

Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare: “A Poet of Nature”

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Though many scholars and critics have made efforts explaining its connotation and influence from philosophical, religious and historical perspective about Samuel Johnson’s statement that Shakespeare is “A Poet of Nature”, it is still worthy of discussion. As a Neoclassical critic, Johnson revealed Shakespeare’s genuine faculties through comparison with Homer following John Dryden and Alexzander Popeto illustrate the dramatic writing process. Then Shakespeare’s genius in natural acquisition of human nature and literature tradition, adaptation and concatenation to make something novelty, and selection of original language and characters is exemplified to analyze mixed genre, irregular structure, natural dialogue and characters under the principle of general nature.

Keywords: Samuel Johnson, Shakespeare, acquisition, adaptation and concatenation, general nature

Introduction

Many scholars have been making efforts to explore Neo classical critic Samuel Johnson’s opinion that Shakespeare is a poet of nature from the various perspectives. Some arguments provide us thought-provoking ideas such as Cyril H. Knoblauch exploration about Johnson’s attitude about the empirical writing process (1980), Philip Smallwood’s essay “Shakespeare: Johnson’s Poet of Nature” (1996) and Scott David Evans’ discussion about the principle of general nature in context from philosophical, religious and historical context (1997) and so on. However, Johnson’s argument that “Perhaps it would not be easy to find any authour, except Homer, who invented so much as Shakespeare, who so much advanced the studies which he cultivated, or effused so much novelty upon his age or country” (Johnson, 1905, p. 39) has not been comprehensively discussed.

Though Johnson defended for Shakespeare’s violation of classical rules as his predecessors had done, he did not completely agree with Dryden’s opinion about Shakespeare’s born knowledge, or Pope’s attitude concerning Shakespeare’s intuition with first glance to make something new. His tentative analysis about the development of Shakespeare dramatic writing from a needy man who just came to London for a fortune fighting against tough life without being overwhelmed by poverty, and then established a dramatic kingdom which would never decline for “the representation of general nature” is based on his cotemporary popular term “genius” later adopted to evaluate the poetical talents in his *Lives of the Poets*.

In his well-known *A Dictionary of the English Language* published in 1755, Johnson illustrates several meanings of genius and quotes Addison’s words “There is no little writer of Pindarick who is not mentioned as a prodigious genius” to support the item “A man endowed with superior faculties” (Johnson, 1755, p. 865).

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Johnson followed Aristotle's description of the process of creating a dramatic poetry and made a description of Shakespeare's genuine writing process as following: first making the design of the plot through borrowing the fable from the known works with episodes, and then draw the image of characters with clear and simple diction, which might be the foundation of Horace's Letter to Piso's son to acquire the skill of dramatic writing.

Taking the attitude that genius could compensate the defects in classical education, Johnson made a thorough survey about Shakespeare's works and his times. His knowledge about the old writers are only "obtained them from accidental quotations, or by oral communication, and as he used what he had, would have used more if he had obtained it" (Johnson, 1908, p. 35).

Therefore, Johnson's enlightening perspective about Shakespeare's superior faculties under the guideline of Aristotle, Horace and Dryden's dramatic theory is worthy of reconsideration about acquisition of human nature, creation of irregular structure, and selection of natural language and characters with consideration of his well-known argument general nature. In particular, the relationship between genius, general nature, and classical rules employed by Johnson to label Shakespeare's status in literary history following Dryden and Pope through comparison with Homer in the Preface to Shakespeare (1765) is critical to recognize the framework of Johnson's neoclassical criticism and its correspondent influence on the following critics from generation to generation.

I. Acquisition of Human Nature and Mingled Drama

It is not unusual in Elizabethan's England that scholars and poets intended to make enquiry about human nature. However, the most outstanding among them are not those from the noble or well-educated class like Robert Burton and Boyle who were born with golden spoon and could confine themselves in the closet made "idle subtilty, and nice discernment were yet unattempted" (Johnson, 1908, p. 38). It is Shakespeare from grass root who was less educated in classical education and acute mind to enrich his life experience through observation and could mingle its business and amusement in the process of dramatic writing with comprehensive commanding view. Opposite to Pope's opinion that Shakespeare's role of a player is only to be conducive to please the spectators, Johnson's attitude about Shakespeare's life experience is very positive since human nature is not born but to be acquired gradually as his fellowmen stated in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* by John Locke or *A Treatise of Human Nature* by David Hume through reading the classical books or to be accumulated through life experience or observation. In Johnson's opinion, life experience is Shakespeare's direct means to get about human mind and books concerning human nature is of the secondary importance. At the same time, his experience and observation is not that kind obtained as Horace advised Piso's son to complement his noble family life and increase his knowledge of human feature with deliberate observation about the model of common people.

