

samuel johnson preface to shakespeare

samuel johnson preface to shakespeare stands as a pivotal document in the history of literary criticism, offering a profound and enduring perspective on the Bard's enduring legacy. This seminal work, penned by the esteemed Dr. Samuel Johnson, delves into the complexities of Shakespearean drama, examining its structure, characterization, and universal appeal. Within its pages, Johnson grapples with contemporary criticisms of Shakespeare, defending his genius against accusations of rule-breaking and historical inaccuracy. He explores themes of theatrical convention, the nature of poetic justice, and the very essence of tragedy and comedy as envisioned by Shakespeare. Understanding the Samuel Johnson Preface to Shakespeare is crucial for anyone seeking to appreciate the critical reception and evolving interpretation of England's greatest playwright. This article will comprehensively explore the key arguments and lasting significance of this foundational piece of literary scholarship.

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The Context of the Samuel Johnson Preface to Shakespeare

Samuel Johnson's preface to his 1765 edition of Shakespeare's plays was not an isolated academic exercise; it emerged from a specific critical climate and a desire to provide a comprehensive scholarly apparatus for a new edition. The mid-18th century saw Shakespeare grappling with the strictures of Neoclassical dramatic theory, which emphasized adherence to the classical unities of time, place, and action. Critics like Rymer had earlier attacked Shakespeare for perceived deviations from these rules. Johnson, a staunch defender of Shakespeare's genius, felt compelled to address these criticisms directly. His preface was intended to serve as both an introduction to his monumental editorial undertaking and a robust defense of Shakespeare's artistic integrity against a generation of more rigid critics. The anticipation for a definitive edition of Shakespeare, coupled with Johnson's established reputation as a literary arbiter, ensured that the Samuel Johnson Preface to Shakespeare would receive significant attention.

Johnson's Defense of Shakespeare's Dramatic Principles

One of the central aims of the Samuel Johnson Preface to Shakespeare is to dismantle the prevailing criticisms leveled against the playwright's supposed disregard for classical dramatic conventions. Johnson argues persuasively that Shakespeare's deviations are not flaws but rather deliberate choices that enhance the power and realism of his plays. He famously defends Shakespeare's use of comic subplots within tragedies, asserting that such juxtapositions mirror the complexities of real life, where joy and sorrow often coexist. Similarly, Johnson addresses the perceived violation of the unities, contending that while strict adherence might offer neatness, it can also lead to artificiality and a loss of dramatic scope. He posits that Shakespeare's genius lies in his ability to create a more profound and engaging theatrical experience by embracing a broader canvas. The preface meticulously unpacks these arguments, establishing a critical framework that began to shift the perception of Shakespeare from a talented but undisciplined playwright to a master craftsman working with a different, and arguably more effective, set of artistic principles.

The Question of the Unities

Johnson dedicates considerable space to discussing the classical unities. He acknowledges their theoretical basis but questions their practical application in capturing the full spectrum of human experience. For Johnson, the artificial constraints imposed by the unities could paradoxically lead to a less believable representation of life. He suggests that by allowing for a greater passage of time and a wider range of locations, Shakespeare could more effectively explore the long-term consequences of actions and the diverse environments that shape human character. This defense of Shakespeare's sprawling narratives marked a significant departure from earlier criticisms that demanded strict adherence to Aristotelian ideals.

The Role of Comic Elements in Tragedy

The intermingling of comic and tragic elements in Shakespeare's works was another point of contention for Johnson's predecessors. The Samuel Johnson Preface to Shakespeare directly confronts this by arguing for the artistic merit of such contrasts. Johnson posits that the inclusion of comic scenes serves not only to provide relief from the intensity of tragic events but also to heighten the emotional impact of the tragedy. By presenting a fuller picture of life, with its inherent mix of laughter and tears, Shakespeare's tragedies achieve a greater sense of verisimilitude and resonance. This perspective challenged the notion that genres should be kept rigidly separate, advocating instead for a more organic and humanly relatable dramatic structure.

Characterization in Shakespeare: Johnson's Analysis

Beyond structural and thematic considerations, the Samuel Johnson Preface to Shakespeare

offers insightful commentary on Shakespeare's unparalleled skill in character creation. Johnson recognizes Shakespeare's ability to portray characters that are not mere archetypes but complex, multifaceted individuals who resonate with audiences across centuries. He highlights Shakespeare's genius in capturing the nuances of human psychology, presenting characters with both virtues and flaws, motivations that are often contradictory, and internal struggles that feel profoundly real. This focus on psychological depth and individual complexity was a crucial element in solidifying Shakespeare's reputation as a master of human nature.

