UNIT 7: SAMUEL JOHNSON: *PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE*

UNIT STRUCTURE:

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Samuel Johnson: The Critic

7.4 Johnson: *Preface to Shakespeare*

7.5 Important Concepts of the Text

7.6 Reception of Johnson as a Critic

7.7 Let us Sum up

7.8 Further Reading

7.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

7.10 Possible Questions

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to

- assess the importance of Samuel Johnson with respect to his life and works
- discuss the text of *Preface to Shakespeare* as an important text for Neo-classical criticism
- explain the different concepts and issues that are raised in the text
- gain ideas on how Johnson's text provides fresh insights into the plays of Shakespeare
- evaluate the status of Johnson as a critic of the 18th century

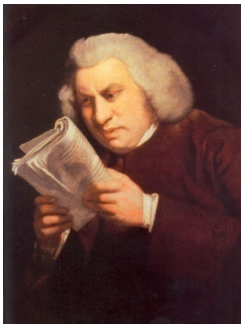
7.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, an attempt has been made to discuss Neoclassical criticism of the 18th century as represented by a text called *Preface to Shakespeare* by Samuel Johnson. Johnson is one of the most influential critics in English literary history of the Neoclassical period. His literary endeavours include a monumental *Dictionary of the English Language,* a

comprehensive edition of Shakespeare, and the *Lives of the English Poets*—a set of insightful, vividly written biographical portraits of 17th and 18th century authors. Johnson's eight-volume edition of Shakespeare was published in October 1765. There, he celebrates Shakespeare's talent in portraying character and revealing truths about the human nature, and defends the playwright against charges of violating the dramatic unities of time and place and improperly mixing the genres of tragedy and comedy. An integral dimension of Johnson's literary output was his literary criticism, which was to have a huge impact on the English men of letters in the subsequent days to come. In this unit, you will notice that *Preface to Shakespeare* played a large part in establishing Shakespeare's reputation in the 18th century as well as in subsequent period.

7.3 SAMUEL JOHNSON: THE CRITIC

Samuel Johnson, the eldest son of Michael Johnson, was born in 1709 at Lichfield, Staffordshire, a town about 100 miles Northwest of London. His father was a bookseller and his education consisted largely of the volumes in his father's bookshop, and by what was "whipped into" him by the master of the grammar school in Lichfield. Leaving this school at the age of 16, he spent the next two years at home presumably learning his father's business. It was during this period that the foundations of his future career as a man of letters were laid by his voracious reading. He attended Pembroke College at the University of Oxford for only a year, leaving in December 1729, because he lacked the funds to continue. During his short stay at Oxford, he proved himself an ardent Latin scholar of vast knowledge. As he recalls later, "I was miserably poor, and I thought to fight my way by my literature and my wit". The fight against poverty continued for most of his life. Johnson was an intense, discerning reader as the economist Adam Smith recalled—"Johnson knew more books



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org

than any man alive." While at oxford, he was influenced by the popular devotional tract A *Serious Call* to *A Devout and Holy Life* (1729), by the schoolmaster and minister William Law. He termed Law's book "the finest piece of hortatory theology in any language", and it is the foundation for the prayers and meditations that he composed later in his life.

In July 1735, Johnson married Elizabeth Jervis Porter, a widow more than 20 years his senior, and a mother of three children. Though she was very fat, dressed fantastically, and affected in manners and addicted to drink, Johnson was deeply associated with her. With the help of a small fortune from her, in 1736 Johnson opened a school in Edial, near Lichfield. Although he got very few pupils from the start, one of his students whose name was David Garrick turned out to be very distinguished and became a poet, an essayist, and an acclaimed actor and manager of Drury Lane Theatre. Johnson left Lichfield for London in search of better fortune. While in London, he worked on a historical tragedy *Irene,* which recounts the story of the love of Sultan Mahomet for the lovely Irene, a Christian slave captured in Constantinople. (The play was not performed until 1749, in a production that Garrick organised). Therefore, in 1737, Johnson and Garrick travelled to London, which had by then become the largest city in Europe with a population between 650,000 and 700,000. Johnson found it captivating and later famously professed: "No, Sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford." Once settled there, he began his association with the *Gentleman's Magazine,* contributing to it not only prose and poetry but also, from 1741 to 1744, a series of speeches and works that represented the debates in the House of Commons.

