

Ruskin on Shakespeare: An Introspection

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Abstract: Shakespearean criticism encompasses varied thoughts and observations on multi-faceted creations of Shakespeare. Ben Johnson, Dryden, Rymer, Addison, Pope, Rowe, Whalley, Farmer, Lennox, Samuel Johnson, Morgan, Lessing, Lamb, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Bradley, Dowden, Brandes, Harris, James Joyce, G Wilson Knight, Cleman, Campbell, Quiller-Couch, Robertson, Eliot etc have provided criticism of immense value dealing either with Shakespeare's plot design, characterization, craftsmanship, theatre techniques, language, psychological penetration, biography or chronological sequence of his plays. Ruskin has also added to advance Shakespearean criticism. Shakespeare's artistry, character-delineation, feminine psyche, style, language, names of the characters are the focal issues in the present paper. Ruskin's observations are thought-provoking and facilitate to understand the meaning of Shakespeare and his works. His approach is eclectic, though text-based explicative procedure, personal, descriptive and aesthetic approaches, he adopts while evaluating Shakespeare

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The paper endeavours to introspect Ruskin's observation of Shakespeare and evaluate the validity of his criticism in the post modern era. Ruskin's personal criticism may be divided into two classes: in the first we may place the elaborate and detailed studies of the authors who formed his earliest studies, and to whom he remained faithful to the end - Shakespeare, Scott, Homer, Wordsworth, and later Dante, Secondly, those who are remarked frequently in scattered manner. Ruskin's judgements were limited, but they were never insular. Ruskin has appreciated Shakespeare for his universality and objectivity, kingly or heroic style with absolute command over all passions—illustrative of his concept of grand style; representation of women through his female protagonists, names of Shakespeare's characters—mixed out of various traditions he confusedly adopted, and the languages which he imperfectly knew etc are some very important issues Ruskin critically analyses in his criticism of Shakespeare. His observations are thought-provoking and facilitate to understand the meaning of Shakespeare and his works. Ruskin's approach is eclectic, though text-based explicative procedure, personal, descriptive and aesthetic approaches, he adopts while evaluating Shakespeare. Literary illustration wells up from the rich stores of Ruskin's mind while he is laying down the laws of art, or fulminating against those of political-economy, or advising the workmen or the maidens of England, or reviewing the facts of his own life; and in most cases the criticism is enriched and made more suggestive by the context in which it is placed. He was full of prejudices. Though his

sympathies were fairly wide, they were not all-embracing, and outside their range he was untrustworthy. He was too completely a man of his own age to be just to the 19th century; for when he was at the zenith of his powers, comments Rene Wellek "English criticism has reached a nadir in its history." (141) That excessive self-confidence which is a feature of his criticism of art mars his criticism of literature also. But though to criticize is to judge, it sometimes proves that an erroneous judgement is more helpful than a correct one. Ruskin's criticism is as great man "always profitable company." (Walker: 120) We may think his praise of Scott excessive and his appreciation of Shelley inadequate, we may think the colours lurid in which he paints Dickens and other novelists who represent "foul" fiction. Criticism is always time-bound and idiosyncratic. It is "tentative, partial, oblique" but "designed to demonstrate the nature and quality of a work and so to increase understanding and appreciation--it must always be fragmentary, indirect, and approximate. It can never be a complete and wholly satisfactory description of what takes place in the work of art." (Daiches: 397) Literary criticism remains an art, not a science, and the critic who tries to reduce his practice to the following of a rigid scientific method runs the risk of letting the true vitality of the work of literature elude him and his readers. T.S. Eliot once remarked that criticism is a means to the greater understanding and appreciation of literary works. It should always be tested by its success in achieving that end. Art is meant to be experienced, and in the last analysis the function of criticism is to assist that experience. Ruskin's appreciation of Shakespeare for his universality and objectivity is still valid and widely acknowledged:

He seems to have been sent essentially to take universal and equal grasp of human nature; and to have been removed, therefore, from all influences which could in the least warp or bias his thought ... contemplates, with absolute equality of judgement, the life of the court, cloister, and tavern, and... sympathizes so completely with all creatures as to deprive himself, together with his personal identity, even of his conscience, as he casts himself into to their heart. (Shakespeare was, as he finds, forbidden to Heaven to) have any plans, to do any good, get any good, in the common sense of good, was not to be within his permitted range of work.... Neither he, nor the Sun, did on any morning that they rose together, receive charge from their Maker concerning such things. They were both to behold unoffendedly all that was upon the earth. (Modern Painters. Vol. IV: 447-448)

