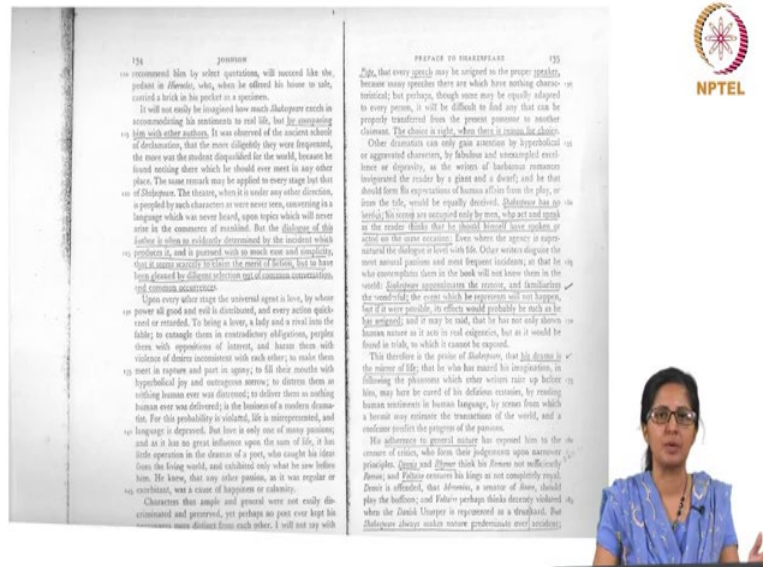


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Lecture 18
Samuel Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare (Session 2)

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Hello, and welcome to today's session, we continue looking at Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare*. So in the previous session, we had already given a background and introduction to the context of this writing and what this preface had eventually done to cementing the literary reputation of Shakespeare in the critical tradition. So, in the first section, as we had already mentioned, Johnson looks at some of the general features which cater to the universal appeal of Shakespeare's works.

And he begins to look at certain things in particular detail. And this also has become quite a commonsensical rhetoric in the later decades, especially with reference to Shakespeare's criticism. We notice that many of the things that we take for granted in terms of the understanding related to Shakespeare, in terms of the general perceptions about the literary constructions of Shakespeare, we owe it largely to Johnson preface. And this begins to become very evident when we look at some of the particular things that Johnson begins to engage with over here.

And at the outset, he tells us it is important to compare Shakespeare with other authors in order to see how he excels in various aspects. He looked at characterization, he looks at language, he looks at the thematic representations and likewise he focuses on such many things which were not focused upon in detail until that point of time. So, when Shakespeare's

plays were being enacted in the 16th century, during the Elizabethan period, they were all huge successes. But there was very little attention, critical attention, which was given to particular aspects of the performance or particular aspects in ways in which drama could be seen as a literary genre.

So, this undergoes a radical change during the neoclassical time and it becomes important and they also present it as a very relevant engagement to deal with Shakespeare's works, not just as performances, but also as literary texts. So, the texts, which of course, we all know that Shakespeare's works were presented to us in written form as folios, they were published posthumously. He himself had not published anything written apart from the performances, the scripts were largely elicited from the performances by the co-actors and some of his friends who put together the first folio right after his death.

So, Johnson also takes it upon himself to give a fresher version to this, to give perhaps a more literary version to this, trying to stay true to the original as far as possible. And here we also find this attitude of the neoclassical critics in order to situate a text within the kind of perfection that they expect out of it. And it is in this context that we also need to understand the balanced rhetoric, the balanced critical approach that Johnson seems to take over here in spite of the many tilted opinions that he had, many biases that he had towards the kind of literature that he believed in.

He first begins to look at the way in which a varied sense of contexts were brought together in Shakespeare's canvas, in Shakespeare's dramatic canvas. In between lines 135 and 140 he says, "For this probability is violated, life is misrepresented, and language is depraved. But love is only one of many passions and as it has no great influence upon the sum of life it has little operation in the dramas of a poet, who caught his ideas from the living world and exhibited only what he saw before him. He knew that any other passion as it was regular or exorbitant, was a cause of happiness or calamity."

