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***CANONICAL APPROACHES TO SHAKESPEARE:  
DR. JOHNSON AND COLERIDGE***

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**Abstract:** *A canonical critical approach to a canonical author was defined by Harold Bloom as a combination of two critical standpoints. One aspect concerns the critic's ability to solve formal and phenomenological issues which arise in a work of art. The other one refers to the critic's capacity of making value judgments on literary works on moral grounds. My preferred approach in this presentation is of 'the compare and contrast' type, as critics from two different cultural paradigms (late Neoclassicism and early Romanticism) are weighed against each other. While Johnson is concerned with the issue of the three unities and with the moral dimension of Shakespeare's plays, Coleridge attempts a reconstruction of Shakespeare's original intention and builds on the hypothesis that as concerns poetry pleasure precedes truth. The main aim of this article is bringing together two critics having different personalities, united by a common interest: taking Shakespeare away from accessibly appreciatively-naïve criticism and promoting a truly critical approach to the author. Their views are also canonical as they understood and incorporated two of Shakespeare's registers that are the sage discourse and the passionate language of nature. Apart from this, the two critics managed, I think, successfully, to build the basis of a tradition in literary criticism. Since the conference's theme is labeled Genres and Historicity: Text, Cotext, Context, I thought it would be interesting to refer to the above mentioned aspects which mainly focus on criticism as an emerging genre.*

During one of his public lectures, Coleridge would rhetorically address his audience: "The first question we should ask ourselves is - What did Shakespeare mean when he drew the character of Hamlet?" (Coleridge, *Notes on Hamlet* 192). Coleridge lectured in front of an audience to whom he wanted to unravel the mental stages Shakespeare underwent in order to create one of his most ambiguous characters. As the title of the paper hints, our broader aim here, is to compare Coleridgean literary criticism with that of Samuel Johnson's with respect to their approaches to Shakespeare. For the purpose of this study, comments on passages of Shakespearean criticism are meant to highlight both the 'sage' and the 'passionate' critic in Johnson and Coleridge, as one can find both instances in the criticism they produce. Also, at least a cursory look at the two critics' main assumptions about literature is provided alongside their Shakespearean criticism. And since the June 2010 conference's theme is labeled Genres and Historicity:

Text, Cotext, Context, I thought it would be interesting to refer to the above mentioned aspects which mainly focus on criticism as an emerging genre.

In order to understand Coleridge's position as a critic with respect to Shakespeare, it is first desirable to inquire into Dr. Johnson's view of literature. A valuable source for understanding Johnson's literary criticism is represented by his periodical essays which build up *The Rambler* (1750-1752). In the eighteenth century, the periodical was a genre in itself, where the essayist tackled issues of morality and issues of taste. Johnson discusses issues such as vanity, flattery, sloth, bereavement, the nature of human faults or the proper use of one's time. *The Spectator* and *The Rambler* are among the periodicals which displayed the greatest longevity and they represent key sources for understanding the Augustan values of decency and propriety. Literary criticism was bred in such periodicals as literature, taste and morality were, at the time, inseparable. As a consequence of this tight relation between literature and moral instruction, Johnson's judgments in the sphere of literature are also remarks concerning morality. The guiding principle of *The Rambler* is in many ways the intention behind Johnson's accomplishments in literary criticism: "my purpose being to consider the moral discipline of the mind and to promote the increase of virtue rather than of learning" (Johnson, *Essays from the Rambler* 23).

