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SAMUEL JOHNSON'S CRITICISM: A DRAMATIST WRITES ON THE DRAMA

BY KATHERINE H. ADAMS

From 1737 when he began doing "hack work" for the *Gentleman's Magazine* to the end of 1748, Samuel Johnson wrote only three pieces on the drama: the *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth*, the Prologue to Garrick's *Lethe*, and the Drury Lane Prologue. But for that journal from 1749 to 1754, Cave's last year as editor, he contributed at least thirteen theatre reviews, and in his *Rambler* from 1750 to 1753, he included more than sixteen essays pertaining to the rules of the drama and its critics.¹ In the later 1750s in his work for the Shakespeare edition, the *Adventurer*, and the *Idler*, Johnson continued this interest, which culminated in the *Lives of the Poets*. What caused this distinct change in his writing career? One crucial factor in the formation of Johnson as critic was the production in February of 1749 of his play *Irene*.

For twelve years, from age 27 to 39, in Lichfield and in London, Johnson labored over his play based on the story of Irene, a captive of Mahomet II of Turkey. This first major writing project adheres strictly to the neoclassical rules for tragedy: it employs the three dramatic unities, liaison of scenes, and blank verse. At its ending, strict poetic justice is observed when the faithful Greeks, Aspasia and Demetrius, escape from the Turkish court and the apostate Irene is sentenced to death. Throughout, lengthy, eloquent speeches describe the characters' emotions, as when Demetrius finds his lost Aspasia:

¹ Johnson's reviews for the *Gentleman's Magazine* are discussed in D. J. Greene, "Was Johnson Theatrical Critic of the *Gentleman's Magazine*?" *Review of English Studies*, NS 3 (1952), 158-61; Arthur Sherbo, "Samuel Johnson and the *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1750-1755," *Johnsonian Studies* (1962), pp. 133-59.

Demetrius. Why does the blood forsake thy lovely cheek?
Why shoots this chillness through thy shaking nerves?

Why does thy soul retire into herself?
Recline upon my breast thy sinking beauties:
Revive—Revive to freedom and to love.

Aspasia. What well known voice pronounc'd the grateful
sounds
Freedom and love? Alas! I'm all confusion,
A sudden mist o'ercasts my darken'd soul,
The present, past, and future swim before me,
Lost in a wild perplexity of joy.

Demetrius. Such ecstasy of love! such pure affection,
What worth can merit? or what faith reward?

(III.x.5-16)²

During the 1740s, Johnson negotiated with theatre managers like Charles Fleetwood to produce this tragedy and planned a second one on Charles XII of Sweden. But the theatre did not want a serious work by a patronless writer; they were more interested in booking pantomimes and farces. In 1748, however, when Johnson's old student and friend from Lichfield, David Garrick, became manager of Drury Lane, *Irene's* moment arrived. But Garrick, like Fleetwood, conflicted with Johnson on the alterations required for production. He wanted to have Irene strangled on stage, to cut many speeches, and to enliven the cruel villain Mahomet. ("Sir [said he], the fellow wants me to make Mahomet run mad, that he may have an opportunity of tossing his hands and kicking his heels."³) To see *Irene* finally produced, Johnson agreed to the first two conditions but would not succumb to Garrick's vision of a more volatile sultan. The great star then decided to play Demetrius, with Mahomet going to the fine tragedian, Spranger Barry. Garrick then carefully chose actors, scenery, and costumes to please his early teacher and friend.

² The play is quoted from *Poems*, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr., and George Milne (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 109-218.

³ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill and Lawrence F. Powell (Oxford: Clarence Press, 1971), I, 196.

On opening night, February 6, 1749, Samuel Johnson sat in a side box dressed in a scarlet and gold waistcoat. And he saw that Garrick was wrong about the strangling scene—it made a previously attentive and polite audience laugh and scream out, “Murder, Murder!” But with this conclusion again placed offstage, *Irene* played to large audiences for eight more nights, although on the last three Garrick decided that farces and dancing should be added to attract a larger crowd.⁴

During February and March, many reviews of *Irene* appeared in the London journals. Basically the audience was divided in its praise and criticism, as Johnson’s first biographers commented:

[T]he play was allowed by the best judges to possess fine sentiments and elegant language; and that the moral held up the cause of truth and virtue: yet the incidents and situations were not thought strong enough to produce that kind of effect, which, from habit, an English audience generally expects.⁵