So, he talks about the obsessive engagement that Shakespeare had with love. And this passage begins with this, "Upon every other stage, the universal agent is love, by whose power all good and evil is distributed and every action quickened or retarded, to bring a lover, a lady and a rival into the fable, to entangle them in contradictory obligations, perplex them with oppositions of interest and harass them with violence of desires inconsistent with each other, to make them meet in rapture and part in agony, to fill their mouths with hyperbolic

joy and outrageous sorrow, to distress them as nothing human ever was distressed, to deliver them as nothing human ever was delivered, is the business of a modern dramatist.”

And this is how he begins to situate the complex narratives, the complex narrative worlds that Shakespeare had constructed. And this is also seen as very modern, from Johnson's perspective. And for Johnson, to refer to someone as modern, (he is writing in the eighteenth century) to refer to someone has modern from the sixteenth century that is really a big deal because he also believed in the power of the modern ways of writing as they were. They had begun to explicate in the neoclassical tradition, which was a fine blend of the classical traits, as well as modern language and modern thoughts. And it was very trendy in that sense, the kind of writings that Dryden, Pope, Johnson and others presented before the world was very trendy for that time period.

It engaged with literature, it engaged with art in a very urban way, in a very city-centric way. So, for a person like that, for a person like Johnson, who believed in the power of the kind of modern language that they had begun to engage with, the modern ideas that they had begun to engage with, to appreciate the complex worlds that Shakespeare had created. That certainly is of extreme importance over here. And then he begins to focus on the characters that Shakespeare had created from line 145 onwards. “Characters thus ample and general were not easily discriminated and preserved, yet perhaps no poet ever kept his personages more distinct from each other.”

So, it talks about how Shakespeare was very different in his creation of characters. Not only did he have distinct characteristics for each character, he also made those characters speak differently, the language was very different. “I will not say with Pope that every speech may be assigned to the proper speaker”. And this is a proper comparison that he is making between Pope, one of his contemporaries, and Shakespeare who wrote in the sixteenth century, “Because many speeches there are, which have nothing characteristic; but perhaps though some may be equally adapted to every person it will be difficult to find any that can be properly transferred from the present possessor to another claimant; the choice is right when there is reason for choice.”

So, he tells us about how appropriate Shakespeare's language was in identifying language with character which he says even someone like Pope could not appropriately achieve. And he tells us about how other dramatists mostly try to gain attention “by hyperbolic and aggravated characters”, in line 155, “by fabulous and unexampled excellence of depravity”.

So, Shakespeare, he says, he is not someone who had to engage with these sort of cheap tricks in order to get attention, in order to get his complex narrative right, in order to attach the appropriate language with the suitable character, in 160, “Shakespeare has no heroes. His scenes are occupied only by men who act and speak as a reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion.” He is also, not very directly though, he is also invoking in some of the Aristotelean ideas about the need for the audience to empathize with what happens on stage, empathize with the protagonist who is out there performing a certain life. So, he is also telling us about how Shakespeare never had the burden, never had the anxiety to create heroes, to make stories out of heroes. On the other hand, he used raw material from what he found around him. And that was like, just real men and women.

And he transformed them into heroic characters, which is what he does in most of his plays, as we are also aware of. And in the same way, it is also important for us to notice that Johnson is equally appreciative of the ability to humanize certain characters, humanize certain characters which already had a place in history, like the Roman tragedies, for instance, which is what he means and which is what he explicates in line 165 and he says, “Shakespeare approximates the remote and familiarizes the wonderful, the event which he represents will not happen. But if it were possible, its effects would probably be such as he has assigned”. So, this is one of the instances, one of the earliest instances where a critic is also talking about the power of imagination which has the power to approximate the remote and familiarize the wonderful.

So, we would also notice that until the Romantic tradition, until the Romantic Movement, the word imagination is really not stressed in these critical discourses at all. There are indications, there are various ways in which it is indicated that there is a certain faculty of mind, there is a certain powerful faculty of mind which is at work, which aids this transformation, this movement between the remote and the wonderful, between the familiar and the unfamiliar. So, there are these techniques of which the critics are certainly aware of, but at the same time, the term imagination does not enter this discourse during this period of time at all.