One of Dr. Johnson's greatest concerns focuses on the moral purpose of Shakespeare's plays. Although he finds Shakespeare an accomplished writer, Johnson cannot refrain from claiming that the English bard "has likewise faults, and faults sufficient to obscure and overwhelm any other merit." (Johnson 15) The first impression one gets about this passage is that Johnson is keen on 'dethroning' Shakespeare. Further on, the critic raises Shakespeare's greatest defect to the height of a sin: "His first defect is that to which may be imputed most of the evil in books or in men." (20) Johnson explains why it is so:

He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose. From his writings indeed a system of social duty may be selected, for he that thinks reasonably must think morally; but his precepts and axioms drop casually from him. (Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare* 20)

The ethical dimension of Johnson's criticism is evident; a literary work that fails to meet the moral expectations of its age falls into disgrace. In his eyes, artistic talent pales if the writer neglects issues of morality. These apparently narrow and ethicist views could have easily obscured Johnson's merits as a critic, but he acknowledges the historical conditions in which Shakespeare wrote his plays: "the reign of Elizabeth is commonly supposed to have been a time of stateliness, formality and reserve; yet perhaps the relaxations of that severity were not very elegant" (Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare* 22).

Although he recognizes Shakespeare's brilliant use of the language of nature, Johnson does not readily give up his Christian values for the 'illicit' pleasures of a great

literary text. In this respect, it is Coleridge who excels at incorporating Shakespeare's passionate language into his own brand of literary criticism.

Johnson's criticism is also concerned with formal issues in Shakespeare's plays such as the violation of The Three Unities. In one of his most inspired passages from his Preface to Shakespeare (1765), Samuel Johnson expresses his praise of Shakespeare against the neoclassical background:

He that, 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; and the greatest graces of a play, are to copy nature and instruct life. (Johnson, *Essays from the Rambler* 30)

This dense paragraph briefly exposes the demands of Neoclassical art and, at the same time, invigorates its aesthetic claims. It is a way of saying that a dramatic genius who does not obey the rule of The Three Unities – of space, time and action - is still praiseworthy as long as he gives a faithful representation of nature and meets a didactic purpose. One frequently invoked Augustan view was that Shakespeare had violated the golden rule of The Three Unities. But it is Johnson who claims that it is impossible or indeed useless to decide “whether Shakespeare knew the unities, and rejected them by design, or deviated from them by happy ignorance”.

Since a play essentially needs unity of action, Johnson does not see the reason why the unities of time and place are that important after all. The spectator can assuredly participate in a play where acts occur in different places rather than in one and the same: “Nor, if such another poet could arise, should I very vehemently reproach him, that his first act passed at Venice, and his next in Cyprus” (Johnson, *Essays from the Rambler* 29).

Shakespeare's chief merits, according to Johnson, lie in the all-encompassing nature of his characters, which most often represent a species rather than an individual. For Romantic critics, the argument seemed superficial, because they felt that the notion of individuality was underrated. Here is Johnson's ‘controversial’ passage:

His persons (Shakespeare's) 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. (Johnson, *Essays from the Rambler* 12)

The confusion Johnson's passage has brought relies on conflating the ideas of character types and that of individuality. To Romantic critics such as Hazlitt or Coleridge, the individuality of a character removes that particular character from the didactic frame. Hazlitt thought that Johnson was attempting to level the characters by seeking the didactic form instead of the dramatic distinctions among Shakespeare's characters:

He (Johnson) in fact found the general species or didactic form in Shakespeare's characters, which was all he sought and cared for; he did not find the individual traits, or the dramatic distinctions which Shakespeare has engrafted on this general nature, because he felt no interest in them. (Hazlitt, *Dr. Johnson and Shakespeare* 268)

In his 'elegy for the canonical history of literature' entitled *The Western Canon* (1995), Harold Bloom explains what individuality and generality mean to Johnson. By stating that Shakespeare's characters represent species rather than individuals, Johnson considers that Hamlet or Iago, for instance, go beyond the limits of clearly defined individuals. More than that, their individuality is confirmed and highlighted by a whole system of values. For this reason, one can hardly conceive a charismatic intellectual without thinking of Hamlet. In the same way, one can easily envisage an evil, wicked man by simply referring to Iago. (Bloom 205) However we may wish to interpret this, we simply cannot do without this common-sensical, overwhelmingly canonical view that Shakespeare is our contemporary because the generality of human nature as he expressed it has to do with the universality of his powerfully individualized characters. As Jann Kott opines in his study *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1962), William Shakespeare's quality lies in providing a flexible scenario, where characters' roles are assigned by the contemporary world. (Kott 68). To give an example, recent hamletology deems that *The Tragedy of Hamlet* represents theatre in the first place, and not a moral, philosophical or psychological treatise. The conception that Hamlet is theatre more than it is anything else implies the existence of a scenario and of roles to be assigned (Kott 72).