The influence of nature on Shakespeare was slight. In his perfectness, nature, he finds quiet; "No mountain passions were to be allowed in him... not even any supreme natural beauty. He had to be left with his kingcups and clover;-pansies-the passing clouds, the Avon's flow-and the undulating hills and woods of Warwick." (M.P.448-449) Despite it, the most curious proofs of high imagination that it should paint straight from the life not abberated in morbid fancy (pathetic fallacy): Shakespeare, "only painted human nature as he saw in his own time... animating them with pure human nature, of any time and all time; but

inquired into the minor detail of temporary feeling, he despised as utterly as he did maps;" (*Ibid*: 450) There was only one thing belonged to hills that Shakespeare seemed to feel as noble-"the pine tree," and that was because he had seen it in Warwickshire. Whereas the style of Shakespeare is concerned, Ruskin designates it, "kingly" and "heroic," illustrative of his concept of grand style which consists in the habitual and sincere choice of a noble subject and its treatment. Beauty and ugliness are to be juxtaposed together to learn truly what is beautiful. Great art is produced by imagination, that is, it not only presents grounds for noble emotion, but also it furnishes these grounds by imaginative power. In technique, imaginative art is historical or simply narrative, but until the poetical or the imaginative power touches them. In the third article of *Fiction, Fair and Foul*, Ruskin sets forth "nobility" as a touchstone of grand style. The nobility alone gives sweetness, simplicity and melody of expression. While speaking about Shakespeare's heroines, Ruskin finds that he has "no heroes;-he has only heroines." (*Sesame and Lilies*: 78) The remark is not wholly applicable to his tragedies and histories; only in his comedies. But how Ruskin justifies?

There is not one entirely heroic figure in all his plays, except the slight sketch of Henry the Fifth, exaggerated for the purposes of the stage; and the still slighter. Valentine in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Othello... is the only example even approximating to the heroic type. Coriolanus-Caesar-Antony, stand in flawed strength, and fall by their vanities;- Hamlet is indolent, and drowsily speculative; Romeo, an impatient boy; the Merchant of Venice languidly submissive to adverse fortune; Kent, in *King Lear*, is entirely noble at heart, but too rough and unpolished to be of true use at the critical time, and he sinks into the office of a servant only; Orlando, no less noble, is yet the despairing toy of chance, followed; comforted, saved by Rosalind. Whereas there is hardly play that has not a perfect woman in it,...Cordelia, Desdemona, Isabella, Hermione, Imogen, Queen Katherine, Perdita, Sylvia, Viola, Rosalind, Helena, and last, and perhaps loveliest, Virgilia, are faultless; conceived in the highest heroic type of humanity. (*Ibid*: 78-79)

Secondly, the catastrophe of every play is caused always by "the folly or fault of a man; the redemption, if there be any, is by the wisdom and virtue of a Woman, and failing that, there is none" and the catastrophe of *King Lear* is owing to his "want of judgement, his impatient vanity, his children." (*Ibid*: 79) The virtue of his one true daughter would have saved him from all the injuries of the other, unless he had cast her away from him, as it is, she all but saves him. Of *Othello* "weakness of his so mightily love", and "inferiority of his perceptive intellect" (*Ibid*: 79) is traced even of the second woman character in the play, the Emilia who dies in wild testimony against his error. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the wise and brave stratagem of the wife is brought to ruinous issue by the "reckless impatience of her husband." (*Ibid*: 79) In *Winter's Tale*, and in *Cymbeline*, the happiness and existence of two princely households, lost through long years, and imperiled to the death by "the folly and obstinacy of the husbands, are redeemed at last by the queenly patience and wisdom of

the wives." (*Ibid*: 80) In *Measure for Measure*, the injustice of the judges, and the foul cowardice of the brother, are opposed to the. "Victorious truth and adamantine purity of a woman." (*Ibid*: 80) In *Coriolanus*, the mother's counsel, acted upon in time would have saved her son from all evil; his momentary forgetfulness of it is his ruin; her prayer, at last granted, saves him, not from death, but from the curse of living as the destroyer of his country. Julia, Ruskin observes, is constantly against the fickleness of a lover who is a mere wicked child; Helena, against the petulance and insult of careless youth of the patience of Hero, the passion of Beatrice and the calmly devoted wisdom of Portia, who appears among the helplessness, the blindness, and the vindictive passion of men, as a "gentle rain," bringing courage and safety by her presence. Among all the principal figures Ruskin investigates, in Shakespeare's plays, only one weak woman "Ophelia" it is because "she fails Hamlet at the critical moment, and is not, and can not in her nature be, a guide to him when he needs her most, that all the bitter catastrophe follows." (*Ibid*: 80) In *Lady Macbeth*, Regan and Goneril are three wicked women among the principal figures. They are felt at once to be "frightful exceptions to the ordinary laws of life: fatal in their influence." Shakespeare presents his women characters as "infallibly faithful and wide counselor." (*Ibid*: 80) Names of Shakespeare's characters are mixed out of the various traditions he confusedly adopted, and languages which he imperfectly knew. Desdemona, "miserable fortune" is also plain enough, Othello, Ruskin believes, "the careful," all the calamity of the tragedy arising from the single flaw in his magnificently collected strength. Ophelia, "Serviceableness," the true lost wife of Hamlet, is marked as having a Greek name by that of her brother, Laertes; Hamlet is, connected in some way with "homely" the entire event of the tragedy turning on betrayal of home duty. Hermione, "Pillar like," Titania, "the queen;" Benedict and Beatrice, "blessed and blessing," Valentine and Prateus, enduring (or strong) and changeful. Iago and Lachimo have evidently the same root-probably the Spanish Iago, Jacob, "the supplanter" Leonatus, and other such names, are "interrupted, or played with, in the plays themselves." (*Works*. Vol 17: 270)

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