So, by drawing attention, though remotely, to the power of imagination, to this faculty which has the power to transform the remote or the familiar into something entirely different, by not talking about imagination directly he is also highlighting this stellar quality that most works, including Shakespeare's has. And from there, he again, slips into this universal rhetoric, this

universal praise that he has for Shakespeare, like he says, “This therefore, is a praise of Shakespeare that his drama is a mirror of life.” One of the flip sides of this sort of an argument is that there is a unilateral way in which life is being seen over here.

And there is also this assumption that whatever a certain artist has depicted of society that is perhaps the best representation of life. And now when he says his drama is a mirror of life, this is also telling us about how universal this depiction is also. On the other hand, we also know that this is also tempered with a lot of other kinds of mediations. For instance, there could be a bias in terms of gender, in terms of one’s location, in terms of class, in terms of race. So, Johnson, definitely and still this historical kind of criticism, it is still in its infant stages. So, Johnson does not take these things into account.

But when we look at this from the contemporary, we are also required to be aware of the many limitations of this sort of criticism which tends to universalize and thereby privilege and legitimize a certain kind of a canon or a certain kind of writing. So, from line 180 onwards, there is this very interesting comparison that Johnson draws with other contemporaries. “His adherence to general nature has exposed him to the censure of critics, who found their judgments upon narrower principle.”

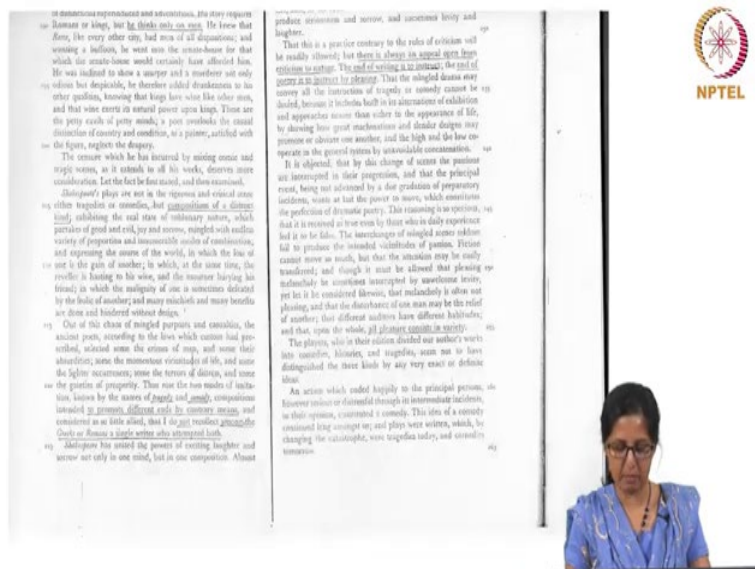
So, herein we also get a broader sense of the context in which *Preface to Shakespeare* is being written. Why is Johnson getting very defensive of Shakespeare and trying to cement Shakespeare's literary reputation perhaps forever? So, this is a context with a lot of other critics who are writing as Johnson would say, who are basing their judgments upon “narrower principles” and hence missing the larger point, missing the universal point which Shakespeare is perhaps trying to make. He gives these examples of “Dennis and Rhymer think his Romans are not sufficiently Roman, Voltaire censures his kings as not completely royal. Dennis is offended that Menenius, a senator of Rome should play the buffoon, Voltaire perhaps things decency violated when the Danish usurper is presented as a drunkard.”

So these are some of the instances that he quotes from his contemporary critics. And here, what is interesting is he dismisses all of these views almost simultaneously. Johnson is not willing to engage with the criticisms leveled against Shakespeare during the neoclassical time. This also tells us that there is perhaps a renewed interest in Shakespeare's works, not essentially to elevate its literary quality but to show how much wanting his literary characteristics are, to show that his characters are not sufficiently formed and to show that

there is not an appropriate fit between the status accorded to the characters and the kind of things that they are made to do.