In between 1739-49, Johnson was engaged with numerous literary projects. One was his biography of Mr. Richard Savage: *An Account of the Life of Mr. Richard Savage, Son of the Earl of Rivers* (1744)—a book on the trials of a failed poet whom Johnson knew and the tribulations of Grub Street, famous for many literary hacks and desperate writers. *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1949) in verse was yet another achievement and the most important and characteristic product his genius. This



Drury Lane Theatre: Theatre Royal Drury Lane is the oldest London Theatre still in use. It stands in the eastern part of the City of Westminster.

solemn, disquieting rumination on the futility of worldly hopes and endeavours was the first composition that Johnson issued under his own name. Johnson was working on and planning larger projects as well. In 1745, he wrote "Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth," along with a proposal for an edition of Shakespeare. In the following year, he outlined his "Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language."

During 1950s, Johnson wrote many periodical essays. The best of this work appeared in *The Rambler,* which was published twice weekly from March 1750 to March 1752. The 20th century critic Walter Jackson Bate has described these pieces as "saturated with thought to an extent unexceeded by any other writer of English prose since Francis Bacon." Johnson also contributed essays to his friend John Hawkesworth's periodical *The Adventurer;* and from 1758 to 1760, he wrote yet another series of essays, titled *The Idler, which* were published in a weekly newspaper, *The Universal Chronicle.* However, Johnson's greatest accomplishment of the decade was *A Dictionary of the English Language,* published in two large folio volumes in April 1755. Nine years in the making, and compiled by Johnson and six assistants, it consists of 40,000 defined words and 114,000 quotations that illustrate the meanings. In January 1759, Johnson wrote his only long fictional work *Rasselas* so that he could pay for his mother's funeral and settle her debts. Three years later, he received from King George III an annual pension of 300 pounds, winning at last some economic security. Then he met the Scotsman James Boswell, a twenty-two-year-old lawyer less interested in law than in literature and politics. Boswell cultivated Johnson's friendship; watched him closely at the literary clubs with Adam Smith, the painter Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, and other luminaries; conversed with them, and gathered facts and anecdotes about him. Boswell made Johnson the subject of what is often called the greatest biography in English, *The Life of Samuel Johnson,* LL.D. (I79I).

In 1777, Johnson was approached by London booksellers to contribute, brief prefaces to a multivolume edition of English poets. Though the original plan was scaled back (instead of including all reputable poets from Chaucer on, the survey began in the 17th with Cowley), Johnson did much more than required, producing in all about

400,000 words of biographical and interpretive text on the fifty-two poets (all male). Each preface follows a three-part plan, as Johnson recounts the author's biography, the features of his character, and criticism of his writings.

Johnson died on 20th December 1784, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Johnson was more than a well-known writer and scholar. He was a celebrity for the activities and the state of his health in his later years, were constantly reported in various journals and newspapers. In addition, most interestingly, when there was nothing to report, something was invented. According to Bate, "Johnson loved biography," and he "changed the whole course of biography for the modern world. One by-product was the most famous biographical work—Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. There were however, many other memoirs and biographies on Johnson after his death. Some of them include Thomas Tyers's *A Biographical Sketch of Dr. Samuel Johnson* (1784); John Hawkins's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1787), the first full-length biography of Johnson; and Arthur Murphy's *An Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson* (1792) which replaced Hawkins's biography as the introduction to a collection of Johnson's *Works*. Another important source was Fanny Burney, who described Johnson as "the acknowledged Head of Literature in this kingdom" and kept a diary containing details missing from other biographies.



