

# Aesthetics of Reception: Shakespeare Criticism down the Ages

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Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of human nature. – Samuel Johnson

An anonymous critic once declared, with a little bit of pardonable jingoism, that if all the writings on *Hamlet* were to be collected and piled one upon another, it would touch the nearest planet! Fun apart, none can deny that of all writers in this cosmos, it is the Bard-of-Avon who has elicited the widest response to his works from all over the world. Lay readers, students, scholars, critics, theatre-goers, translators—indeed all of them have marvelled at what Harold Bloom terms him as the ‘human invention.’ It is well-nigh impossible to put together all the reactions which have been so continuously pouring over the four centuries. I intend to restrict myself to the critical output on Shakespeare by established critics ever since the plays were staged.

In his own time, Shakespeare met with favourable response; and right from the Restoration in 1660 onwards critics and editors began their focus on the dramatic text and language of Shakespeare and quite naturally the attention shifted from theatre performance to the text, the printed version. A vantageous point to begin our journey would be to start from John Dryden who in his *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* (1668) offers this remark:

To begin, then, with Shakespeare. He was the man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the images of nature were still present to him, and he drew them, not laboriously, but luckily; when he describes anything, you may more than see it, you may feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning, give him the greater commendation: he was naturally learned; he needed not the spectacle of books to read nature; he looked inwards, and found her there. I cannot say he is everywhere alike; were he so, I should do him injury to compare him with the greatest of mankind, He is many times flat, insipid; his comic wit degenerating into clenches, his serious swelling into bombast. But he is always great, when some great occasion is presented to him; no man can ever say he had a fit subject to his wit, and did not then raise himself as high above the rest of the poets.

It was Dryden who declared that the credit of initiating the genre of the tragicomedy goes to Shakespeare for till then ‘the sock and the buskin were not worn by the same poet’, that is the genres of the tragedy and comedy were kept apart from each other and were not practised by one and the same poet.

Samuel Johnson's edition of Shakespeare (1765) was the sixth edition of the great poet in terms of history of editions (after the folio). The earlier ones were by Nicholas Rowe, Alexander Pope, Lewis Theobald and William Warburton. All of these textual details connected with the definitive, authoritative editions were updated and published by the great bibliographer W.W. Greg as *Editorial Problems in Shakespeare*. On his own method of textual editing and emendation, Johnson was of the view that that reading is right which requires many words to prove it wrong, and that emendation is wrong which cannot without much labour appear to be right. In form and spirit, he follows the earlier prefaces. The *Preface* which was intended as the introduction to his edition of Shakespeare is Johnson's first work in extended criticism. There are seven units in this long essay: Shakespeare as a poet of nature, a defence of his tragicomedy, his style, his defects, and attack on the dramatic unities in general, the historical background to drama, and finally, his editorial practice. There are some inconsistencies in his views on tragicomedy, in his praise of Shakespeare and the later attack on him, and on his style—"A quibble to Shakespeare, what luminous vapours are to the traveller; he follows it at all adventures; it is sure to lead him out of the way, and sure to engulf him in the mire..... A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it—but these were the characteristic defects—not taken seriously—of his age." In his own Johnsonian language, his estimate of immortal Shakespeare, who it was said

knew little Greek and less Latin, runs thus:

The work of a correct and regular writer is a garden accurately formed and diligently planted varied with shades and scented with flowers; the composition of Shakespeare is a forest in which oaks extend their branches, and pines tower in the air, interspersed sometimes with weeds and brambles, and sometimes giving shelter to myrtles and to roses; filling the eye with awful pomp, and gratifying the mind with endless diversity. Other poets display cabinets of precious rarities, minutely finished, wrought into shape, and polished into brightness. Shakespeare opens a mine which contains gold and diamonds in inexhaustible plenty, though clouded by incrustations, debased by impurities, and mingled with a mass of meaner minerals.