Johnson applies a sort of empirical method which attempts to relate causes of artistic creation to their effects on the reader. If we take a look at Johnson's account on *The Tragedy of Lear*, we would notice that genius is the collaboration of all mental powers. Shakespeare's art lets loose the richness of the imagination, dragging both the reader and the theatre spectator along for the ride:

The artful involutions of distinct interests, the striking opposition of contrary characters, the sudden changes of fortune, and the quick succession of events, fill the mind with a perpetual tumult of indignation, pity, and hope. [...] So powerful is the current of the poet's imagination, that the mind, which once ventures within it, is hurried irresistibly along. (Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare* 159-160)

In this passage, Johnson paves the way for Coleridge's imaginative recreations of Shakespeare's artistic intentions. Notice the quasi-scientific language of Johnson, carrying residues of empiricist thinking: "So powerful is the current of the poet's imagination". The enumeration in the passage "fill the mind with a perpetual tumult of indignation, pity, and hope" proves that the critic empathizes with the play, making him renounce, for a moment at least, the instance of the sage critic with which we are acquainted with. In his study entitled *The Nature of Dr. Johnson's Rationalism* (1950), critic J. T. Hagstrum pointed out that Johnson's understanding of reason is far more complex than we are likely to think. Instead of associating reason with restraining forces,

Johnson seems to invest it with positive energies. (Hagstrum 139) Indeed, Johnson understood the tight relation between genius, reason and imagination and this enabled him “to transcend the rigidly defined categories of neo-classical psychology.” (200) For him, genius is the working together of all mental powers, of all the faculties therefore. However, in his criticism, the boundaries between the faculties are blurred because the stress is more on the cooperation of the faculties in producing an artistic effect than on the processes associated with each faculty. As critic Hagstrum observes, it is often difficult to differentiate between Johnson’s language concerning the rational faculty and the language that displays the imaginative process (203).

While browsing Coleridge’s *Shakespearean Criticism*, the reader cannot help noticing the implacability of the critic’s logical assertions. In addition, the plays themselves are as important as the intentions underlying them. It is exactly this aspect that is paramount in Coleridge’s criticism. In short, his method has no more than two key concepts – the intention and the imagination that brought it to its realization. I would say that this is the assumption behind Coleridge’s literary criticism, especially in his *Biographia Literaria*. Whether he discusses Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth or any other author, the critic is aware of the importance of capturing the creative process, the very intention of the author. As far as formalism is concerned, Coleridge surpasses Johnson. But nowhere else are a critic’s remarks raised to the dignity of a maxim as in Johnson’s assertions. So great is Johnson’s influence on the style of constructing sage discourse that I feel I’m still reading him behind the lines of Coleridge’s ethical concerns in his discussion of Shakespeare’s characters.

Of the two critics, it is Coleridge who manages to bring Shakespeare’s use of language in conjunction with his language of criticism. Johnson is prudent about Shakespeare’s passionate language, so he chooses to emphasize the sapiential discourse in Shakespeare. But when he portrays Edmund’s character (of *King Lear*) for instance, Coleridge abundantly uses metaphorical language. The Romantic critic builds the hypothesis that every show of respect implies repressing a contrary feeling. When shadowed by pride, Edmund’s politeness is “the ever-trickling flow of wormwood and gall into the wounds of pride, the corrosive virus which inoculates pride with a venom not its own, with envy, hatred...” (Coleridge, *Notes on Hamlet* 51) We need go no further. This is one of Coleridge’s most passionate outbursts where the power of his criticism meets Shakespeare’s language of nature. As we can notice, the words “gall” and “wormwood” seem to burst right out of the witches’ dialogues in *Macbeth*. As in Shakespeare’s play, moral statements are put forth more effectively in rough, passionate metaphors than in a sermon-like manner.