So, the examples also tells us that perhaps there were detailed discussions about Shakespeare's flaws, mostly in order to completely delegitimize something which is not sufficiently neoclassical. So here, Johnson is also going against the grain we find, he is challenging some of the dominant opinions which were prevalent during that time, which were extremely critical of the literary merit and the kind of characterization and the kind of dramatic genius that Shakespeare had. So, Johnson basically gives only just a couple of lines to engage with these critics in a very dismissive tone and immediately moves on to make another universalized and much appreciated statement about Shakespeare.

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“Shakespeare always makes nature predominate over accident. And if he preserves the essential character, is not very careful of distinctions, superinduced and adventitious. His story requires Romans or Kings but he thinks only on men. He knew that Rome, like every other city, had men of all dispositions; and wanting a buffoon, he went into the senate house for that which the senate house would certainly have afforded him.” He is being critical of the stereotypical ways in which literature has characterized certain kinds of characters or individuals. He is here, turning the entire set of criticism against Shakespeare to his own advantage to show that this is the peculiar thing that Shakespeare could afford, because he did not look at kings.

Instead, he looked at the men who were inside the garb of the kings. He looked at real men and women instead of looking at their positions and he sees this as a huge advantage. He sees this as a point to be appreciated, compared to the criticisms which were leveled against him. And then he entirely dismisses those sort of contrary views towards the end of this passage. "These are the petty cavils of petty minds, a poet overlooks the casual distinction of country and condition as a painter, satisfied with the figure, neglects the drapery." So, he is also accusing these critics, though not very directly, of getting obsessed with some of those innocuous detail, some of those almost negligible details which are there in a painting just as a background, just as a drapery.

And in this process, they are entirely neglecting the figure which has come out perfectly. Now, Johnson is entering a certain area which he also needs to tread very delicately because even during the neoclassical tradition, though they had named themselves as neoclassicals and they had sufficiently removed themselves from the rigidities of most classical notions, the idea of the tragicomedy as well as the idea of the unities in terms of composite play; those were still points of contention. So he begins to locate, he begins to set the stage to defend Shakespeare against some of these charges which were rightly leveled against him from the point of classical criticism.

Shakespeare's plays, line 205, "Shakespeare's plays are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind." So, he is now not even allowing Shakespeare to be compartmentalized based on the yardsticks put forward by classical critics. He is taking Shakespeare entirely out of that and attributing to him "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 innumerable modes of combination." So, there is a way in which he sets the stage to make a difference, to make a case for these many exceptions and many violations that Shakespeare had included in his plays, which also had obviously become a huge success in terms of audience, in terms of reception.

And in this process, he also successfully situates Shakespeare above all the other classical writers and look at how he does this from line 215 onwards. "Out of this chaos of mingled purposes and casualties." So, it was always a complex world that Shakespeare engaged with as we know, if you look at the settings, it was always far removed from reality. And there was a complex narrative and sometimes a narrative within a narrative with a lot of subplots

which he infused into his plays. There are a lot of anachronisms and lot of mismatches that critics at a later point have pointed out.

But nevertheless, it is important to notice that it did make sense to the audience which were witnessing that and they did enjoy it and that is something which is extremely important at the end of the day, to notice as well that they were very well-received by the audience. And that could be the highest test and they continued to be staged even during the neoclassical times when these rules and regulations and these formulations were being written and rewritten. And they were being also rigidly imposed in many ways, even during those times Shakespeare's plays always had a very receptive audience.

So, Johnson is again, drawing attention to the complex narrative worlds with which Shakespeare always engaged. And this, of course, needed both tragedy as well as comedy. It was not something which was driven by form, driven by genre. But on the other hand, he looked at life. Remember the earlier statement that Johnson made that there is a mirroring of life which happens in Shakespeare's plays. And when you mirror life, you cannot choose it to be just tragedy or a comedy. It is a mix of different kinds of feelings that he had outlined from 205 to 210.

So, he then goes on to say, "Thus rose the two modes of imitation known by the names of tragedy and comedy, compositions intended to promote different ends, by contrary means, and considered as so little allied." That was a classical notion. These two, tragedies and comedies, were written and performed towards two different ends, they were not supposed to come together and they were not supposed to merge together at all. Those were two parallel lines entirely, those were two parallel tracks entirely.

