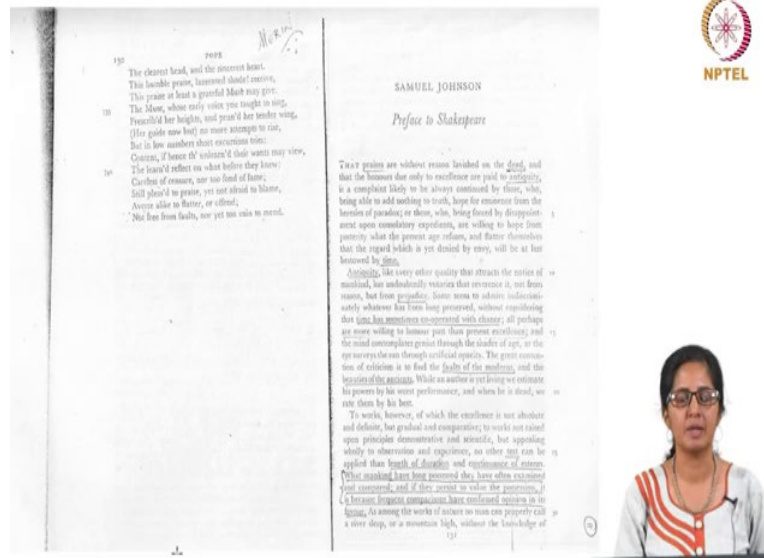


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**Lecture 17**

**Samuel Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare (Session 1)**

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Hello, and welcome to yet another session of this course on literary criticism. Today we are looking at one of the iconic texts of the neoclassical period, *Preface to Shakespeare* by Samuel Johnson. This, understandably, is a preface written by Samuel Johnson to one of the editions of Shakespeare's plays that he had brought out. So, Samuel Johnson, as you might be aware of, he is one of the last important critics of the neoclassical period. And it is possible to say that the kind of criticism that the neoclassical period endorsed almost becomes obsolete after Johnson's period.

So, Johnson was a very important figure in the neoclassical period, he was someone who had the power to make or break the career of a contemporary writer. And, we do know that Johnson had influenced the literary field quite considerably in terms of his writings as well as in terms of the major influence that he had on radically challenging the system of patronage which existed in the English literary circles. And with his dictionary, which was an important milestone linguistically as well as in terms of English literature, we find that Johnson gave a lot of impetus to contemporary writers of his period, to encourage them to get rewarded for their own writings through systems which operated other than through patronage, through revenues, through royalties from publishing houses.

So, it was a very radical movement that Johnson initiated. So, today we are looking at one of these texts, which is said to have cemented the literary reputation of Shakespeare forever, not just in England, but also in the context of World Literature. So Johnson begins by telling us about some of the misconceptions that are there in terms of literature when we compare the writings of the ancient litterateurs in comparison to the writings of the contemporary people. And he is also aware of the fact that and quite critical of the fact that sometimes ancients are praised over the moderns. When he is referring to moderns, he is talking about contemporary neoclassical writings.

So, he is aware of this fact that sometimes the ancients are praised for no reason, simply because they are located in antiquity. So antiquity, he is aware that becomes the reason for legitimizing merit for various reasons. So, in spite of that, in spite of this awareness, he is also leading us into this argument that there are certain writers who also need to be rescued from antiquity such as Shakespeare in this case and he talks about the need to focus on the literary merit of Shakespeare. Of course, Shakespeare was the kind of dramatist, the playwright who had produced box office successes one after the other.

And he had also radically reinvented the grammar of drama in England as well as in Europe in the later decades as we have seen. But situating him as a literary artist was a task, an entirely different task altogether. We find Johnson undertaking this task and completing it to precision. So, this entire work, this preface could be divided into 3 different parts. In the first segment, he talks about the general universal abilities of Shakespeare's works, the universal capacities of Shakespeare's works, which made him endearing to different generations and he is even seen as someone who had outlived his own century. And the focus is on the various kinds of aesthetic, literary and cultural merits, which made him very popular during his time as well as endearing to the posterity.

In the second section, he focuses on some of the faults of Shakespeare's writing and some of the flaws which he identifies in Shakespeare's drama. And in the final section, he undertakes to defend one of the major flaws, which is the violation of the unities. And we also find that is the first time in an English critical tradition that a critic undertakes to defend a writer for violating the Unities which were considered as very significant, very central to any composition related to drama. So, we also need some context to this in terms of the neoclassical tradition.

So, during the neoclassical period, we understand that the English writers had trained themselves to move away considerably from the classical tradition, but they were also rooted in many rigid ways in the classical principles. So, we do find them advocating the need for a standalone literary critical tradition like Dryden began to do and we also realize that they find themselves in a very precarious situation between tradition and the kind of modern writings that they were encountering within England.