Other writers, who more openly denounced the audience’s decision, expressed similar views:

The plot however, the thoughts, and the diction of his tragedy, are allowed to be beautiful and masterly. But he is sparing of that bustle and incident, which atone for the want of every excellence with a London audience. A performance which exemplified the prescriptions of an Aristotle, was not likely to please a nation tutored in this barbarous taste.⁶

Thus a *Gentleman’s Magazine* reviewer for February of 1749 commented that “to instance every moral which is inculcated in this performance, would be to transcribe the whole.”⁷ And a March 1749 publication, *An Essay on Trag-*

⁴ James L. Clifford, *Dictionary Johnson* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976), pp. 1-6.

⁵ William Cooke, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, in *The Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson*, ed. O. M. Brack, Jr., and Robert E. Kelley (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1974), p. 100.

⁶ Shaw, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Late Dr. Samuel Johnson in The Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson*, pp. 159.

⁷ “Plans and Specimens of *Irene*,” *Gentleman’s Magazine*, 19 (Feb. 1749), 79.

edy, also praised its didacticism: "Its sole tendency is warmly to promote, and earnestly to encourage the practise of virtue and religion."⁸ But with these excellences noted, reviewers condemned the lack of dramatic intensity: Irene's fate "makes no impression on the audience"; both Aspasia and Irene are "languid and unaffecting"; *Irene* "has got a warm fancy but little or nothing of the pathetic."⁹ Thus a common objection concerned the play's sacrifice of natural language and a convincing plot to rules.

As the fine playwright at Drury Lane, Johnson must have been disappointed by these mixed reviews. When he began the *Rambler* in 1750, he demonstrated this frustration in several essays on the harshness of critics and audiences. His second essay, for example, warns authors not to hope for success because of the public's cruelty:

He that endeavours after fame by writing, solicits the regard of a multitude fluctuating in pleasures, or immersed in business, without time for intellectual amusements; he appeals to judges prepossessed by passions, or corrupted by prejudices, which preclude their approbation of any new performance. Some are too indolent to read any thing, till its reputation is established; others too envious to promote that fame, which gives them pain by its increase. What is new is opposed, because most are unwilling to be taught; and what is known is rejected, because it is not sufficiently considered, that men more frequently require to be reminded than informed.¹⁰

In the next essay, the ancient goddess Criticism, the daughter of Labour and Truth, is said to have left the modern world in the hateful grip of Prejudice and False Taste. In other early *Ramblers*, Johnson also comments on the abuses of patrons, the pointless revisions, and the anxiety of writers as though he is reflecting on *Irene*:

⁸ *An Essay on Tragedy, with a Critical Examen of Mahomet and Irene* (London: Ralph Griffiths, 1749), p. 34.

⁹ *An Essay on Tragedy*, p. 17; John Blair, "To John Douglas," 30 March 1749, B. L. Egerton MS. 2185 (Press 524H), ff. 9-10; Clifford, p. 12.

¹⁰ *The Rambler*, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), III, 14. Hereafter cited in the text.

If we consider the distribution of literary fame in our own time, we shall find it a possession of very uncertain tenure; sometimes bestowed by a sudden caprice of the publick, and again transferred to a new favourite, for no other reason than that he is new; sometimes refused to long labour and eminent desert, and sometimes granted to very slight pretensions; lost sometimes by security and negligence, and sometimes by too diligent endeavours to retain it. (III, 118)

In *Rambler* essays from February and April of 1751, Johnson continued to voice such complaints about the prejudices of critics and the neglect suffered by good writers.

Besides protesting the whims of critics soon after the performance of *Irene*, Johnson defended the standards he followed for his play. In February of 1750 in a review of William Shirley's tragedy *The Black Prince* for the *Gentleman's Magazine*, he maintains that the use of a plot and underplot is defective even when they have a mutual connection. He praises the play's sentiments for being virtuous and noble and the numbers as easy and flowing; thus he defends the eloquence and regularity many had criticized in *Irene*. And in February of 1751, he denounces Edward Moore's comedy *Gil Blas* for a lack of "elegant expression."¹¹

But although Johnson may have reacted negatively to the reception of his play, he was able to learn from the experience, and after 1750 he frequently published his altered viewpoints. For the Drury Lane Prologue in 1747, Johnson had acknowledged the possible weaknesses of neoclassical tragedy:

Then crush'd by rules, and weaken'd as refin'd,
For years the pow'r of tragedy declin'd;
From bard, to bard, the frigid caution crept,
Till declamation roar'd, while passion slept.
Yet still did Virtue deign the stage to tread,
Philosophy remain'd, though Nature fled.