And he says, "I cannot recollect among the Greeks or Romans a single writer who attempted both." And herein lies the uniqueness, the distinctiveness of this English dramatist Shakespeare who has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition. That clearly is an achievement and the way Johnson is presenting this, it does not begin to look as a flaw at all. On the contrary, this begins to look as one stellar achievement by an English dramatist in comparison to all the classical Greek and Roman writers that he knows of. "Almost all his plays are divided between serious and ludicrous characters and in the successive evolutions of the design, sometimes producing seriousness and sorrow, sometimes levity and laughter." That is seen as an inevitable thing, something which should be there when an artist is attempting to mirror life.

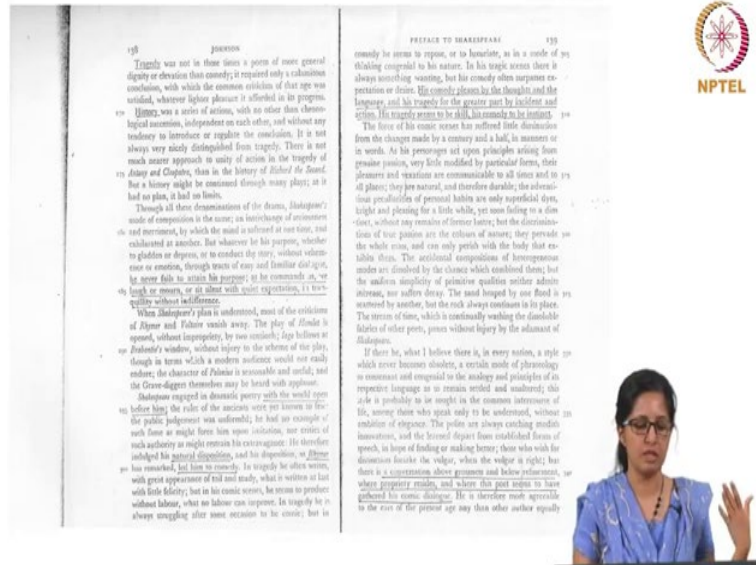
And this is another point that we need to keep in mind, among the classical artists, among the classical dramatists they all have been elevated to a certain status. They all have been applauded for the different kinds of perfection that their works had, but none of them have been referred to as authors of works which mirrored life- that is one rare distinction that Shakespeare's work has, Johnson maintains and goes on to prove. And here he pushes his argument further in 230, "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 exhibition and approaches nearer than either to the appearance of life by showing how great machinations and splendid designs may promote or obviate one another. And the high and the low cooperate in the general system by unavoidable concatenation." So, there is this statement about the function of literature that Johnson also makes over here, "The end of writing is to instruct, the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing."

So, there is always this dichotomy we notice from the beginning of this critical discourse, that there is a dichotomy between instruction and pleasure, instruction was always seen as something of a higher order and it also necessitates a kind of intervention from English critics to show that poetry is something very different, that there is instruction as well as pleasing, the twin objectives, the twin functions always seem to go together. So Johnson also continues to inhabit that framework of morality, that didactic framework which is also secular and humanist in very pertinent ways where one cannot talk about pleasure without it also instructing.

And we find that this trend continues for the longest time until about the Romantic period where they begin to boldly reiterate that poetry is about pleasure. It is ultimately only about pleasing the readers, only about pleasing the audience. Everything else takes a backseat entirely. So, even during this point of time, we notice that this dichotomy continues to exist and there is always this burden, this anxiety from the part of the critics to infuse pleasure with something related to instruction, so that it also looks morally edifying, it also looks useful for the individual as well as for the society. We do find a very Aristotelean notion, a very Platonic notion continuing to govern these principles which define the objectives and the function of art in general.

So, we will quickly move on to some of the other specific things that he notices in terms of pleasure, he reiterates in line 255, “All pleasure consists in variety.”