Johnson might be the first critic who thought the mingled drama is determined by the general human nature in the history of Shakespearean criticism based on Dryden's tentative definition of the play in *Lisideius's* name without distinguishing the functions of tragedy and comedy which has never done by Aristotle or Horace. When Johnson said "comedy is his instinct and tragedy his skill" following Thomas Rhymer's idea, he did not deny that Shakespeare's plays are not the compositions of a distinct kind that is called the mingled drama, which could reflect the general nature of human mind. What he means is to link Shakespeare's life experience with his

comedy, which is mainly about the common people and lack of the chance to get acquitted with the nobles even only supported by Southampton, the Chamberlain and King James successively.

By mingled drama what Johnson does mean not only has broader meaning to cover the tragic-comic pastoral play created and defended by the Italian poet and critic Battista Guarini on the grounds that the development of social life would make it possible, but also broader than that kind of "tragi-comedie" taken by Dryden as the original invention of England stage, which is of great absurdity and popularity to meet the audience taste to go through the sorrow, mirth, honor and duel within two hours (Dryden, 1971, p. 35). According to Johnson's notes, the variety of *Hamlet* is the typical feature of mingled drama: "If the dramas of Shakespeare were to be characterized, each by the particular excellence which distinguishes it from the rest, we must allow to the tragedy of *Hamlet* the praise of variety..... The scenes are interchangeably diversified with merriment and solemnity; with merriment that includes judicious and instructive observations, and solemnity, not strained by poetical violence above the natural sentiments of man (Johnson, 1908, p. 195).

Therefore, passions, characters and fate should be the core of the play not that of the action as the soul of play in *Poetics* from the perspective of Dryden's definition of "a play ought to be, A just and lively Image of Human Nature, representing its Passions and Humours, and the Changes of Fortune to which it is subject; for the Delight and Instruction of Mankind" in *Lisideius'* name (Dryden, 1971, p. 14). According to the above mentioned, mingled drama is not determined by the author's intentions to attract the spectators' attention, but depends on the real course of life, the real state of nature, to reveal the dialectical rule of gain and loss, good and evil and unexpected mischief and benefits to achieve the end of poetry to instruct by delight.

In Johnson's words, Shakespeare got the genius to excel all the modern and ancient poets and breakthrough any limitations in their plays for his first super faculty is to acquire the human nature through observation that could compensate his little knowledge about classical works and limitation of his social status about the life to exhibit the real state of sublunary nature in mingled drama. In other words, books are not so such the ideal means for Shakespeare to explore the nature of mankind than the practical observation and contemplation about the worldly matters.

II. Adaptation and Concatenation of Intrigues

When Johnson fight against French critic's accusation about Shakespeare's plays, he found the conflicts between the rule of three unities, the genius and novelty. In his mind, Shakespeare's "violation of those laws which have been instituted and established by the joint authority of poets and of criticks" should not be taken seriously because his irregular structure has unique charming (Johnson, 1908, p. 24). The forest image of Shakespeare's irregular plays is conformed to the law of the nature mixing with sublimity and weak points compared them with the regular and elegant garden produced by French poets, which is different from the image of giant tree put forth by Voltaire with wild branches which seem need to be cut and will lose its life if being cut completely. Moreover, Johnson's comparison with *Cabinet and Mines* is also established on same condition that the solemnity of structure conceives variety, novelty and impurity.

Johnson puts forth an important idea about genius like Shakespeare who would not care about the old rules and should create something new, which is radically different from Pope's assertions that, "But we, brave Britons, foreign laws despised" (Pope, 1993, p. 38). It is also different from Dryden's comments about Shakespeare's

complicated structure conformed with poetic soul in Shakespeare's play, and the plots should be conformed with characters. The simple and dull character of French, the plot should be like the Italian style you can have a thorough view of the building, while the complicated characters like British should like the planet in the sky that should have subplots to show the rule about life.

