

samuel johnson preface to shakespeare

samuel johnson preface to shakespeare stands as a landmark critical essay that has profoundly influenced the study and appreciation of William Shakespeare's works. Written in the 18th century by the eminent literary figure Samuel Johnson, this preface serves as an introduction to Johnson's edition of Shakespeare's plays and offers a comprehensive analysis of Shakespeare's genius, style, and dramatic art. The preface not only defends Shakespeare against contemporary critics but also establishes enduring principles of literary criticism and dramatic theory. This article explores the historical context, key themes, and critical insights presented in the samuel johnson preface to shakespeare, highlighting its significance in literary history and its lasting impact on Shakespearean scholarship. Readers will gain an understanding of Johnson's views on Shakespeare's characterization, poetic diction, and dramatic structure, as well as the preface's role in shaping modern literary criticism.

- Historical Context of Samuel Johnson's Preface
- Key Themes in the Preface to Shakespeare
- Johnson's Critique of Shakespeare's Style and Language
- Analysis of Shakespeare's Dramatic Genius
- Impact and Legacy of the Preface

Historical Context of Samuel Johnson's Preface

The samuel johnson preface to shakespeare was composed in 1765 as part of Johnson's edition of Shakespeare's plays, published by the publisher Thomas Cadell. At this time, Shakespeare's reputation was undergoing critical scrutiny, with some scholars emphasizing the need for classical adherence to the unities of time, place, and action. Johnson's preface emerged as a response to these debates, asserting Shakespeare's unique place in English literature despite deviations from classical norms. The 18th century was characterized by a growing interest in literary criticism, and Johnson's work contributed significantly to establishing Shakespeare as a universal playwright whose works reflected human nature in all its complexity.

The 18th-Century Literary Climate

During the 18th century, neoclassical principles dominated literary criticism, emphasizing order, decorum, and adherence to Aristotelian unities. Many critics judged Shakespeare's plays harshly for their perceived lack of structure and mixing of genres. Johnson's preface challenged these views by advocating for a more flexible understanding of dramatic art, recognizing Shakespeare's natural genius and emotional depth as paramount.

Johnson's Editorial Role

Samuel Johnson's role as an editor was crucial in shaping the reception of Shakespeare's works. His preface was not only a critical essay but also an editorial statement that guided readers' interpretations. Johnson's authority as a lexicographer, literary critic, and writer lent significant weight to his evaluations, making the preface a foundational text in Shakespearean scholarship.

Key Themes in the Preface to Shakespeare

The Samuel Johnson preface to Shakespeare encompasses several major themes that articulate Johnson's critical philosophy and his admiration for Shakespeare's artistic achievements. These themes include the nature of Shakespeare's genius, the role of poetic diction, the depiction of human nature, and the importance of moral instruction through drama.

Shakespeare's Natural Genius

Johnson emphasizes that Shakespeare's genius was innate and not the product of formal education or adherence to strict classical rules. He praises Shakespeare's ability to portray the full range of human emotions and experiences authentically, arguing that this natural talent is what makes his plays enduring and universally relevant.

The Role of Poetic Diction

In the preface, Johnson critically examines Shakespeare's use of language, acknowledging that while it sometimes deviates from classical poetic standards, it remains powerful and effective. Johnson argues that Shakespeare's diction is appropriate to the characters and situations depicted and that it contributes to the plays' vividness and emotional impact.

Moral and Didactic Elements

Johnson asserts that Shakespeare's plays serve a moral purpose by illustrating the consequences of human actions and flaws. He believes that Shakespeare's portrayal of virtue and vice provides valuable lessons, making his works not only entertaining but also instructive.

Johnson's Critique of Shakespeare's Style and Language

One of the most significant contributions of the samuel johnson preface to shakespeare is its detailed critique of Shakespeare's stylistic choices and use of language. Johnson acknowledges both the strengths and weaknesses of Shakespeare's writing, offering a balanced and nuanced appraisal.

Strengths in Character Dialogue

Johnson praises Shakespeare's mastery of dialogue, particularly the playwright's ability to craft speeches that reveal character psychology and advance the plot. He highlights how Shakespeare's characters speak in ways that are consistent with their social status, temperament, and circumstances, enhancing the realism of the plays.

Criticism of Inconsistencies and Prolivity

Despite his admiration, Johnson does not overlook Shakespeare's faults. He points out occasional lapses in plot coherence, excessive length, and the mixing of comic and tragic elements in ways that can confuse audiences. Johnson suggests these flaws arise from Shakespeare's reliance on inspiration rather than strict dramaturgical discipline.

Language and Poetic License

Johnson defends Shakespeare's use of ungrammatical or unusual language as a form of poetic license, arguing that the emotional truth conveyed outweighs rigid linguistic correctness. This perspective helped to broaden the understanding of poetic diction beyond prescriptive norms.

Analysis of Shakespeare's Dramatic Genius

The samuel johnson preface to shakespeare delves deeply into what constitutes Shakespeare's dramatic genius, providing insights that have influenced generations of critics and scholars.

Complexity of Characterization

Johnson highlights Shakespeare's unparalleled skill in creating complex, multifaceted characters who embody universal human traits. Unlike many dramatists of his time, Shakespeare avoided one-dimensional figures, instead portraying individuals capable of both virtue and vice, strength and weakness.

Unity of Human Nature

Johnson asserts that Shakespeare's plays succeed because they reflect human nature in its entirety, transcending historical and cultural boundaries. This unity allows audiences across different eras to connect with the emotional and moral dilemmas faced by Shakespeare's characters.