LET US KNOW

There are many societies formed around and dedicated to the study and enjoyment of Samuel Johnson's life and works. On the bicentennial of Johnson's death in 1984, Oxford University held a weeklong conference featuring 50 papers, and the Arts Council of Great Britain held an exhibition of "Johnsonian portraits and other memorabilia". *The London Times* and *Punch* produced parodies of Johnson's style for the occasion. In 1999, the BBC 4 television channel started Samuel Johnson award for non-fiction.

His Works :

You should note that Johnson's career as writer and critic is marked by three major scholarly projects. These are – *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), and his eight-volume edition of Shakespeare (1765), and *Lives of the English Poets* (1783). In 1746, some London booksellers commissioned Johnson to produce a wholly new dictionary of the English Language. Produced on historical principles on illustrations from well-known writers, this dictionary has still retained its historical significance.

As you have realized that, an integral dimension of Johnson's literary output and personality was his literary criticism, which was to have a huge impact on the English men of letters in the subsequent days to come. Another area in which Johnson exerted great influence on his successors was that of biography and comparative estimation of the poets in the English canon. His accounts of the lives and works of numerous English poets were first produced as a series of prefaces to a large edition of the works of the English poets. These prefaces, fifty-two in all, were published separately as *Lives of the English Poets* in 1781. In general, Johnson raises biography to an art: far from being adherent to facts. His most fundamental appeal, throughout these prefaces, is to the notion of "nature," as encompassing reason, truth, and moral propriety. He considers various genres and styles of poetry, the nature of imitation, the problems of translation, the classical rules of art, and the duties of literary criticism.

However, many of Johnson's views on drama are available in his contributions to different issues of the *Rambler.* Johnson stresses that rules should be drawn from reason rather than from mere precedent (*Rambler* 197–199). In No. 156 of *Rambler,* he had also urged, "many rules have been advanced without consulting nature or reason." Among these, he cites some long-held precepts about drama: the rule that only three persons should appear at one time on stage; the limitation of a play to five acts; and the unity of time, whereby a play should be performed in the compass of one day. He applauds the "mixed" genre of tragicomedy, suggesting that this does not violate either reason or the essential function of drama, which "pretends only to be the mirror of life."

Johnson does, however, commend the absolute need to observe the rules of unity of action and unity of character. In judging which rules to follow, he states that it "ought to be the first endeavour of a writer to distinguish nature from custom" (*Rambler*, 194–196). There seems to be an admission here, not that the foundations of classical precepts – adherence to nature, reason, and truth – were wrong, but that some rules have not been truly derived from these foundations.

Johnson on Shakespeare

Shakespeare was a subject of much of critical discussion during Johnson's period and his subsequent reputation in the Neoclassical period rests mainly on the assessments made by Dryden and Johnson. Dryden had made his claims for Shakespeare in his *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* (1668) which was to have important implications for his own ideas of drama. The three 'Unities' represented the dictates of the classical influences on drama. However, Johnson's *Preface* shows how Shakespeare is exonerated from his breaking of the rule of the Unities, and the views contained in it sums up what Johnson's age thought of Shakespeare.

Johnson's connection with Shakespeare and his plays started from the very beginning of his literary career as part of his project to edit the plays of Shakespeare. Because, he firmly believed that none of the previous editors of Shakespeare—Rowe, Pope and Theobald had done any satisfactory job. In 1745, Johnson issued his *Proposal* for bringing out a completely new edition of all the plays of Shakespeare. A specimen of the kind of work that could be expected from Johnson is visible in his *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth.* However, Johnson had to call off his scheme, as he was busy with the *Dictionary* (1755). Johnson once again turned towards Shakespeare with yet another proposal for a new edition of Shakespeare in 1756. Here, he presents a comprehensive account of the duties and responsibilities of a modern editor of Shakespeare. In October 1765, Johnson's *Shakespeare* finally appeared in 8 volumes. His goal was to produce a huge text that was clear and intelligible. Keeping this end in view, Johnson modified the punctuation, modernised the spelling and added

many new stage directions. Moreover, his experience as a lexicographer had made him an expert in accurate definitions of certain terms. One might of course argue that Johnson was not free from criticism. For example, Johnson did not have access to all the necessary materials to perform a thorough job of collation. So, as an editor of Shakespeare, Johnson does not rank among the greatest editors. However, you should also note that the *Preface* alone would entitle Johnson to be ranked among the foremost critics of Shakespeare.

