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# *Introduction*

At the beginning of this century David Nichol Smith claimed that the publication of Dr Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* in 1765 marked the end of a stage in the history of Shakespearean criticism, and that after that date there was a new mode of approach to Shakespeare. This new mode, he alleged, was similar to that of Coleridge. But in 1931, armed with an impressive amount of scholarship, R. W. Babcock stepped forth with his study of the Shakespearean critics of the last third of the eighteenth century. In it he put forward the theory that when we have studied the works of these minor critics we find nothing new in Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare. Between 1900 and 1930 a great deal had happened in the world of English letters to turn the tide of taste. Early in the century the influential T. E. Hulme attacked 'romanticism', which he labelled 'damp', and predicted a return to what he called 'dry' and 'hard' classicism. The cause of classicism was championed by no less influential critics, men of the calibre of Irving Babbitt and T. S. Eliot. Particularly in literary criticism, the word 'romantic' came to acquire an unsavoury flavour: people began to write about such topics as 'The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal'. And although we can safely say that the campaign against romantic criticism is now over, it was not so long ago that a certain critic, who is also a distinguished Oxford scholar, wrote: 'Romantic poetry died of old age many years ago, and it is more than time that Romantic criticism also received its decent and final interment.'

The general reaction against the romantic critics was clearly visible in Shakespearean criticism as well: Emile Legouis wrote about it as early as 1928 (in *Essays and Studies*, XIII). For better or for worse the name of Coleridge is always linked with the word 'romantic'. Consequently, as a critic of Shakespeare, Coleridge suffered at the hands of professed anti-romantic critics and



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scholars. On the whole the nineteenth century venerated Coleridge, and regarded him where Shakespeare is concerned almost as an infallible oracle – an oracle, however, whose advice was not scrupulously followed all the time. In the twentieth century a return to something like Dr Johnson's position was, for a time at any rate, claimed to be the orthodoxy; and by reacting against the nineteenth-century tradition, the twentieth attempted to reject much of what it stood for. An authoritative critic once hinted that the criticism of Coleridge on a particular Shakespearean play was not really an honest enquiry, but an attempt to present Coleridge himself in an attractive costume. Another critic claimed that Coleridge's critical work 'tells us nothing of what poetry is itself'. More recently a historian of criticism wrote that his remarks on the plays and characters of Shakespeare are often 'either trite or moralizing or, when ingenious, unconvincing', and denied that they are 'in any way integrated into a theory or even into a unified conception of a play'. This is not the place to consider these statements: I mention them only to show that an impartial evaluation of Coleridge's Shakespearean criticism seems to be overdue. We can now ask ourselves calmly: Was there after all any valuable contribution in Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare? Or was the bulk of his critical writings, marginal notes and lectures on the great poet and dramatist merely, as Dr Babcock suggests, a summarization, or at best, an intelligent elaboration of current or past opinions – the thing which one can quite safely say of Dr Johnson's *Preface*?

In claiming that an evaluation of Coleridge's Shakespearean criticism is overdue I am aware that the past two decades have witnessed a remarkable resurgence of academic interest in Coleridge. This is revealed in the launching of the ambitious scheme for the publication of the *Collected Coleridge* under the general editorship of Kathleen Coburn, and in the appearance of more than a score of full-length studies (not to mention whole books devoted to him in other languages: French, German, Italian and even Arabic). These books, however, are mostly either general all-round studies or else they are about the poet, the thinker, the philosopher and theologian, the critic of society or of politics. The ones that profess to discuss his literary criticism – with the exception of J. V. Baker's *The Sacred River: Coleridge's Theory*



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*of the Imagination* (1958) and R. H. Fogle's slim volume *The Idea of Coleridge's Criticism* (1962) – do so only tangentially. Both J. A. Appleyard in *Coleridge's Philosophy of Literature* (1965) and J. R. de J. Jackson in *Method and Imagination in Coleridge's Criticism* (1969) are primarily interested in Coleridge's philosophical and theological thought and only secondarily in his literary criticism. Considering the limited amount of literary criticism proper which they contain, it is not surprising that the space allotted to Coleridge's Shakespearean criticism in these books is very small indeed. Jackson admits that in discussing Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare he does not 'try to consider its place in the history of Shakespearean criticism' (p. 123), assuming that that has been settled. Despite the proliferation of books on Coleridge then, there is no full-length study of his criticism of Shakespeare, which is a curious omission, since we are often told by the Coleridge enthusiasts that he, the greatest English critic, produced his finest criticism when writing or lecturing on Shakespeare. Time and time again we read that he was the 'greatest of Shakespearean critics'.