So, for instance, these are some of the ways in which they began to depart; Dryden, for instance, began to glorify tragicomedy, which was an absolute misfit when one takes a classical tradition into account. And he had this compelling argument that if Aristotle had seen our tragedies perhaps he would have changed his mind. And we find Johnson in that sense trying to defend the violation of unities which was also seen as a very cardinal thing in Aristotelian principles. And we also find them using English examples in order to prove this point against, vis-a-vis, classical tradition. So, now we begin to enter this text and he begins with this almost satiric statement, "That praises are without reason lavished on the dead and that the honors due only to excellence are paid to antiquity is a complain likely to be always continued by those who being able to add nothing to truth, hope for eminence from the heresies of paradox."

So, you must have noticed that in Dryden's writings as well as in Johnson writings, keeping in tune with the typical neoclassical wit that they were all endowed with, we find them beginning on a rather sarcastic note, on a rather satirical note about their own worldviews and about the ways in which contemporary traditions have been forged. From that he moves on to make this statement which was considered radical then, "The great contention of criticism is to find the faults of the moderns, and the beauties of the ancients. While an author is yet living, we estimate his powers by his worst performance and when he is dead, we rate them by his best." So, this in certain ways, continues to be true in the critical tradition where death in certain ways ensures a certain kind of permanence within the literary critical tradition while one is extremely critical about the writers who continue to write, who are still living.

So, the neoclassical period which also had seen the birth of different kinds of criticisms, which saw the birth of criticism being brought closer to the layman and it is said about that period that it was a period when criticism was brought to the coffee house from the court. So, we also see a continuous engagement with various kinds of texts and lot of people posing as critics and writing reviews and critical statements about different works which were being

published then. And, we also find this tendency of many critics including Dryden and Johnson and such other big names, they being extremely critical about the contemporary writers because the standards that they had begun to expect from the English writers were quite high during that period.

And also there is this infinite focus, this insistent focus on the aspects related to intellect and wit which also got prioritized over lot of other things like feelings or aesthetics. So, here we find Johnson taking a middle path. And he is quite unlike himself in this entire set of writing where he is willing to let go of some of his rigidities, he is willing to let go of some of the principles of classical tradition that he himself believed in, in order to support and in order to endorse the aesthetics which had dominated Shakespeare's writings. So, from then he talks about "What mankind have long possessed, they have often examined and compared and if they persist to value the possession, it is because frequent comparisons have confirmed opinion in its favor."

He talks about the general tendency of criticism to base the value of a work on certain things. Just before that in line 25, he has already said, "But appealing wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem". We find that the universal appeal and the general quality, the general goodness of Shakespeare's works that he begins to praise is also rooted in this length of duration and continuance of esteem, which had surpassed his own times which had also outlived the century as very soon he will also point out.

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So, “in the productions of genius, nothing can be styled excellent till it has been compared with other works of the same kind.” So, just like Dryden did in his preface to Chaucer and Ovid, we noticed that there is a comparative strand which is evident even in Johnson's criticism. But Johnson also manages to move away from that comparative mode and he focuses on historical criticism, which also becomes a major intervention in literary critical theories. And at a later point, we also know that it becomes, it evolves into a more sophisticated way, which gets labeled as New Historicism.

So, when Johnson is writing *Preface to Shakespeare*, he is largely employing a mode of historical criticism, which also takes into account the modes of production which operated outside the text. He takes into account the biographical information that he had garnered from different sources. He also evaluates the text in the context of its production. So, when Johnson is situating Shakespeare's merits, he is not entirely delving into the text per se, but he is evaluating the text's merit in the context of its production, in the ways in which the text was received. And he is also looking at the faults in terms of its dialogue with the audience.

So he begins talking about Shakespeare per se from line 55, where he identifies Shakespeare as “the poet”. So if you are familiar with classical criticism, this term, the poet, is used to universally refer to, almost unanimously to Homer who was “the poet” during the classical times. So, we find Shakespeare being given the same kind of title by Johnson and if you remember in the Preface by Dryden, he had referred to Chaucer also as the poet. Here we find the English critical tradition emerging as a formidable successor of the classical tradition, though far removed from it in various ways as well. So, this is how Johnson talks about Shakespeare, “The poet of whose works I have undertaken the revision may now begin to assume the dignity of an ancient and claim the privilege of established fame and prescriptive veneration. He has long outlived the century, the term commonly fixed as the test of literary merit.” We find universality and a lot of tenets of secular humanism being enacted over here in very practical terms. So, as we had noticed from the earlier sessions, from Sydney onwards, there is a tendency to situate the literary critical tradition within the secular humanist traditions. So here, we find the very fact of a writer outliving his century, of the performer outliving his century being taken as the true test of literary merit.