Through his criticism, Johnson introduces certain fresh insights into Shakespeare's dramatic art. From the outset, he seeks to establish Shakespeare's undisputed supremacy in the world of drama, although he never hesitates to mention the flaws of Shakespeare. Despite Shakespeare's violation of the classical rules, like the unities, Johnson applies to the work of Shakespeare the Longinian principle of 'length of duration and continuance of esteem'. Shakespeare's greatness lies in the universal appeal of his plays owing to their faithful portrayal of the universals of human experience. At the same time, his characters are noted for their intense realism. Johnson also points to Shakespeare's originality and places him next to Homer. His genuine strength lies not in the isolated passages of exceptional beauty but in the orderly development of his plots.

Thus, we may assume that Samuel Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* is a landmark in Shakespearean criticism. In one sense, he laid the foundations of modern Shakespearean scholarship and textual criticism.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Write a short note on Johnson's literary accomplishments with reference to his periodical essays.

Q 2: Who was David Garrick? What were his collaborations with Dr. Johnson?

Q 3: What is the significance of Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*?

Q 4: Describe briefly how Johnson's engagement with the works of Shakespeare?

7.4 JOHNSON: *PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE*

Johnson begins his *Preface* by referring to the debate on the relative virtues of ancient and modern writers. He affirms that the excellence of the ancient authors is based on a "gradual and comparative" estimate, as tested by "observation and experience." If we judge Shakespeare by these criteria – "length of duration and continuance of esteem"–we are justified, thinks Johnson, in allowing Shakespeare "to assume the dignity of an ancient," since his reputation has survived the customs, opinions, and circumstances of his time. Inquiring into the reasons behind Shakespeare's enduring success and popularity, Johnson makes an important statement: "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature". By "general nature", Johnson refers to the avoidance of particular manners and customs, and the foundation of one's work on the 'stability of truth' – truth that is permanent and universal. Johnson claims that Shakespeare is "the poet of nature: the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life." His characters are not molded by the accidents of time, place, and local custom; rather, they are "the genuine progeny of common humanity," and they "act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated."In contrast with the "hyperbolical or aggravated characters" of most playwrights, Shakespeare's personages are not heroes but men; he expresses "human sentiments in human language," using common occurrences. Indeed, in virtue of his use of durable speech derived from "the common intercourse of life," Johnson views Shakespeare as "one of the original masters of our language". Though Shakespeare "approximates the remote, and familiarises the wonderful," the events he portrays accord with probability. In view of these qualities, Shakespeare's drama "is the mirror of life" (64–65).

Johnson then defends Shakespeare against charges brought by critics and writers such as John Dennis, Thomas Rymer, and Voltaire. They argue that Shakespeare's characters insufficiently reflect their

period and status. For example, his Romans not sufficiently Roman, and his kings not sufficiently royal. Johnson retorts that Shakespeare "always makes nature predominate over accident; and…he preserves the essential character," extricated from accidental conventions and the "casual distinction of country and condition" (65–66). A more serious form of censure concerns Shakespeare's mixing of comic and tragic scenes, thereby violating the classical distinction between tragedy and comedy. Johnson acknowledges that Shakespeare's plays "are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, 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 in numerable modes of combination." The ancient poets selected certain aspects of this variety, which they restricted to tragedy and comedy respectively; whereas Shakespeare "has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition" (66–67).