The object of the present study is twofold: first, to attempt to understand the critical methods and assumptions in Coleridge's writings on Shakespeare, and, secondly to define the nature of his contribution to the criticism of Shakespeare in England. But in order to arrive at a just appraisal of his contribution it is necessary to have some idea of the development of Shakespearean criticism before his time. I have therefore devoted the first chapter to a background discussion of basic problems in Shakespearean criticism before Coleridge. This can only be a very brief account of a large and complicated subject, my aim being only to summarize my views which I have set out in some detail elsewhere.[1] If in my summing up I sometimes sound categorical I can only beg the reader's forbearance and refer him to the much fuller treatment with all the necessary supporting evidence in my forthcoming book on the subject. As far as serious literary criticism, and not vague rapturous writing is concerned – a distinction which Babcock and others do not always make – eighteenth-century criticism of Shakespeare, however varied it

[1] In my forthcoming book *Attitudes and Assumptions in Eighteenth Century Shakespearean Criticism*.



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may appear in its interests, and whatever the stages of development into which historians may have divided it, constitutes one main tradition. I set out on this study with the commonly accepted view that Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare has its roots in the criticism of the third or last quarter of the eighteenth century. But having examined closely the critical works of that period, I came to the conclusion that their main assumptions look backwards to earlier writing rather than forwards. With few exceptions, far from embodying, or even pointing forward to, what is basically Coleridge's approach, these works are to be understood as based on much earlier criticism. Indeed, some of their premises are to be searched for in the writings of Dryden and his contemporaries. What happened in the last third of the eighteenth century was not so much a basic change, as is generally thought, as an accentuation of elements in earlier criticism – an accentuation which made the disintegration of the organic unity of Shakespearean drama an indisputable fact of criticism. What I offer in my first chapter is not so much a bare historical survey as an interpretation which raises several questions. In the subsequent chapters of the book I discuss Coleridge's answers to these questions.

Coleridge was not merely an impressionist critic; nor was he a man in whom the reality principle was sadly deficient, but who was gifted with occasional flashes of psychological insight. On the contrary, it is my strong conviction that, at least in Shakespearean criticism, what sets off his criticism from that of his predecessors is its profoundly systematic nature. Coleridge had a theory of poetry which calls for serious analysis, and is not to be dismissed as mere rhetoric, as it has been by some critics. I therefore start with an attempt to relate his aesthetic theory to his actual practice as a Shakespearean critic. My conclusion is that while he inherited much from his eighteenth-century predecessors, Coleridge contributed both in theory and in practice something new and significant to English Shakespearean criticism. It is no exaggeration to say that the critical principles underlying his new approach to Shakespeare are the principles we now use ourselves. By going to the roots of problems, and by questioning basic assumptions in poetry and drama, Coleridge raised questions that are still alive – so much so that it has



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sometimes been difficult to resist the temptation to place him among living critics, discussing him in relation to them and even defending his position against theirs.

Finally, there are one or two things which this study does *not* attempt to do. First, it does not deal with the hazardous question of Coleridge's direct debts, except on one or two occasions, and even then only indirectly. It does not offer any new evidence of, or clues to, Coleridge's acquaintance with his immediate predecessors. Of an omnivorous reader like Coleridge, it is extremely difficult to say for certain that he did not read this writer or that (although we may mention in passing that there is not a single reference in his writings to critics like Whately or Morgann or Richardson). The omission of a discussion of Coleridge's direct debts is really dictated by the nature of this work. For this is primarily a study in critical method; and here Coleridge's approach to Shakespearean drama is radically different from that of the eighteenth-century critics. Even if it were proved (which is by no means the case) that he owed this remark or that to an eighteenth-century critic, the remarks together would never add up to a system, but would remain a collection of disjointed comments. Coleridge's critical remarks, on the other hand, clearly form an integral part of a whole approach. It is because of this quality of 'wholeness' in Coleridge's criticism that the question of indebtedness, in spite of its interest, seems to me to be of decidedly secondary importance. This applies to his German sources no less than to his English ones.

Secondly, this is not a plea for 'romantic' criticism. In fact, I have tried to avoid, as far as possible, the use of the terms 'romantic' and 'classic'. The terms are misleading in a study of serious Shakespearean criticism, which is to some extent distinct from the history of ideas. Of course, the 'discovery' of Shakespeare was a major factor in the development of the romantic or pre-romantic consciousness. But this is not so much the case in England as on the continent, where for several reasons the effect of the introduction of his plays on the literary scene presents a relatively neat and tidy picture that can be traced by the literary historian.[1] In England Shakespeare was always admired, even

[1] It has been done systematically by Paul van Tieghem, *Le Préromantisme, la Découverte de Shakespeare sur le Continent* (1947).