When you come next to the Romantic age, here is Coleridge's dispassionate judgement:

As proof positive of his unrivalled excellence, I should like to try Shakespeare by this criterion. Make out your amplest catalogue of all the human faculties, as reason, or the moral law, the will, the feeling of the coincidence or the two called the conscience, the understanding, or prudence, wit, fancy, imagination, judgment, and then of the objects on which these are to be employed, as the beauties, the terrors, and the seeming caprices of nature, the capabilities, that is, the actual and the ideal of the human mind, conceive as an individual or a social being, as in innocence or in guilt, in a play-paradise or in a war field of temptation: and then compare with Shakespeare under each of

these heads all or any of the writers in prose and verse that have ever lived! Who, that is competent to judge doubts the result?

Charles and his sister Mary Lamb were avid readers of Elizabethan drama. It is said they read together all the plays of Shakespeare twice over every year. As a regular theatre-goer Lamb felt that the depth of Shakespeare's plays cannot be seen through ocular aids; they have to be felt on the pulse through an imaginative response that can be aided only by reading. Stage presentation cannot do justice to the play. His work *On the Tragedies of Shakespeare* came out in 1811. The tragic experience of a play will always remain 'unplumbed and unplummable by the best actors and producers.

Appreciation of a play by Shakespeare through his character portrayal begins with William Hazlitt, one of the most notable critics of the Romantic age. In his trend-setting book *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817), he evaluates the playwright on the basis of the real, life-like portrayal of his characters. "*Macbeth* and *Lear*, *Othello* and *Hamlet* are usually reckoned Shakespeare's four principal tragedies. *Lear* stands first for the profound intensity of passion; *Macbeth* for the wilderness of the imagination and the rapidity of action; *Othello* for the progressive interest and powerful alternations of feeling; *Hamlet* for the refined development of thought and sentiment." With him began what has now come to be called the character school of Shakespearean criticism, later on to be taken up for more serious study and

interpretation by Dr A.C. Bradley. Charles De Quincey's famous essay "On the knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*" is a penetrating and philosophic piece of criticism. The Porter scene (II, 3) in which Macduff and Lennox knock at the gates of Duncan's castle Inverness is usually taken to mean a comic interlude to relieve the mental tension the after effect of the most foul murder. "We must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested—laid asleep—tranced—racked into a dead armistice; time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must be self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion. Hence it is that when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect ... the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced..." The Scottish philosopher and historian Thomas Carlyle in his famous work *On Heroes and Hero-worship* remarks that history is nothing but the biography of the Great Man. In the light of this remark he puts to test Shakespeare's work and concludes that he is a hero poet. Likewise Carlyle's contemporary, the American philosopher, essayist and transcendentalist Emerson in his *Representative Men* eulogises and extols the virtues in Shakespeare's works. The two of them opine that it was Shakespeare who had created the European imaginative empire.

Criticism came to occupy its place in the universities only in the beginning of the twentieth century. Until then men of letters combined criticism and scholarship and

articulated their views in journals. The situation now is different: criticism does not—indeed cannot exist outside the academia. Coleridge, Hazlitt, Carlyle and De Quincey did not belong to the university fold. George Saintsbury was the first to effect some reforms. Edward Dowden published his biographical criticism *Shakespeare: His Mind and Art*. Dr AC. Bradley and W.R. Ker were the critics of prominence—the first among the academic critics—entering the university for the spread of their critical enterprise. At a time when Walter Raleigh and Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch were occupying positions of prominence in the two citadels of learning, criticism came into its own in the beginning of the twentieth century. The most distinguished of them all was the redoubtable Dr A. C. Bradley. His *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) was so much of a bible for Indian students. It used to be a wisecrack that Shakespeare failed in the ‘Shakespeare’ paper because he had failed to read Bradley. A critic Guy Boas composed this limerick: I dreamed last night that Shakespeare’s ghost/Sat for a civil service post,/The English paper of the year/Contained a question on *King Lear*,

Which Shakespeare answered very badly/  
Because he had not read his Bradley.”