It is in his defence of tragicomedy that Johnson appeals to nature as a higher authority than precedent. He allows that Shakespeare's practice is "contrary to the rules of criticism . . . 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, and approaches nearer than either to the appearance of life." Moreover, says Johnson, the mixed genre makes for greater variety, and "all pleasure consists in variety" (67). Johnson also points out that when Shakespeare's plays were first "edited" in 1623 by members of his acting company, these editors, though they divided the plays into comedies, histories, and tragedies, did not distinguish clearly between these three types. But although through all of the three forms, Shakespeare's mode of composition is the same which is an interchange of seriousness and merriment" and he "never fails to attain his purpose". However, Johnson does concede, that Shakespeare had many faults. As he states: "Shakespeare with his excellencies has likewise faults, and faults

sufficient to obscure and overwhelm any other merit. I shall show, them in the proportion in which they appear to me, without envious malignity or superstitious veneration. No question can be more innocently discussed than a dead poet's pretensions to renown; and little regard is due to that bigotry which sets candour higher than truth."

The faults of Shakespeare, according to Johnson are as follows:

A. He is "more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose."

B. The plots are often so loosely formed that a very slight consideration may prove them, and so carelessly pursued that he seems not always fully to comprehend his own design.

C. In many of his plays the later part is evidently neglected.

D. He had no regard to distinction of time or place, but gives to one age or nation, without scruple, the customs, institutions, and opinions of another, at the expense not only of likelihood, but also of possibility.

E. In his comic scenes he is seldom very successful. Neither his gentlemen nor his ladies have much delicacy, nor are sufficiently distinguished from his clowns by any appearance of refined manners.

F. In tragedy his performance seems constantly to 'be worse, as his labour is more. The effusions of passion which exigence forces out are for the most part striking and energetic; but whenever he solicits his invention, or strains his faculties, the offspring of his throes is tumour, meanness, tediousness, and obscurity.

G. In narration, he affects a disproportionate pomp of diction, and a wearisome train of circumlocution, and tells the incident imperfectly in many words, which might have been more plainly delivered in few.

H. His declamations or set speeches are commonly cold and weak, for his power was the power of nature; when he endeavoured, like other tragic writers, to catch opportunities of amplification, and instead of inquiring what the occasion demanded, to show how much his stores of knowledge could supply, he seldom escapes without the pity or resentment of his reader.

I. His neglect of the unities, his violation of those laws, which have been instituted and established by the joint authority of poets and critics. To the unities of time and place, he has shown no regard.

J. His histories, being neither tragedies nor comedies, are not subject to any of their laws. Nothing more is necessary to all the praise which they expect than 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 to be sought.

Johnson acknowledges that from Shakespeare's plays, a "system of social duty" may be cultivated. Some other faults of Shakespeare cited by Johnson are:

- the looseness of his plots, whereby he "omits opportunities of instructing or delighting"
- the lack of regard for distinction of time or place, such that persons from one age or place are indiscriminately given attributes pertaining to other eras and locations
- the grossness and licentiousness of his humour
- the coldness and pomp of his narrations and set speeches;
- the failure to follow through with scenes that evoke terror and pity; and a perverse and digressive fascination with quibbles and wordplay.

As stated earlier in this unit, there is one fault from which Johnson exonerates Shakespeare— neglect of the classical unities of drama. Johnson takes this opportunity to elaborate on his own cynicism regarding these ancient rules. To begin with, he exempts Shakespeare's histories from any requirement of unity: since these are neither tragedies nor comedies, they are not subject to the laws governing these genres. All that is required in these histories 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." Johnson argues that Shakespeare does observe unity of action: his plots are not structured by a complication and denouement

"for this is seldom the order of real events, and Shakespeare is the poet of nature." However, he does observe Aristotle's requirement that a plot should have a beginning, middle, and end.

For the unities of time and place, however, Shakespeare had no regard. This is one point on which Johnson defends Shakespeare by questioning these unities themselves. Like Corneille, he views these unities as having "given more trouble to the poet, than pleasure to the auditor." Johnson sees these unities as arising from "the supposed necessity of making the drama credible." In addition, such a requirement is premised on the view that the mind of a spectator or reader "revolts from evident falsehood, and fiction loses its force when it departs from the resemblance of reality." The unity of place is merely an inference from the unity of time, since in a short period, spectators cannot believe that given actors have traversed impossible distances to remote locations. Such are the grounds on which critics have objected to the irregularity of Shakespeare's drama. Spectators, Johnson observes, are always aware that they are subjecting themselves to a fiction in theatre, to a form of temporary self-delusion. In addition, we must acknowledge that, "if delusion be admitted," it has "no certain limitation." If we can believe that the battle being enacted on stage is real, why would we be counting the clock or dismissing the changing of places as unreal? We know, from first to last, that "the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players".

