished themselves, inhaling and exhaling their breath of life? That Shakspeare should have accomplished so great an achievement towards the interpreting of history is much, –that he should have grasped in thought the national life of England during a century and upwards, in her periods of disaster and collapse, of civil embroilment, and of heroic union and exaltation–, this is much. But that by his study of history Shakspeare should have built up **his own moral nature**, and have fortified himself for the conduct of life, was, we may surmise, to Shakspeare the chief outcome of his toil. (1892: 162-63)

2. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904)**Text 1**

If we are to include the **outer** and the **inner struggle** in a conception more definite than that of conflict in general, we must employ some such phrase as 'spiritual force.' This will mean whatever **forces** act in the **human spirit**, whether good or evil, whether personal passion or impersonal principle; doubts, desires, scruples, ideas – whatever can animate, shake, possess, and drive a man's soul. In a Shakespearean tragedy some such forces are shown **in conflict**. They are shown acting in men and generating strife between them. They are also shown, less universally, but quite as characteristically, generating disturbance and even conflict in the soul of the hero. Treasonous ambition in Macbeth collides with loyalty and patriotism in Macduff and Malcolm: here is the outward conflict. But these powers of principles equally collide in the soul of Macbeth himself: here is the inner. And neither by itself could make the tragedy.

We shall see later the importance of this idea. Here we need only observe that the notion of tragedy as a conflict emphasizes the fact that **action** is the **centre of the story**, while the concentration of interest, in the greater plays, on the inward struggle emphasizes the fact that this **action** is essentially the **expression of character**. (1992: 12-13)

Text 2

At the very **beginning**, it is true, we are inclined to feel merely **pity** and misgivings. The first lines tell us that **Lear's mind** is beginning to fail with **age**. Formerly he had perceived how different were the characters of Albany and Cornwall, but now he seems either to have lost this perception or to be unwisely ignoring it. The rashness of his division of the kingdom troubles us, and we cannot but see with concern that its motive is mainly **selfish**. The absurdity of pretence of making the division depend on protestations of love from his daughters, his complete blindness to the hypocrisy which is patent to us at a glance, his piteous delight in these protestations, the openness of his expressions of preference for his youngest daughter – all make us smile, but all pain us. But pity begins to give way to another feeling when we witness the precipitance, the **despotism**, the **uncontrolled anger** of his injustice to Cordelia and Kent, and the '**hideous rashness**' of his persistence in dividing the kingdom after the

rejection of his one dutiful child. We feel now the presence of **force** as well as **weakness**, but we feel also the presence of the tragic $\upsilon\beta\rho\iota\zeta$ (hubris). Lear, we see, is generous and unsuspecting, of an open and free nature, like Hamlet and Othello, and indeed most of Shakespeare's heroes, who in this, according to Ben Jonson, resemble the poet who made them. Lear, we see, is also **choleric** by temperament – the first of Shakespeare's heroes who is so. And a long life of **absolute power**, in which he has been flattered to the top of his bent, has produced in him that **blindness to human limitations**, and that **presumptuous self-will**, which in Greek tragedy we have so often seen stumbling against the altar of Nemesis. Our consciousness that the **decay of old age** contributes to this condition deepens our pity and our sense of **human infirmity**, but certainly does not lead us to regard the old King as irresponsible, and so to sever the tragic *nexus* which blinds together his **error** and his **calamities**. (1992: 243-244)

1.5. FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

1.5.1. The Emphasis on Poetry and Language: George Wilson Knight, Caroline Spurgeon, Wolfgang Clemen

During the first half of the twentieth century, and as a reaction to approaches based mainly on character study, a group of critics emerges whose works focus on the study of Shakespeare's style. The language of his plays was studied in detail from various points of view but the most productive linguistic approach to tragedy was the analysis of imagery.

1.5.1.1. G. Wilson Knight (1897-1985)

G. Wilson Knight is one of the most remarkable scholars in this field. His main works are: *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy* (1930); *The Imperial Theme: Further Interpretations of Shakespeare's Tragedies Including the Roman Plays* (1931); and *The Crown of Life* (1947). In the opening chapter of *The Wheel of Fire*, "On the Principles of Shakespeare Interpretation," Knight defines his method. He draws a clear line between criticism and interpretation. Criticism objectifies the work, decides what should be considered its "good" and "bad" elements to pass final judgement on the work. Interpretation, however, does not

appraise the evaluation of the work. It endeavours, as Knight states, “to merge into the work it analyses ... to understand its subject in the light of its own nature” (1).

This merging takes place through the analysis of patterns of images and symbols that help the interpreter to find the central theme, unity and dominating atmosphere of the play, what he calls, “the burning core of mental or spiritual reality from which each play derives its nature and meaning” (14).¹⁰ Knight focuses on the spatial dimension of the play as opposed to the temporal one and considers as constituents of the “spatial dimension” “a set of correspondences which relate to each other independently of the time-sequence which is the story” (3). The interplay between images and symbols in each play constitutes what he calls the play’s dominating “atmosphere.” The critic sees a close inter-penetration between the action of the play and the symbolic patterns that construct an “omnipresent and mysterious reality brooding motionless over and within the play’s movement” (5).

Knight criticises the analysis of the play as a theatrical artifice, as will be noted in 1.5.2, since “it does not render up its imaginative secret” (13) and he also dismisses the notion that the author’s intentions and the sources of the work are relevant to its nature. They have no value for the interpreter who should abandon the analysis of facts and be receptive to the essence of the poetic work. Knight reproves psychological realism for setting up a distinction between artistic and normal ethics.¹¹ He argues that the actions of the characters cannot be analysed in accordance with the rules of human behaviour, with the set of laws of normal ethics, they should be analysed against the laws of artistic ethics. Characters must be studied as dramatic constructions and not as human beings. According to Knight, literary interpretation should never be founded on analogies with human affairs since plays, as artistic expressions, have their own set of close-knit and self-imposed laws.

¹⁰ See *Selection of Texts* 1.2.

¹¹ See *Selection of Texts* 1.1.