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So, thereby he also finds room to accommodate these different ways in which Shakespeare's plays afford different kinds of pleasure. So, when he comes to the end of the first section, where he continues to reiterate the general disposition, the general universal nature which also had immense appeal to the audience, he talks about the way in which Shakespeare had treated tragedy and how history had undergone a radical, imaginative revision in Shakespeare's plays.

So, he says, “He never fails to attain his purpose as he commands as we laugh or mourn, or sit silent with quiet expectation in tranquility, without indifference.” So, it was always engaging, whether he was dealing with tragedy or with history. And that was precisely the one yardstick, which has helped Shakespeare stand the test of time. And then he says, when you understand this plan of Shakespeare, like he says in line 285, if you understand this grand plan that Shakespeare had, if you understand these complex worlds, narrative worlds, fictional worlds, dramatic worlds that he was constructing, then most of the criticisms of Rhymer and Voltaire vanish away.

So, we are also given to understand that perhaps the audience of those times, the leaders of those times were not entirely familiar with the worlds created by Shakespeare. They were also perhaps getting quite swayed by the criticisms made by Rhymer and Voltaire. So partly, the purpose of this preface is also to ensure that none of these criticisms overshadow the

merit of Shakespeare. “The play of *Hamlet* is opened without impropriety by two sentinels; Iago bellows at Brabantio’s window without injury to the scheme of the play, though in terms which a modern audience could not easily endure; the character of Polonius is seasonable and useful and the grave-diggers themselves may be heard with applause.”

So, everything needs to be understood within this grand plan. He says if you recall in the beginning of the play *Othello*, it begins with these very bawdy dialogues by Iago who is yelling at Brabantio’s window. It does not take away the propriety of that tragedy, it does not take away the gravity of that situation at all when you also realize that there are certain comic interludes in between which are inserted into most of Shakespeare's plays, but that does not take away the gravity of the situation, the tragedy, the tragic effect, the cathartic effect if you push it until that far, that is not affected at all.

And even today, when we look at the performances and when we look at the complex worlds, which Shakespeare managed to create and recreate, we understand that there is no compromising of one emotion over the other just because certain emotions which were considered originally inappropriate in this context, were also introduced into that. And Voltaire and Rhymer they had also these criticisms against Shakespeare where he thought that Shakespeare's natural disposition was towards comedy and that he really had to struggle very hard to fit in tragedy in the most appropriate way.

So, Johnson does not really engage with it much except that he says, “His comedy pleases by the thoughts and the language and his tragedy for the greater part by incident and action. His tragedy seems to be his skill, his comedy to be instinct.” So, look at the way in which one very powerful criticism against Shakespeare is being turned around entirely to his advantage. Where Rhymer and Voltaire, where they feel that Shakespeare's natural disposition is towards comedy, Johnson makes it sound in a very different way altogether. Tragedy is his skill and comedy is his instinct.

And here we are also being introduced to the different ways in which artistic impulses are being received, about skill becoming an inherent part of artistic manifestation just as genius is. And this is a discussion which from the time of Longinus, if you remember, we have been trying to have about how art along with genius, technique, along with genius, is always important in order to produce excellent work which has a power to transport the reader out of oneself, which is what Longinus had believed in.

We will skip some of the minute details, some of the micro details that Johnson engages with. In the second section, he focuses on the flaws, he identifies about twelve flaws from Shakespeare. This more than damaging the reputation of Shakespeare, it actually gives credibility to Johnson's analysis and some of those flaws we may find has emerged from the many biases that Johnson himself has. And we also find that some of them also need to be taken quite seriously. But we realize that this engagement with the flaws does not affect Shakespeare's merit in any way.

On the other hand, it only accentuates the kind of dramatic genius that Shakespeare had that he could perform, that he could deliver, that he could excel and transport the readers out of themselves in spite of these flaws, which is what Longinus also had believed in, if you remember, he did not expect perfection out of any work. He even thought that perfection could perhaps hamper the amount of pleasure that a work could excite. On the other hand, we find that through these imperfections, Johnson is also trying to highlight the human as well as artistic quality in Shakespeare which had excelled into a perfect dramatic genius. So with this, we wrap up for today. We will continue with the following sections in the next class. Thank you for your attention.