Johnson concludes by holding the views that "nothing is essential to the fable, but unity of action", and the unities of time and place arise from "false assumptions". Hence, these unities are "to be sacrificed to the nobler beauties of variety and instruction," the greatest virtues of a play being "to copy nature and instruct life." Although, Johnson is discussing the principles of drama in the context of new examination, yet his strategy is both to argue logically against the incoherence of the unities of time and place and to set up Shakespeare as an alternative source of authority against the classical tradition. Johnson broadly agrees with the tradition that Shakespeare lacked formal learning; and

the greater part of his excellence being a "product of his own genius." Unlike his predecessors, Shakespeare directly obtained "an exact knowledge of many modes of life" and demonstrates clearly that "he has seen with his own eyes; he gives the image which he receives, not weakened or distorted by the intervention of any other mind." Johnson also shrewdly points out that Shakespeare's reputation owes something to his audience, to its willingness to praise his graces and overlook his defects. In this text, Johnson's appeal to nature and direct experience and observation over classical precedents and rules, as well as his assessment of Shakespeare as inaugurating a new tradition, effectively sets the stage for various broader perspectives of the role of the poet, the poet's relation to tradition and classical authority, and the virtues of individualistic poetic genius.



LET US KNOW

Three basic concerns of Johnson in the *Preface:*

1. How a poet's reputation is established
2. The poet's relation to nature, and
3. The relative virtues of nature and experience of life as against a reliance on principles established by criticism and convention



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What, according to Johnsons, is the meaning of general nature?

Q 6: Mention the faults of Shakespeare as dictated by Samuel Johnson in the *Preface*?

Q 7: State the common charges that were labelled against Shakespeare during Johnson's time?

7.5 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS OF THE TEXT

The following are the important concepts available in Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare.*

Importance of Nature:

Nature has an important role to play in Johnson's criticism. Nature is seen to be allied with reason and experience, and even truth. As we read in the *Preface*: "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature. Particular manners can be known to few, and therefore few only can judge how nearly they are copied. The irregular combinations of fanciful invention may delight awhile, by that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest; but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth. 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 influences 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." Thus, in the *Preface*, we have seen that Johnson's ultimate perspective in the evaluation of Shakespeare as a poet of nature against classical authority rests on relations with the truth of valid experience.

Reason and Experience:

Reason and Experience are other important aspects in Johnson's criticism in the *Preface*. You should note that Johnson's inclination towards nature, reason and experience is not without its own merit. It is perhaps important to note that during his time, Johnson makes a unique contribution by reminding critics of the role of the audience in the reception of a particular play and of the value of practical experience. Johnson's essays in *The Rambler* were pieces of valuable literary

criticism that show his contributions towards promoting a general culture of literary decorum. Interestingly, Johnson also had a keen interest in scientific matters, conducting minor chemical experiments of his own. This may remind us of how the classicism of the late 17th and the 18th centuries was also influenced by scientific rationalism. This would have naturally laid open classical authority to questioning from 'reasonableness'. This is the kind of thinking that led Johnson to temper his classicism with an historical sense of what is to be expected of an age. Therefore, Shakespeare's writings must be read and understood in the light of his times. You would have also noted that Johnson's criticism takes into view the concept of 'verisimilitude' or the representation of reality. The discussion of the unities is centred on this problem.

Idea of the Universal:

On the question of Shakespeare's characterisation in drama we have to relate Johnson's idea of the 'universal' or the 'typical'. We may rest with the conclusion that what is 'universal' or 'natural' has a relation with "just representations" of reality, which is often an unclear premise in Johnson's criticism. This is the difficulty that perhaps leaves us often mystified regarding the depiction of characters in drama in Johnson's *Preface*.