One of Shakespeare's genius is to take most of his fables of the plays from the most popular materials is to help spectators to follow him through the intricacies of the drama with the thread of the story in their hands. For example, the fable of *As You Like It*, which is supposed to be copied from Chaucer's *Gamelyn*, was a little pamphlet of those times. Though adaptation is the convention established by Greek tragic poets who have adapted stories concerning three famous tribes with interludes assumed by Aristotle, and still a popular means to create dramatic plays in Elizabethan times, it is no doubt that no poet is above Shakespeare who could manipulate materials from the chronicles, legendary and popular romances into dramatic plays crowded with events and interludes, which are radically irregular from the perspective of three unities although the "university wits" as Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Keyed are predecessors to adapt the chronicles into historical plays.

The other is his capability to concatenate intrigues from different stories to attract the spectators' attention to compensate the injury of simplicity of. For example, the subplot in *Hamlet* that Edmund is abundantly recompensed by the addition of variety and the moral instruction "that villany is never at a stop, that crimes lead to crimes, and at last terminate in ruin" (Johnson, 1908, p. 161). Johnson insists that complicated intrigues have two important functions. One is to meet the expectation of the poetic justice and the other is reveal the real process of the event in the world to attract the spectators' attention and provide novelty and reality for them. Moral instruction was highly critical from the French critic Bissau and Lapin.

In a word, Shakespeare's irregular structure is conformed to its function "to copy nature and instruct life" (Johnson, 1908, p. 30). According to Johnson's top-down approach for the reader and spectators, to appreciate the beauty of Shakespeare's plays should be carried out from the fable to the commentators as following: "Let him, that is yet unacquainted with the powers of Shakespeare, and who desires to feel the highest pleasure that the drama can give, read every play from the first scene to the last with fancy, attention and curiosity" (Johnson, 1908, p. 40).

Therefore, form and structure are the most critical to get pleasure with all the parts that he could achieve intellectual remoteness necessary for the comprehension of any great work in its full design and its true proportions. When the best form should achieve the end of poetry to instruct by delight that the defects in minor parts should not be taken seriously. Though Shakespeare sometimes makes the beginning is giant while the end is in a rush, there is inevitable the evil was punished by end of the play owing to the subplots will help the characters experience the ups and downs of life to reveal the real process of life instead of that simplified one in French plays for they could get a thorough grasp from the whole to the exact parts. Johnson thinks that the expectation of Reader and Spectator are different about the fate of virtuous Cordelia in *King Lear*. For a reader, especially himself, he expects a natural ideas of justice that the devils will ruin and the virtues should be protected, while the revised end of Cordelia success and happiness by Tate was viewed that "the tragedy has lost half its beauty" (Johnson, 1908, p. 161).

In general, Johnson's opinion who follows Horace rules about the poet should bear in mind the principle to instruct, delight or achieve both at the same time, the aesthetic aspect of the form is inferior to the moral

instruction of the dramatic structure through. Because it is "without diminution of any other excellence, shall preserve all the unities unbroken, deserves the like applause with the architect, who shall display all the orders of architecture in a citadel, without any deduction from its strength; but the principal beauty of a citadel is to exclude the enemy" (Johnson, 1908, p. 30). What should a play to instruct is of the first importance the tough life to achieve the poetic justice with complicated intrigues even in this situation. Johnson thinks we should understand the King Lear's Problem as a family ethics that the old father and three daughters instead of a king.

III. Selection of Natural Dialogue and Characters

Johnson regards Shakespeare's capability to make the right choice in the process of writing to be the last and foremost factor to achieve the originality of natural dialogue and characters. "His language is natural, instead of fictional. He is therefore more agreeable to the ears of the present age than any other authour equally remote, and among his other excellence's deserves to be studied as one of the original masters of our language" (Johnson, 1908, p. 20).

What Johnson means original of language has nothing to do with the metaphorical use of language but the simple and easy expression to evaluate the value. To be compared with the poetical diction of Addison, Shakespeare's language of men is original on the stage which has shift the style of Marlowe's "Mighty blank verse" to "the dialogue of this authour is often so evidently determined by the incident which produces it, and is pursued with so much ease and simplicity, that it seems scarcely to claim the merit of fiction, but to have been gleaned by diligent selection out of common conversation, and common occurrences" (Johnson, 1908, p. 13).