Middleton Murry thought that it was the greatest single work of criticism in English, while Leavis and the *Scrutiny* scholars forcibly pushed Bradley off the pedestal. Bradley was a committed student of Hegel. No wonder then that his ahead aesthetic theory was based on Hegel’s philosophy of tragedy. He was most at home in German

metaphysics. The English had known the meaning of tragedy from the Aristotelian tradition, and its effect on the audience by arousing the twin emotions of pity and fear. For Bradley reality is one and the same. All things which exist are only imperfect manifestations of the real one, the infinite. Evil is that which alienates the part from the whole. Finite is imperfect while the infinite is perfect. Finally moral order is restored and harmony prevails. Tragedy as an art is the very image of this human drama. Tragedy defends and confirms this order of the world. The tragic hero goes against this order succumbs and submits. “We feel that this spirit, even in the error and defeat, rises by its greatness into ideal union with the power that overwhelms it.” Passive suffering cannot lead to the tragic. A tragic hero is one who is responsible for his actions. There is no element of chance in tragedy. The concept of poetic justice that virtue is rewarded and evil punished is alien to the tragic spirit. To understand tragedy Bradley has to look at the characters because actions issue through the characters. It is this insistence on character that has come in for much criticism.

L.C. Knights made a scathing attack on him in his famous essay, “How many children had Lady Lady Macbeth?” The rejection of Bradley came from different quarters: from those who maintained that Shakespeare’s plays should be discussed as effective stage dramas; Granville Barker took up Shakespeare’s dramaturgy and the practical matters and problems of staging Shakespeare in *Prefaces to Shakespeare*

that appeared in 12 volumes over a period of 20 years; from those who thought that he was unhistorical in his concept of tragedy, from those, the *Scrutiny* group of critics who wanted to interpret Shakespeare's plays as poems in terms of imagery and themes. Bradley relied upon his personal emotional reactions to Shakespeare. He succeeded in inculcating in us something about the profundities of Shakespeare's plays and laid the foundations for a philosophic criticism of Shakespeare practised later by such well-known critics as Middleton Murry and Wilson Knight. L.C. Knights, the co-editor of *Scrutiny*, however, wanted to reject this character approach that dominated Shakespeare criticism and so mockingly wrote the essay "How many children?" a classic of modern criticism. His position is that "the only profitable approach to Shakespeare is a consideration of his plays as dramatic poems, of his use of language to obtain a total complex emotional response." He demonstrates this method by exploring the twin themes of reversal of values and unnatural disorder in the play *Macbeth* by a close examination treating it as a poem and not as a play. This attention to the organic poetic unity that expresses the intention of the playwright was the next step in Shakespeare criticism, followed by a great many New critics like Derek Traversi (*Approach to Shakespeare*), Robert Heilman (*This Great Stage*) among others. This lopsided insistence on the words alone to the exclusion of other elements such as the plot and constructive features of the play came in for rejection at the hands of a group Neo-

Aristotelians. They argued in favour of treating the play as play taking into consideration all constitutive elements: plot, character, dialogue, music and spectacle all of which together built up a play. Ronald Crane, Elder Olson and others formed this group which came to be known as the Chicago Neo-Aristotelians.

After the advent of Structuralism and Deconstruction, Shakespeare criticism took a different turn, veering away from the interpretative methodology, spearheaded by the New Historicists Stephen Greenblatt and his followers. New Historicism is based on a parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts (chosen from the archive) both of which belong roughly to the same historical period. It does not privilege the literary text. It does not attempt to 'foreground' the literary text and treat history as its background as was done by Tillyard in his *Elizabethan World Picture* (1943). Literary and all other discourses are given equal importance: the one is used to read and interpret the other. The two are seen to mutually interrogate, contradict, modify and inform each other. In other words it textualises history and historicises the text. Social structures are determined by 'discursive practices.' Their high powered journal *Representations* became its organ, promoting essays that gave a historicist reading of literature of the Renaissance and Elizabethan age. It is more of a practice than an interpretation or a theory. To quote Greenblatt, "the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire

of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society.” Most of the plays of Shakespeare have been subjected to this new historicist reading and this has marked a new wave in Shakespeare criticism.