7.6 RECEPTION OF JOHNSON AS A CRITIC

Johnson's critical assessments of the English poets have been taken as what Matthew Arnold calls "natural centres" of reference to which criticism can repeatedly return. Though Johnson's criticism rests on the classical foundation of nature, reason, and truth, as well as on moral instruction, what Johnson added was the need for historical contextualisation (exemplified in his work on Shakespeare, in his *Lives*, and in his *Dictionary*) of authors and their works, as well as the obligation to place nature–in its most comprehensive sense–above the authority of mere precedent or classical authors, an obligation that might empower new or revised visions of the literary tradition. Johnson stresses that "truth . . . is . . . superior to rule" (*Lives*, 94).

It is worth remembering also that by "nature," Johnson does not mean primarily the world of external, physical nature, but rather human nature in its universal and historical embodiment of reason and moral sensibility. In his essay on Milton, he states:

"the knowledge of external nature, and the sciences which that knowledge requires or includes, are not the great or the frequent business of the human mind . . . the first requisite is the religious and moral knowledge of right and wrong; the next is an acquaintance with the history of mankind, and with those examples which may be said to embody truth . . . Prudence and justice are virtues and excellences of all times and of all places; we are perpetually moralists, but we are geometricians only by chance" (*Lives* 23).

In both these respects: the need for historical contextualisation and comparison, and the appeal to nature and truth over convention–he anticipates, and sets the stage for, much Romantic and modern criticism.

In the field of English criticism, Johnson had a lasting influence, although not everyone viewed him favourably. For example, the Romantic poets were completely opposed to Johnson's views on poetry and literature, especially in regards to Milton. Macaulay regarded Johnson as an idiot savant who produced some respectable works. However, contrary to such views, Stendhal's *Racine et Shakespeare* is based in part on Johnson's views of Shakespeare. Johnson influenced Jane Austen's writing style and philosophy. Even Matthew Arnold, in his *Six Chief Lives from Johnson's Lives of the Poets*, considered the *Lives* of Milton, Dryden, Pope, Addison, Swift, and Gray as "points which stand as so many natural centres, and by returning to which we can always find our way again."

More than a century after his death, literary critics such as G. Birkbeck Hill and T. S. Eliot came to regard Johnson as a serious critic. They began to study Johnson's works increasingly focusing on the critical analysis found in his edition of Shakespeare and *Lives of the Poets*. Yvor Winters claimed: "A great critic is the rarest of all literary geniuses; perhaps the only critic in English who deserves that epithet is

Samuel Johnson". F. R. Leavis on Johnson's criticism stated: "When we read him we know, beyond question, that we have here a powerful and distinguished mind operating at first hand upon literature. This, we can say with emphatic conviction, really *is* criticism." Edmund Wilson claimed that *The Lives of the Poets* and the prefaces and commentary on Shakespeare are among the most brilliant documentation in the whole range of English criticism. The critic Harold Bloom placed Johnson's work firmly within the Western canon, describing him as "unmatched by any critic in any nation before or after him..."



7.7 LET US SUM UP

By this time, you must have gained some relevant ideas about Neo classical criticism through a reading of Johnson's *Preface*. You must have also realised that Samuel Johnson's importance as a critic mainly rests on his work on Shakespeare and his dramatic art. This unit has tried to introduce you to the life and works of Johnson so that you gain important insights into the phase of English criticism of the 18th century, and into how through the criticism of Johnson, and his praise for the classical masters, the idea of Neoclassical criticism can be expounded. You have seen that Johnson's text provides fresh insights into the plays of Shakespeare as he mainly seeks to establish Shakespeare's undisputed supremacy in the world of drama, although he never hesitates to mention the flaws of Shakespeare. You have learnt that Shakespeare's greatness lies in the universal appeal of his plays owing to their faithful portrayal of the universals of human experience. At the same time, his characters are noted for their intense realism. Thus, we may assume that Samuel Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* is a landmark in Shakespearean criticism for one single most dominant idea that he laid the foundations of modern Shakespearean scholarship and textual criticism.