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in the days when the influence of the French theatre was at its highest – although naturally not always for the same reasons. And when we stop to consider what Shakespeare meant to his late eighteenth-century enthusiasts on the continent we shall find that it was largely freedom of expression, superiority and intractability to rules – what I have preferred to call primitivism – a primitivism which no doubt arose in England itself in the latter part of the century, and which is best expressed in Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition*, a book which had a revolutionary effect in Germany.[1] We know where the *Sturm und Drang* school laid the emphasis.[2] As for the French romantics, Henri Fluchère tells us that when they cried '*Shakespeare avec nous!*' in the beginning of the nineteenth century, they 'could hardly bring out a reasonably valuable estimate of Shakespeare's genius'. What mattered to them '*was* the genius, and what it stood for', and his name meant to them nothing more than 'liberty of expression, repudiation of the unities, *mélange des genres* and poetry'.[3] But this was not what Shakespeare meant to Coleridge. As the reader will see, Coleridge did not share any of these excesses of the primitivists. On the contrary, in his theory of the imagination he clearly distinguished between the *order* of a work of art and the chaos of experience.

To show that my attempt to dispense with the words 'classic' and 'romantic' here does not stem from a facile and once fashionable dismissal of accepted critical terms, I will provide one or two of the numberless examples in which the neat distinction between 'classic' and 'romantic' breaks down in our study of English Shakespearean critics. If classicism means the apotheosis of the 'general' and romanticism that of the 'particular', then we can without much hesitation call Dr Johnson a classicist and Hazlitt a romantic. Did not Johnson proclaim that a Shakespearean character is always a species and did not Hazlitt take him to task because of that very assertion? But under which

[1] See J. R. Robertson, *Lessing's Dramatic Theory* (1939), p. 34, and M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953), pp. 201ff.

[2] See Paul van Tieghem, *Le Préromantisme*, pp. 179ff.; H. B. Garland, *Storm and Stress* (1952), pp. 12, 17, 20, 36.

[3] Henri Fluchère, 'Shakespeare in France: 1900–1948', *Shakespeare Survey*, No. 2 (1949), p. 115.



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category can we put Coleridge, who explicitly stated that the virtue of a Shakespearean character is that it is both individual and general at one and the same time? If, on the other hand, the difference between the classical and romantic critics of Shakespeare lies in that the classicist often judges by reference to a system of rules and principles and the romantic is a mere impressionist, then we may be able to say that Johnson and Hazlitt are classical and romantic critics respectively. But then again, what of Coleridge who claims that serious criticism should always be based on valid principles? But perhaps classical Shakespearean criticism should be taken to mean simply that which measures the plays of Shakespeare by the rules of antiquity as interpreted and applied in French drama, and romantic criticism that which does not take the rules to be absolute criteria. In that case we could easily dispose of Rymer or a later Gildon as classicist; but would we really be justified if we put Farquhar, Dr Johnson, Kames, and Coleridge in the same category? It is to avoid this kind of confusion that I have tried to do without these slippery terms in the following discussion. My plea is then not for Coleridge the romantic critic, whatever that may mean, but for Coleridge, the critic of Shakespeare.



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# *Basic problems in Shakespearean criticism before Coleridge*

## I

It is generally accepted that by Dryden's time much of the Elizabethan tradition and outlook was lost, that the world of the Renaissance, to which Shakespeare belongs, bears a closer affinity to the medieval world than people at one time thought, and that its difference from the rational, scientific, secular and urban bourgeois civilization, which roughly coincided with the Restoration, is radical. The change had its effect on literary criticism no less than on other aspects of intellectual life. In the Shakespearean criticism of this period, what was significantly new was not so much the insistence upon classical rules (Sidney and Jonson had insisted upon them before), as the spirit in which that insistence was made, the spirit which dominated Shakespearean criticisim of the eighteenth century, and which was there all the time, even when critics reacted against the rules. Rationalism had created a craving for verisimilitude. Hence, in spite of his famous encomium on Shakespeare, which both Dr Johnson and Hazlitt admired, in 1672 Dryden disposed of plays like *The Winter's Tale*, *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Measure for Measure* as being 'grounded on impossibilities'. Likewise in 1710 Charles Gildon found the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* 'unnatural' and wanting in 'the Probability and Verisimilitude which is absolutely necessary to all the Representations on the Stage'.[1]

How far the rationalist attitude can go in the process of draining Shakespeare of tragic significance can be seen in Thomas Rymer's commonsense and literal-minded criticism of *Othello*. Of course, Rymer was not fully representative, and his view was rejected even by his contemporaries. Yet in its basic assumptions

[1] *Ker*, I, 165; Charles Gildon, *An Essay on the Art, Rise and Progress of the Stage* (1714), p. v.