The Realism and Verisimilitude of Shakespearean Characters

Johnson emphasizes that Shakespeare's characters are not idealized figures but rather representations of humanity in all its imperfection. He argues that Shakespeare avoids creating characters that are wholly good or entirely evil, instead populating his plays with individuals who possess a believable mixture of traits. This realism, Johnson suggests, is what allows audiences to connect with Shakespeare's characters on a deep emotional level, fostering empathy and understanding. The preface celebrates Shakespeare's capacity to imbue even minor characters with a sense of individuality and purpose, contributing to the rich tapestry of his dramatic world.

Shakespeare's Portrayal of Universal Human Passions

A key aspect of Johnson's analysis is his appreciation for how Shakespeare captures and dramatizes universal human passions. He notes that Shakespeare's characters, despite their historical or social settings, are driven by emotions that remain constant: love, hate, ambition, jealousy, and grief. This universality, according to Johnson, is a primary reason for Shakespeare's enduring appeal. By plumbing the depths of these fundamental human emotions, Shakespeare's plays transcend their specific contexts and speak to audiences in any era. The Samuel Johnson Preface to Shakespeare thus underscores the timeless relevance of Shakespeare's exploration of the human condition.

The Universality of Shakespeare: Johnson's Enduring Argument

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the Samuel Johnson Preface to Shakespeare is its powerful assertion of the playwright's universal appeal. Johnson argues that Shakespeare's works are not confined by the conventions or sensibilities of his own time but possess a timeless quality that speaks to the human heart regardless of era or culture. He champions Shakespeare's profound understanding of human nature, his ability to capture the fundamental truths of existence, and his capacity to evoke a wide range of emotions that are shared by all people. This emphasis on universality cemented Shakespeare's position not just as a national treasure but as a global literary icon.

Shakespeare as a Mirror to Nature

Johnson famously describes Shakespeare as a mirror that reflects nature. He contends that Shakespeare's plays present an honest and unvarnished depiction of human life, capturing its complexities, contradictions, and enduring truths. This fidelity to nature, Johnson argues, is what makes Shakespeare's works so enduringly relevant and powerful. By holding up a mirror to humanity, Shakespeare allows audiences to see themselves and the world around them with greater clarity and insight. The Samuel Johnson Preface to Shakespeare thus elevates Shakespeare's art to a form of profound social and psychological commentary.

The Enduring Relevance of Shakespearean Themes

The preface consistently returns to the idea that Shakespeare's exploration of themes such as love, power, ambition, and mortality remains as relevant today as it was in the 16th century. Johnson suggests that Shakespeare's insights into these enduring aspects of the human experience are so profound that they continue to resonate with audiences and provide valuable lessons about life. This focus on the thematic richness and enduring relevance of Shakespeare's plays is a cornerstone of the preface's argument for his unparalleled genius. The Samuel Johnson Preface to Shakespeare therefore positions the playwright as a timeless commentator on the human condition.

Critical Reception and Lasting Impact of the Preface

The Samuel Johnson Preface to Shakespeare was met with considerable acclaim upon its publication and has since become a foundational text in Shakespearean criticism. It marked a turning point in how Shakespeare was viewed, shifting the focus from adherence to rigid rules to an appreciation of his organic artistry and profound understanding of human nature. Johnson's defense of Shakespeare against Neoclassical strictures helped to legitimize the playwright's unique genius and paved the way for future generations of scholars to explore his works with a greater degree of critical freedom. The preface's enduring influence can be seen in its continued presence in academic curricula and its role in shaping our understanding of one of the world's greatest literary figures. Its comprehensive approach and eloquent prose have made it an indispensable resource for anyone seeking to delve into the complexities and enduring brilliance of Shakespeare.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the primary purpose of Samuel Johnson's 'Preface to Shakespeare'?

The primary purpose of Johnson's 'Preface' is to defend Shakespeare's enduring relevance and literary merit against contemporary criticisms, offering a rational and balanced assessment of his strengths and weaknesses.

What specific criticisms of Shakespeare did Johnson address in his preface?

Johnson addressed criticisms regarding Shakespeare's disregard for the classical unities of time, place, and action, his mixing of tragedy and comedy, his use of low characters and vulgar language, and his perceived historical inaccuracies.

How did Johnson defend Shakespeare's use of the unities?

Johnson argued that the unities, while valued by classical theorists, were not essential for dramatic success and could even be detrimental. He proposed that audiences could readily accept the suspension of disbelief and that a focus on human nature and moral truth was more important than strict adherence to arbitrary rules.

What was Johnson's view on Shakespeare's mixture of tragedy and comedy?

Johnson defended Shakespeare's blending of tragic and comic elements, arguing that it better reflected the complexities of real life, where joy and sorrow often coexist. He believed this mixture made Shakespeare's characters and situations more relatable and profound.

What did Johnson consider Shakespeare's greatest strength?

Johnson considered Shakespeare's greatest strength to be his profound understanding and accurate representation of human nature. He believed Shakespeare's characters were universally recognizable and spoke to the enduring truths of the human condition.

How did Johnson approach Shakespeare's language and verse?