7.8 FURTHER READING

Abrams, M. H. (2003). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Singapore : Thomson Asia Pvt. Ltd. Habib, M.A.R. (2005). *A History of Literary Criticism:*

From Plato to the Present. Malden: Blackwell.

Johnson, Samuel. *Preface to Shakespeare*. UK, Dodo Press.

Leitch, Vincent B. (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton and Company, Inc.

Thomas, C. T. (ed). (1986). *Samuel Johnson Preface to Shakespeare*. Macmillan India limited.

Web Resources :

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Johnson



7.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: The best Johnsons' works appeared in *The Rambler* (1750-1752)… …he also contributed essays to his friend John Hawkesworth's periodical *The Adventure* (1758 to 1760)… …he wrote yet another series of essays, titled *The Idler… …*however, his greatest accomplishment was *A Dictionary of the English Language.*

Ans to Q No 2: David Garrick was one of the most distinguished students of Johnson in his school at Edial, near Lichfield, in 1736… …later, he became very distinguished as a poet, essayist, and acclaimed actor and manager of Drury Lane Theatre… …in 1737, Johnson and Garrick travelled to London.

Ans to Q No 3: This book rendered great service by making biographical and comparative estimation of the poets in the English canon… …his accounts of the lives and works of numerous English poets were first produced as a series of prefaces to a large edition of the

works of the English poets… … these fifty two prefaces were published separately as *Lives of the English Poets* in 1781… …here Johnson raises biography to an art of writing.

Ans to Q No 4: Johnson's *Preface* shows how Shakespeare is exonerated from his breaking of the rule of the Unities and the views contained in this preface sum up what Johnson's age thought of Shakespeare… …But Johnson's connection with Shakespeare started with his project to edit the plays of Shakespeare… …In October, 1765, Johnson's *Shakespeare* finally appeared in 8 octave volumes… …however, it is his *Preface to Shakespeare* which is a landmark in Shakespearean criticism of all times.

Ans to Q No 5: By "general nature" Johnson refers to the avoidance of particular manners and customs, and the foundation of one's work on the 'stability of truth' – truth that is permanent and universal… …his claim is that Shakespeare is "the poet of nature: the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life."

Ans to Q No 6: That he is "more careful to please than to instruct"… … that the plots are often so loosely formed… …that in many of his plays the later part is evidently neglected… …that he had no regard to distinction of time or place…. …that in his comic scenes he is seldom very successful…. …that in tragedy his performance seems constantly to be worse as his labour is more… …that in narration he affects a disproportionate pomp of diction… …that his histories, being neither tragedies nor comedies are not subject to any of their laws and so on.

Ans to Q No 7: Critics and writers such as John Dennis, Thomas Rymer, and Voltaire argued that Shakespeare's characters insufficiently reflect their time period and status… …Shakespeare's mixing of comic and tragic scenes, thereby violating the classical distinction between tragedy and comedy.



7.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: In what ways, can we call Samuel Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* a landmark in Shakespearean criticism?

Q 2: Do you agree that Johnson restored the reputation of Shakespeare in the 18th century? Discuss with reference to Johnson's praise for Shakespeare.

Q 3: State the grounds based on which Samuel Johnson tried to establish the significance of Shakespeare.

Q 4: Provide an evaluation of Johnson's central critical principles in *Preface to Shakespeare.*

Q 5: *Preface to Shakespeare* is an important document about drama, human nature, common sense, and literary precepts. Discuss with reference to the text.

Q 6: What are the main aspects of Johnson's criticism? Assess the importance of Johnson's *Preface* in the context of 18th century Neo classical criticism.

Q 7: "Shakespeare is, above all writers, the poet of nature." Examine Johnson's deliberations on the representation of nature in Shakespeare's plays.

* * *