¹¹ "Remarks on the Tragedy Called *The Black Prince*," *Gentleman's Magazine*, Feb. 1750, p. 56; "Of *Gil Blas*: A New Comedy by Mr. Moore," *Gentleman's Magazine*, Feb. 1751, p. 75.

But as Johnson considered the many similar reactions to his play, instead of stating his judgments generally, he began to analyze specific rules, styles of dialogue, and types of plots.

In *Rambler* 125 from May of 1751, Johnson describes eighteenth-century dramas in words that might apply to *Irene*.

The later tragedies indeed have faults of another kind, perhaps more destructive to delight, though less open to censure. That perpetual tumour of phrase with which every thought is now expressed by every personage, the paucity of adventures which regularity admits, and the unvaried equality of flowing dialogue, has taken away from our present writers almost all that dominion over the passions which was the boast of their predecessors. (IV, 305)

In *Rambler* 156 and 158, he explicitly attacks what his contemporaries looked upon as the Aristotelean unities. Although a tragedy should have a single action and hero, he now maintains, rules restricting the number of people on stage, the number of acts, and the amount of time that elapses are accidental prescriptions, traditions that need not be followed:

It ought to be the first endeavour of a writer to distinguish nature from custom, or that which is established because it is right, from that which is right only because it is established; that he may neither violate essential principles by a desire of novelty, nor debar himself from the attainment of beauties within his view by a needless fear of breaking rules which no literary dictator had authority to enact. (V, 70)

Contradicting the principles followed in *Irene* and the early *Gentleman's Magazine* reviews, Johnson also recognizes that, as in Shakespearean tragedies, multiple plots and farcical scenes can enrich the drama:

The connexion of important with trivial incidents, since it is not only common but perpetual in the world, may surely be allowed upon the stage, which pretends only to be the mirror of life. . . . [N]o plays have oftner filled the eyes with tears, and the breast with palpitation, than those which are variegated with interludes of mirth. (V, 68-69)

Similarly, in a review of Macnamara Morgan's *Philoclea* for the *Gentleman's Magazine* in February of 1754, he comments that a rapid succession of events "naturally pleases" and is more important than conformity to dramatic rules.¹²

After 1750 Johnson also decided that elegant language, like the dramatic rules, might detract from a convincing "mirrour of life." For the *Gentleman's Magazine* review of William Mason's *Elfrida* in May of 1752, he notes that the beauties of philosophy and poetry are perceived by few because the mind is more affected by incidents than by words. And his February 1753 article on Edward Moore's *The Gamester* declares that colloquial dialect and tender incidents have a greater effect than elegant poetry. In the review of *Philoclea*, he even states that all dialogue in verse is a deviation from nature and lessens the effect of a play.¹³

Then for the *Gentleman's Magazine* in April of 1754, Johnson most obviously considered his experience as a dramatist. Here his criticism of Philip Francis' tragedy *Constantine* clearly echoes a February 1749 review of *Irene*, *A Criticism of Mahomet and Irene in a Letter to the Author*: both reviews emphasize the necessity of providing a convincing series of events. Johnson objects that in *Constantine* Marcellus and Aurelian are said to both be imprisoned and to have fled. This confusion thus makes for contradictory actions:

If, on the contrary, Aurelian did not fly, but was really imprisoned, it cannot be conceived why he did not suffer the rack, which the emperor appears to have commanded; or by what means he escaped, and returned after his justification, at the catastrophe.¹⁴

¹² "Plan of *Philoclea*, the New Tragedy," *Gentleman's Magazine*, Feb. 1754, p. 81.

¹³ "Some Account of *Elfrida*, a Dramatic Poem," *Gentleman's Magazine*, May 1752, pp. 224-27; "Some Account of the *The Gamester*," *Gentleman's Magazine*, Feb. 1753, pp. 59-61; "Plan of *Philoclea*, the New Tragedy," *Gentleman's Magazine* Feb. 1754, pp. 81-84.