While acknowledging Shakespeare's occasional obscurity and linguistic idiosyncrasies, Johnson defended his rich and varied language, seeing it as a reflection of his genius and his ability to capture the nuances of thought and emotion. He also defended his blank verse as more natural and adaptable than rhymed couplets.

What is Johnson's concept of 'poetic justice' in relation to Shakespeare?

Johnson argued that while Shakespeare sometimes deviates from strict poetic justice (where good is always rewarded and evil punished), his plays ultimately affirm moral order through their lasting impact on the audience's understanding of vice and virtue.

What is the significance of Johnson's 'Preface' in literary criticism?

The 'Preface' is a landmark in English literary criticism for its balanced and rational approach, its defense of English literature against neoclassical dogma, and its foundational arguments for Shakespeare's universal appeal and enduring genius.

What is Johnson's famous quote about Shakespeare's lasting appeal?

Johnson's famous quote is: 'Shakespeare is the poet of nature. He has not only drawn the portraits of the characters that have lived, but has also given them animation and warmth, so that they seem to be alive before us.'

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Samuel Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare, with short descriptions:

1. The Shakespearean Revolution

This book likely explores the seismic shift in literary and critical understanding of Shakespeare that occurred, in part, due to Johnson's Preface. It would probably trace the evolution of Shakespearean criticism from earlier, perhaps more formulaic approaches, to the more humanistic and nuanced interpretations championed by Johnson. The text might also discuss how Johnson's arguments helped solidify Shakespeare's canonical status and influenced subsequent generations of scholars.

2. Johnson's Judgment: The Art of Literary Criticism

This title suggests a deep dive into Samuel Johnson's broader critical methodology, using the Preface to Shakespeare as a prime case study. It would likely analyze his principles of taste, reason, and morality as applied to literary works, examining how he balances historical context with universal human truths. The book could also explore Johnson's influence on the development of English literary criticism and his lasting legacy as a discerning judge of literature.

3. The Unities and the Stage: Drama in the Age of Johnson

This book would focus on the theatrical conventions and dramatic theories prevalent during the Neoclassical period, which Johnson engaged with in his Preface. It would likely explain the classical "unities" of time, place, and action that Johnson, while acknowledging their theoretical basis, ultimately argued Shakespeare transcended effectively. The text could explore the tension between strict adherence to classical rules and the more expansive, "natural" approach to drama that Johnson defended in Shakespeare.

4. Shakespeare's Humanity: Character and Realism in the Elizabethan Theatre

This title points to a work that examines how Johnson's Preface championed Shakespeare's profound understanding and portrayal of human nature. The book would likely analyze Shakespeare's complex characters, arguing that their deviations from strict decorum and their emotional depth made them more relatable and enduring than those of many

contemporary playwrights. It might explore how Johnson saw this psychological realism as a key to Shakespeare's universal appeal.

5. The Lexicographer as Critic: Johnson's Language and Literary Authority

This work would explore the connection between Johnson's monumental achievement as a lexicographer and his prowess as a literary critic, particularly in the Preface. It would likely argue that his meticulous attention to language and definition informed his insightful analyses of Shakespeare's vocabulary and poetic style. The book could also discuss how his authoritative voice, honed by his dictionary, lent significant weight to his pronouncements on Shakespeare.

6. Contesting the Canon: Shakespeare's Place in Literary History

This book would likely explore how Johnson's Preface played a crucial role in solidifying Shakespeare's position at the apex of the English literary canon. It might examine earlier debates about Shakespeare's merit and how Johnson's arguments provided a powerful defense against detractors. The text could also analyze how his work helped to establish criteria for judging literary greatness that continue to resonate today.

7. The Poetical Character: Johnson and the Evolution of Literary Taste

This title suggests a book that traces the development of literary taste in the 18th century, with Johnson's Preface serving as a pivotal document. It would likely discuss how Johnson sought to refine the sensibilities of his readers and establish a standard for appreciating poetry and drama. The book might also examine how his ideas on authenticity, imagination, and the role of the poet influenced subsequent movements in literary appreciation.

8. Beyond the Rules: Johnson's Defense of Shakespeare's Genius

This work would specifically focus on the parts of Johnson's Preface where he defends Shakespeare's perceived breaches of dramatic conventions. It would likely analyze his arguments for prioritizing nature and truth over strict adherence to classical rules, highlighting his belief in Shakespeare's unique, innate genius. The book could explore how this defense paved the way for later Romantic interpretations that valued individual expression and originality.

9. The Legacy of the Preface: Shakespearean Interpretation Through the Ages

This book would trace the enduring impact of Samuel Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare on subsequent critical thought and performance of his plays. It would likely examine how different generations of critics, scholars, and directors have engaged with, challenged, or built upon Johnson's ideas. The text could also explore how his foundational arguments continue to inform contemporary discussions about Shakespeare's enduring relevance and artistic merit.

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