Innovations in Plot and Structure

While acknowledging deviations from classical unities, Johnson praises Shakespeare's inventive approach to plot construction, noting that the emotional and thematic coherence of the plays compensates for any structural irregularities. He views Shakespeare's blending of tragedy and comedy as a reflection of real life's complexity.

Impact and Legacy of the Preface

The Samuel Johnson preface to Shakespeare has left a lasting legacy in literary criticism and Shakespearean studies. Its influence extends beyond the 18th century, shaping modern approaches to literary analysis and dramaturgy.

Establishing Shakespeare's Canonical Status

Johnson's preface played a pivotal role in cementing Shakespeare's reputation as England's greatest playwright. By articulating a coherent defense and appreciation of Shakespeare's work, Johnson helped establish the Bard's central place in the Western literary canon.

Influence on Literary Criticism

The preface introduced critical principles such as the importance of character development, the role of emotion in drama, and the value of natural genius over rigid formalism. These ideas have continued to inform literary criticism and pedagogy.

Enduring Relevance

Today, the Samuel Johnson preface to Shakespeare remains a vital resource for students, scholars, and readers seeking to understand Shakespeare's works and their significance. Its balanced critique and insightful observations continue to inspire appreciation and critical inquiry.

Summary of Key Contributions

- Defended Shakespeare's departure from classical unities and norms
- Highlighted Shakespeare's natural genius and emotional depth
- Provided a balanced critique of Shakespeare's style and language
- Emphasized the moral and didactic aspects of Shakespeare's plays
- Influenced the canonization of Shakespeare in English literature
- Shaped modern literary criticism principles and approaches

Frequently Asked Questions

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

Samuel Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare is significant because it provides one of the earliest comprehensive critical analyses of Shakespeare's works, establishing Shakespeare as a central figure in English literature and influencing subsequent literary criticism.

How does Samuel Johnson evaluate Shakespeare's characters in the Preface?

In the Preface, Johnson praises Shakespeare's characters for their realism and depth, noting that they are drawn from nature and human experience rather than idealized models, which contributes to their enduring appeal.

What criticisms does Samuel Johnson make about Shakespeare's plays in the Preface?

Johnson criticizes Shakespeare for lacking adherence to classical unities of time, place, and action, and for occasional lapses in taste and morality, but he argues that Shakespeare's natural genius compensates for these imperfections.

How did Samuel Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare influence later Shakespearean criticism?

Johnson's Preface laid the groundwork for modern Shakespearean criticism by emphasizing the importance of character development, moral complexity, and the playwright's connection to human

nature, shaping the way Shakespeare's plays have been studied and appreciated.

What was Samuel Johnson's view on the language used by Shakespeare according to the Preface?

Johnson acknowledged that Shakespeare's language is sometimes rough or unpolished, but he defended it as expressive of genuine human emotions and practical speech, contributing to the vividness and authenticity of the plays.

Additional Resources

1. Samuel Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare: A Critical Edition

This edition offers a comprehensive collection of Samuel Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare, including detailed annotations and historical context. It explores Johnson's insights into Shakespeare's genius and his views on dramatic poetry. The book is essential for understanding 18th-century literary criticism and Johnson's influence on Shakespearean studies.

2. Samuel Johnson and the Shakespearean Tradition

This scholarly work examines Johnson's role in shaping the modern interpretation of Shakespeare's plays. It delves into his critical methodology and the impact of his Preface on subsequent literary criticism. Readers gain a deeper appreciation for Johnson's balance of admiration and skepticism toward Shakespeare.

3. Johnson on Shakespeare: Essays and Letters

A collection of Samuel Johnson's essays and personal correspondence related to Shakespeare, this volume sheds light on his evolving thoughts about the Bard. It includes the famous Preface and other writings that reveal Johnson's complex relationship with Shakespearean drama. The book is valuable for both literary scholars and enthusiasts.

4. The Life of Samuel Johnson and His Preface to Shakespeare

This biography focuses on Johnson's life with a special emphasis on the period during which he wrote the Preface to Shakespeare. It contextualizes his critical achievement within his broader literary career. Readers will find insights into how Johnson's personal experiences influenced his literary judgments.

5. Prefacing the Bard: Samuel Johnson's Impact on Shakespearean Criticism

This book investigates how Johnson's Preface transformed the critical landscape of Shakespeare studies. It tracks the reception of his ideas from the 18th century to the present day. The text discusses Johnson's assessments of Shakespeare's faults and virtues and their lasting significance.

6. Shakespeare and Samuel Johnson: A Dialogue Across Centuries

Exploring the intellectual conversation between Shakespeare's works and Johnson's criticism, this book highlights how the Preface serves as a bridge between Renaissance drama and Enlightenment thought. It analyzes key themes such as moral instruction and poetic justice. The work appeals to readers interested in literary history and theory.

7. Critical Prefaces: Johnson, Shakespeare, and the Art of Literary Evaluation

This volume places Johnson's Preface within the tradition of literary prefaces and criticism. It compares Johnson's approach to that of other critics and assesses his criteria for evaluating

Shakespeare's plays. The book offers a nuanced view of 18th-century aesthetics and critical practices.

8. *Samuel Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare: Language, Style, and Interpretation*

Focusing on the stylistic and linguistic features of Johnson's Preface, this study reveals how his prose style reinforces his critical arguments. It discusses Johnson's use of rhetoric and his persuasive techniques in defending Shakespeare's literary merit. The analysis enhances understanding of both Johnson's criticism and 18th-century literary style.

9. *Reading Shakespeare with Samuel Johnson: A Companion to the Preface*

This companion guide assists readers in navigating the complexities of Johnson's Preface and Shakespeare's texts. It provides explanations, historical background, and interpretive insights that illuminate Johnson's perspectives. The book is designed for students and general readers seeking a clearer grasp of Johnson's critical legacy.

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