The British version Cultural materialism, a critical method of enquiry gained currency in the mid-1980s. Jonathan Dollimore and Catherine Sinfield in their book of essays (*Political Shakespeare*) on religion, ideology and power in the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries provided a reading based on political commitment. This served as an alternative to the conventional Christian framework of Shakespeare criticism which had run its course for more than four hundred years. By way of an example, let us juxtapose the readings of Greenblatt and Dollimore of *King Lear*. In his essay “Shakespeare and the Exorcists” Greenblatt makes a comparative study of the play in relation to an unnoticed social document, *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Imposture* written by one Harsnett in 1603 two years before Shakespeare’s play made its first appearance. Harsnett exposes exorcists as frauds and persuades the State to punish them. Greenblatt proves with textual evidence that Shakespeare uses the theatre for a similar purpose of ritual demystification of the supernatural. There is a deeper and unexpressed institutional exchange of the two texts. Dollimore employing a similar method of engaging with the historical, social and political realities concludes that the materialist conception challenges all forms of literary criticism premised on essentialist humanism and

idealist culture. Such a radical reading of Shakespeare throws overboard the idea of a timeless, humane and civilising Shakespeare replacing it with the one anchored in social, political and ideological concepts of his historical moment.

Leaving aside these critical estimates based on some or the other critical assumptions, there have been an enormous variety of contributions on different aspects of Shakespeare studies. The Oxford Renaissance scholar Dover Wilson, the editor of the New Cambridge series of Shakespeare’s works along with Arthur Quiller-Couch wrote two influential studies, “What happens in *Hamlet*?” and “Fortunes of Falstaff” as an answer to Bradley’s “The Rejection of Falstaff.” Terry Eagleton’s *Shakespeare and Society* (1967) and *William Shakespeare* (1986) are two major studies based on his treatment of the literary text in relation to moral, historical and political realities. Shakespeare’s works are inseparable from Elizabethan social issues. In the *Western Canon*, a work by Harold Bloom which makes a list of 22 authors who form the fulcrum, the foundation for a liberal education affords the central place to Shakespeare and Dante. The two have divided the western world between them. For sheer cognitive acuity, linguistic energy and power of imagination they achieve canonical centrality.

‘Negative Capability’ and ‘Objective Correlative’ are two among the best known critical vocabulary used in relation to Shakespeare’s works. Keats, defining Negative capability says, “At once it struck

me, what quality went to form a man of Achievement, especially in literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—that is Negative Capability when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” T. S. Eliot coins the term ‘objective correlative’ in his famous essay “Hamlet and his Problems”. “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative,’ in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula for that particular emotion, such that when the external facts which terminate in sensory experience are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” Using this formula Eliot dismissed the play *Hamlet* as an artistic failure. The yearbook of Shakespeare studies and production *Shakespeare Survey* has been publishing international scholarship in English regularly since 1948, and many of its essays have become classics of Shakespeare criticism.

There have been poetic tributes to the Bard-

of Avon pouring in from all quarters all the ages. It was Ben Jonson, who firsts composed “To the memory of my beloved author William Shakespeare.” It is most appropriate to conclude with the best well-known of them by Matthew Arnold:

Others abide our question. Thou art free.  
We ask and ask Thou smilest and art still  
Out-topping knowledge. For the loftiest  
    hill,  
Who to the stars uncrowns his majesty,  
Planting his steadfast footsteps in the sea,  
    Making the heaven of heavens his  
    dwelling-place,  
Spare but the cloudy border of his space  
    To the foiled searching of mortality;  
And thou who didst the stars and  
    sunbeams did know,  
    Self-schooled, self-scanned, self-  
    honoured, self-secured,  
Didst tread on earth unguessed at. Better  
    so!  
All pains the immortal spirit must endure,  
All weakness which impairs, all griefs  
    which bow,  
Find their sole speech in that victorious  
    brow.