¹⁴ "Some Account of *Constantine*, a New Tragedy," *Gentleman's Magazine*, April 1754, p. 181.

Johnson also wonders how men could speak loudly in the palace without being overheard and why the palace guard would allow Marcellus to enter the royal apartment. Similarly, the anonymous receiver of *Irene* had questioned the confusions caused by Abdalla's and Mahomet's quick changes of affection. He wondered why Cali and Abdalla would conspire within the palace where they would have certainly been overheard by the guards, and he sarcastically commented that Demetrius and Leontius would be captured when they entered the palace:

It is certain, there is not a Janizary upon Duty, or Servant at his Labour, but knows every Person who has Authority to frequent those Shades, as well as the Gate-Keepers do who has a Right to ride through St.-Jame's Park.¹⁵

Both critics, then, saw the primary importance, beyond that of rules and elegant poetry, of providing events that seemed plausible and kept the interest of the audience. Like many critics on *Irene*, Johnson commented that in *Constantine* the events were too few and lingered too long in descriptive language:

[T]he author has attempted to move the passions of his audience not so much by things as words. His language indeed is every where sounding, and, in some places, poetical; but if it does not sink into flatness, it swells into impropriety.¹⁶

By the time Johnson wrote his Preface to the Shakespeare edition in 1765, he had listened to the criticisms of *Irene* and changed his attitudes on the rules of the drama, the proper style of dialogue, and the requirements for vivid characterization. His Preface presents a combined version of the theory formulated in the *Rambler* and the *Gentleman's Magazine*: he praises Shakespeare as the "poet of nature," "the mirrour of life," and he remarks that other

¹⁵ *A Criticism on Mahomet and Irene in a Letter to the Author* (London: W. Reeve, 1749), p. 7.

¹⁶ "Some Account of *Constantine*," p. 181.

dramatists use dialogue that would never be spoken.¹⁷ After declaring that the best English language style comes from daily life, he criticizes Shakespeare when “in narration he affects a disproportionate pomp of diction and a wearisome train of circumlocution”: “His declamations or set speeches are commonly cold and weak, for his power was the power of nature” (VII, 73). The neoclassical *Cato*, he now claims, suffers from “inactive declamation” (VII, 84). And the unities of time and place are false assumptions that lessen variety:

[A] play, written with nice observation of critical rules, is to be contemplated as an elaborate curiosity, as the product of superfluous and ostentatious art, by which is shown, rather what is possible, than what is necessary. (VII, 80)

In the *Lives of the Poets*, Johnson clearly continued these same principles. Dryden’s weakness is that he “studied rather than felt,” and his sentiments are thus derived not from nature but from meditation.¹⁸ Because Edmund Smith followed learning and not nature, his *Phaedra* suffers from the faults once attributed to *Irene*:

What I cannot for a moment believe, I cannot for a moment behold with interest or anxiety. The sentiments thus remote from life are removed yet further by the diction, which is too luxuriant and splendid for dialogue, and envelopes the thoughts rather than displays them. It is a scholar’s play, such as may please the reader rather than the spectator; the work of a vigorous and elegant mind, accustomed to please itself with its own conceptions, but of little acquaintance with the course of life. (I, 359)

On the other hand, Rowe’s *The Fair Penitent* should be praised for the domestic story and pathetic incidents “as-simulated to common life” (I, 390).

For the *Rambler* and the *Gentleman’s Magazine* in the early 1750s, Johnson contributed many essays on the

¹⁷ *Preface to Shakespeare in Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1968), VII, 65, 75.

¹⁸ *Lives of the Poets*, ed. Arthur Waugh (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1906), I, 323.

drama. Although he was then reading plays for the dictionary and the Shakespeare edition, his increased role as a perceptive critic was largely determined by his examination of the reactions to the Drury Lane performance. Perhaps the experience taught him that his talent wasn't in playwriting, but he did see the real necessities for a successful production, especially the need for the lively dialogue and convincing plot that were found lacking in *Irene*. He continued to support his century's belief in the importance of a didactic purpose for the theatre, an element not criticized in *Irene*, but he now began to speak of the drama as properly a natural "mirrou of life," as a genre that should not be bound by arbitrary rules. Unlike the neoclassical critic Thomas Rymer, whose verse tragedy *Edgar, or the English Monarch* was never staged, Johnson was an artist performed, and that experience drastically altered both his view of the theatre and his career.

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