This also has certain inherent flaws as we should be examining later on. But at this moment, it is important to notice that this universality of treating literature as something which has the power to stand the test of time, treating good literature as something which can only survive

the test of time that is being highlighted over here. He also tells us very directly in line 75 that the objective is to inquire by what peculiarities of excellence Shakespeare has gained and kept the favor of his countrymen. So, this text at the outset, opens with this understanding that Shakespeare has outlived his century, he is certainly popular.

So, now the time is to critically evaluate this popularity in order to cement his literary reputation, perhaps forever and that is precisely what this text achieves also, we realize in the long run. And he begins with this statement, which has been oft-quoted in most discussions about Shakespeare. “Nothing can please many and please long but just representations of general nature”. This quality of pleasing, the quality of being popular across generations, across decades is now seen as a true yardstick for measuring literary merit. So, we know that this has been contended in the later times by a lot of other interventions where we also know that the popularity or outliving one century is not a natural given.

It is not something which happens automatically. It is also aided by a lot of other processes, which includes race, class, region and many other kinds of similar locations. So, here at the outset, Johnson, also because, you know, this kind of criticism is still in its infant stages, he is being very reverential of this fact that Shakespeare has managed to outlive his century and has continued to please many. If you look at the statistics of the performance of Shakespeare's plays even throughout the neoclassical tradition, it, in fact, was very hostile to most of the other kinds of writings which were prevalent in England until that point of time. But, we find that even during the neoclassical tradition, Shakespeare's plays and the many versions and the many performances of his plays they continue to be extremely relevant and Dryden himself, he had attempted a re-vision of one of Shakespeare's plays *Antony and Cleopatra*. So, we find this engagement with Shakespeare particularly compelling when it comes to the neoclassical period.

And Johnson is very lavish in his praise of Shakespeare. But in the second part, when he begins to examine the faults, the flaws of Shakespeare's writings, we find that he undertakes a very balanced outlook as well that makes Johnson's criticism more credible and more relevant, which is why this is also seen as one of the texts that again has outlived the century and has become very seminal in our understandings of the shaping of English literary critical tradition. So, in between lines 85 and 90, he goes on to state:

“Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature, the poet that upholds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life”. Many of the

observations that we find over here, we find that they also in course of time, they become general observations about literatures itself, about the function of literature, about the universality of literature, about what is expected of good literature when the readers are encountering that. So that inherent goodness of literature, the inherent universality of literature, the need to stay within the moral frameworks, all these things are being articulated in this preface, just the way it was articulated in Dryden's *Preface to the Fables*, to Chaucer and Ovid as well.

So, look at these statements being made by Johnson which also tells us about some of the commonsensical things that critical tradition has inherited in terms of understanding literature, in terms of evaluating literature. "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."

You all must have heard a number of critical observations about the universality of Shakespeare's writings, the universality of Shakespeare's characters, how they are not really individuals, but they are just types. And you could relocate those characters, you could relocate those narratives into any setting, they will continue to make sense which also accounts for the many revisions of Shakespeare's plays which have been undertaken in different languages and different cultural contexts and also the different genres into other plays, into other stories, into other visual images, into other cinematic expressions, et cetera.

So, here we find that some of the observations, in fact, most of the observations that Johnson makes over here, they go on to become universal tenets, not just about Shakespeare's works, but about good literature, good literature, which is universal and has the power to please many across decades, across generations. And here, one also needs to be attentive to the way in which Johnson entirely overlooks the specificity of the particular productions within which Shakespeare's works are also located here. As an aside, let me also remind you of the post-colonial readings of Shakespeare's works where *Tempest* is seen as a colonial product.

And that needs a different kind of critical tool altogether, different critical perception altogether. But here what Johnson manages to do is to situate someone like Shakespeare as a universal writer. In that process, he is also managing to locate English literary critical

tradition as a universal thing, as a universal category which caters to cultures and men and women across generations and across cultures, which essentially also becomes one of the impetus in the colonial agenda where English literature is literally being promoted. English literature is being sold literally to the different colonies as the kind of literature, as the kind of universal literature, which also has the power to modify human behavior. And to essentially transform a society into a more genteel and a more sophisticated one with good refined thinking and a good set of mind skills.

So, that is a debate that we shall not be entering into at this moment. So, coming back to this work, we find that in the preface, Johnson does not find the need to anchor himself on any classical tradition. On the contrary, he is able to identify as well as elevate Shakespeare as someone who has the power to stand all by himself and by extension, the critical tradition of English literature itself is being invested with the power to stand all by itself.

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In the following section, we shall be looking at how Johnson identifies particular kinds of qualities in Shakespeare's writing, which by extension also becomes a way in which English literary critical tradition, English literary tradition itself becomes qualified. So, we shall continue to look at the remaining sections in the following session. Thank you for your attention and I look forward to seeing you in the next class.