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his criticism is no different from that of the eighteenth-century rationalist commonsense tradition. Rymer represents the logical conclusion of an attitude, which, like that of Dr Johnson, regards 'the stage as only a stage' and 'the players as only players'.[1] It is not sufficiently realized how much of Rymer's influence remained throughout the eighteenth century, though the tone which characterizes his criticism may have disappeared. Even Dr Johnson was not free from it; he was quite serious when he found in *Othello* an admonition against 'disproportionate marriages'.[2] Echoing Rymer, who claimed that Shakespeare's genius 'lay for comedy and humour', and that in tragedy 'he appears out of his element', Johnson found Shakespeare's tragedy to be 'skill' and his comedy to be 'instinct', and he actually preferred Tate's version of *King Lear* to Shakespeare's play. Similarly Edward Malone preferred Shakespeare's comedies to his tragedies. But it is in Francis Gentleman, the author of *The Dramatic Censor* (1770), particularly in his strictures on the plot of *Hamlet*, that Rymer's tradition appears most conspicuously.[3]

Rymer's inability to appreciate Shakespeare's 'rhetoric' made him condemn as frenzy and nonsense Cassio's speech on Desdemona's safe landing.[4] Subsequent critics were never again so extreme in their denunciation of Shakespeare's style. But the charge of turgidity, inflation and false sublime remained a commonplace of eighteenth-century criticism of Shakespeare.

## II

The question of the dramatic unities was one of the things which lay behind Rymer's attack on Shakespeare. The modern reader may find it surprising that so much importance was attached to this question. But by the beginning of the eighteenth century the unities had acquired a rational basis. Science had discovered a mechanical order in the physical universe, and an attempt in the same direction was being made, in response to Newton's own suggestion, in the sphere of morals and subsequently in

[1] *Raleigh*, p. 27. [2] *Ibid.* p. 198.
[3] Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693), p. 156; *Raleigh*, p. 19; Francis Gentleman, *The Dramatic Censor* (1770), I, 52–5.
[4] Rymer, *Short View of Tragedy*, p. 110.



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aesthetics. With the earlier critics of the century the rules of art came to represent order in nature, and for a man like John Dennis in his essay *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) the order in a work of art had a religious significance.[1] Shakespeare, the critics were aware, does not observe the rules of art, which have a rational basis, and yet he evinces formidable power to move us. To get out of this embarrassing dilemma they were driven to attribute this power to a wild, irregular and incomprehensible force which they called 'nature' and which, in a mysterious way, had control over the poet. Rowe wrote:

> Perhaps we are not to look for his beginnings, like those of other authors, among their least perfect writings; art had so little, and nature so large a share in what he did, that for aught I know, the performances of his youth, as they were the most vigorous, and had the most fire and strength of imagination in them were the best.[2]

Such an absurd notion was rightly condemned by Johnson who attacked the unities of time and place.[3] His criteria for rejecting them, however, were the same as those of his predecessors, namely reason and commonsense: the spectator believes from the first act to the last that the stage is only a stage. In fact, nearly all his arguments were foreshadowed more than fifty years earlier in George Farquhar's *Discourse upon Comedy* (1702). In any case the rigidly formal criticism of the early part of the century was beginning to give way by Johnson's time, particularly against the background of the rise of the historical method and the growth of scholarship. But we must realize that the principles which had made that criticism acceptable were still held as the touchstone of criticism. And we hardly need to point out that the complex nature of the problem of the so-called dramatic illusion, could not be derived from a purely commonsense rational approach. Moreover, the implicit assumptions of verisimilitude, which Johnson had set out to remove, did not entirely disappear. Johnson, it must be remembered, allowed the violation of the unities only between the acts.[4]

On the need to observe the unity of action critics were unanimously agreed. Apart from Aristotle's sanction, it came to have a rational basis. Addison objected to the double plot on the

[1] *Hooker*, I, 336. [2] *Smith*, p. 4. [3] *Raleigh*, p. 37. [4] *Ibid.* p. 27.



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