Of all his achievements in criticism, Coleridge impresses most in his attempts at recreating Shakespeare’s original intention of artistic creation. Over and over, Coleridge inquires into what critic Clarence D. Thorpe calls “Shakespeare’s conscious art in creating scenes and characters” (Thorpe 408). In his introduction to Coleridge’s *Shakespearean Criticism*, critic Middleton Raysor notices that Coleridge treats every subject “in reference to the operation of the mental faculties to which it specially appertains” (Raysor 7). During an 1811 public lecture, Coleridge raises a difficult

question from his pulpit: “The first question we should ask ourselves is - What did Shakespeare mean when he drew the character of Hamlet? [...] My belief is, that he always regarded his story before he began to write much in the same light as a painter regards his canvas before he begins to paint ...” (Coleridge, *Notes on Hamlet* 192). In his analysis of Hamlet, Coleridge proceeds in a perfect didactic tone: before attempting to understand a character, we must first be aware of how our minds actually work. The critic himself gives us a hand: “in the healthy processes of the mind, a balance is constantly maintained between the impressions from outward objects and the inward operations of the intellect” (Coleridge, *Notes on Hamlet* 34). Indeed, a flux between empirical reality and the faculty of cognition is the basic requirement for mental sanity. If the balance is broken and tilts towards the contemplative faculty, man becomes “the creature of mere meditation”. The consequence of such an imbalance in the case of Hamlet is that he “loses his natural power of action”. The critic discusses Hamlet using the familiar language of the *Biographia Literaria*, a multi-faced work of splendid insight into, among other issues, the philosophy of the mind. Coleridge, however, is not satisfied with analyzing mental operations as they are exemplified in the character of Hamlet. He goes further by seeking the author’s creative process. First, Shakespeare imagined his own intellectual faculty “in morbid excess” (Coleridge, *Notes on Hamlet* 34). Then he placed himself “thus mutilated and diseased” under the circumstances which he created for Hamlet.

However, what is most remarkable about Coleridge’s criticism in the quotes above refers to his struggle to get to a method of critical inquiry. Letting aside Shakespeare’s design, one should also remark what Coleridge’s purpose as a critic was in taking up such a task in the first place. I believe that Coleridge’s criticism of Hamlet represents a splendid pretext for the author to crystallize his very own conception of art. To me, this particular piece of criticism can be seen as S.T. Coleridge’s most insightful exploration into the nature of art and also of destiny. His belief expressed in the *Biographia Literaria* about the prevalence of pleasure over truth in the realm of art mingles here with exposing the dangers of living in mere meditation. It has to be noticed that Coleridge’s literary criticism manages to subsume both the criticism of the imagination and the formalist heritage left by Johnson. The result of Coleridge’s fusion is what American formalist critic Murray Krieger calls vital formalism: not just the relation between the part and the whole, but also the consciousness of the imaginative process that ties the part to the whole (Krieger 183).