Johnson would like use "seem" to talk about Shakespeare's phraseology that it seems not fictional and his "style is probably to be sought in the common intercourse of life, among those who speak only to be understood, without ambition of elegance" (Johnson, 1908, pp. 19-20). The word "selection", "find" and "gather" are often employed by Johnson to describe the nonfictional feature of writing process, as he means that Shakespeare is not to imitate the action but only select the pearl in the universal and that Shakespeare's writing is not from inspiration but from labors selections.

In fact, Johnson's acceptance of conversation as the best means to express thoughts instead of the rhymed lines might when he defended for Shakespeare's conversation is the best way to express the people's thought and possible way to be understood, the purity of Shakespeare's language taken as the first important factor of the invention of a poet and the graceful sound about his language (Dryden, 1971, p. 35). Dryden was so impressed by Shakespeare's of language and had ever imitate his style when he adapted his *All for Love*, which is not Shakespeare's way to create his plays who thought Shakespeare has done a lot to improve the English Language.

Therefore, the natural dialogue is the critical foundation that Johnson presumes Shakespeare characters are not heroes but men, which reveals the general nature or sentiments of human instead of particular parts featured by one nation. That means the names, social status of characters is remote and strange, while the events are popular in the world. Johnson thinks Shakespeare has found a suitable dress for his thoughts which is the right way to make his system of life expressed. Shakespeare is the great poet to explore the reason behind the people's mind, which means he intends to explore the root which is the first point the common reason and reflection of the average person. "Shakespeare's 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?" (Johnson, 1908, p. 12).

Besides his selection of natural conversation, Johnson thought Shakespeare's characters is based on his selection at his will and necessary following the rule of general nature when his kings were criticized lack of decorum according to his social status and his buffoons might be from the senate-house if necessary. In consequence, general nature is Johnson's basic rule to evaluate Shakespeare's language and characters that "Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion" (Johnson, 1908, p. 14).

What Johnson intends to say that Shakespeare has never made the people elevated to heroes. In his dictionary, Johnson gives a definition of Hero, which refers two classes of man: "A man eminent for bravery or a man of the highest class in any respect; as, a hero in learning" (Johnson, 1755, p. 955). He is really a master deserves to be examined while he is the mirror of his social times. Because he does not create something new but only chose what to reflect in this universe. He thinks the difference between the clothes and ranks will not differ their sentiments to real. Just as Johnson say, when he wants a fool, he will choose from Roman Senate. He wants to build the characters. "In the writings of other poets' character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species" (Johnson, 1908, p. 12).

And the softness of the language appears to the ears that the force and vigor, which means not the mighty blank verse which touch the heart but the soft music which will impart the true opinion of the men. Nobody he chooses his contemporary language to express his idea, therefore his language will be obsolete and obscurity. Shakespeare drama is the mirror of life with the function to cure the people of psychological problems who has amazed his imagination by reading human sentiments in human language.

Conclusion

Johnson treated Shakespeare not so much a heroic genius as a man of some special faculties, who has a quick mind and expertise to partake the sorrow, sadness, happiness and joy of human, explore thereason and motive of human activities. His attitude about Shakespeare's image of the poet of nature can be regarded as the starting point of biographical criticism. This mode of discussion maybe the original mode to support Edmund Malone's sketch of Shakespeare biography and Edmund Dowden's four stages of his career in *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art*.

From then on, Johnson's attitude about Shakespeare's image has critical influence on the development of Shakespearean Criticism, especially Samuel Taylor Coleridge comments on Shakespeare to explore the function of villains that they are existing only to show the intellectual talents not only for the sake of evils but to show how the evils manipulate. Dryden's attitude that Shakespeare draws human image from his comprehensive mind with born knowledge, and Pope's judgement that with intuition he could create the original characters when glancing at the thing with broad reading and life experience were gradually taken as the classical image of Shakespeare quoted by critics and scholars from generation to generation, complementing by Johnson's poet of nature who could explore the inner mind and intellectual beauty of human mind.

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