It is also worth mentioning that Hamlet’s penchant for soliloquies should also be weighed against his courageous initiatives. I am now making a case for Andrew Bradley’s lectures on Hamlet in *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904). Although Bradley recognizes the importance of the Schlegel-Coleridge theory of Hamlet as the tragedy of reflection, he reminds us of the scenes where Hamlet spurs into action. Coleridge’s insistence on the tragic nature of Hamlet’s ‘inactivity’ is also due, according to Bradley, to the biographical penchant of Coleridge’s criticism; in other words, Coleridge might have identified with Hamlet’s soliloquies, but he could have hardly related with the hero’s quickness of action:

he (Hamlet) must have been quick and impetuous in action; for it is downright impossible that the man we see rushing after the Ghost, killing Polonius, dealing with the King's commission, boarding the pirate, leaping into the grave, executing his final vengeance, could ever have been shrinking or slow in an emergency. Imagine Coleridge doing any of these things! (Bradley 110)

Other criticisms about Coleridge's struggle to get to 'Shakespeare's original design' could also arrive; and one could fix the starting point for them in Bradley's passage above. The fallacy is called biographical criticism and it is one of the issues the New Critics of the 1940s and 1950s disliked the most. Making hypotheses about a writer's 'empirical source' which could have triggered an emotional or intellectual response should be left for romanticized, best-seller autobiographies. I admit liking Bradley's joke because it was used in timely fashion in order to prove an important point: that Coleridge 'fell' for Hamlet pretty much the same way Hazlitt did when he wrote "It is we who are Hamlet" (Hazlitt, Hamlet 70). However, we will keep 'translating' Hamlet into our own time and especially into our own feelings so perhaps the emotional fallacy or the biographical criticism is a lot harder to shake off when it comes to Shakespeare's plays.

To sum up, we should ask ourselves why it is that Johnson and Coleridge are canonical with respect to their Shakespearean criticism. Firstly, they breached the 'critical canons' of their age. Johnson puts an end to the endless debates concerning Shakespeare's violation of the Three Unities; the exponents of such debates were Rhymer and Voltaire. Also, Johnson respected Shakespeare for being an irregular genius. He even went as far as to accept Shakespeare as a crowd pleaser rather than a moral judge, and this was to Johnson an anti-canonical stance since the periodicals in which he himself wrote promoted morality above entertainment. Lastly, Johnson notices that Shakespeare's loose plots or harsh, even coarse language do not hinder the stability of truth about human nature.

Coleridge's canonicity is won through a successful attempt at incorporating Shakespeare's poetical language into his own understanding of philosophical, Kantian criticism. We have already highlighted that the critic, as Clarence Thorpe puts it, treats his subject by referring to the operation of the mental faculties to which that subject corresponds. On the other hand, Coleridge makes a case for Hamlet as the tragedy of reflection, which has been challenged since Bradley at the beginning of the twentieth century, but is still canonical as we still cannot wholly refute it. Contemporary theatre and theatre goers still are in the 'biographical fallacy' since it is not only fashionable, but indeed irresistible not to adapt and internalize Shakespeare's plays according to our own notion of the *hic et nunc*.

It was up to someone like Coleridge to establish a method of criticism that would stem from a combination between British empiricism and Kantian aesthetics. As a result of this synthesis of philosophy and aesthetics, Coleridge proceeds with confidence and carefully distinguishes between the faculties implied in the artistic process. This is a quote from Coleridge's lecture on Milton's *Paradise Lost* which is a testimony to Coleridge's critical spirit: "When the mind is fixed on an image, it becomes

understanding, but while it is unfixed and wavering between them, attaching itself permanently to none, it is imagination.” (Coleridge, *Seventh Lecture* 540)

Johnson and Coleridge are also canonical critics as they understood and incorporated two of Shakespeare’s registers that are the sage discourse and the passionate language of nature. Apart from this, the two critics managed, I think, successfully, to build the basis of a tradition in literary criticism. In doing this, they created a genre for criticism, which has its own language and methods. With Coleridge and the Romantic age, criticism enters a new age of imaginative, speculative writing where Shakespeare’s passionate language was used to the critics’ desire to advocate Romantic pathos. But we mustn’t forget Samuel Johnson either, as he is rightly proclaimed the canonical critic by Harold Bloom, due to his emphasis on the universality of human nature expressed in Shakespeare and so well mirrored in Dr. Johnson’s criticism.

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