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Dr. Johnson on Shakespeare

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Abstract

The thesis examines Dr Johnson's opinions about Shakespeare's poetic language and wishes to question the view that Johnson, blinded by his concern for linguistic propriety, was incapable of properly appreciating Shakespeare's freedom with the English language. The thesis proceeds by looking at the Notes in Johnson's edition of Shakespeare and by analysing the passages to which they refer, in order to ascertain the real meaning and implications of Johnson's comments.

Chapter I outlines the problem. Chapter II notes some points at which Johnson seems unjustly to apply such terms as "harsh" to Shakespeare's poetry. Chapter III looks at the concept of "harshness" in more detail. Chapter IV takes the word "nature" as a focus for Johnson's positive appreciation of Shakespeare's poetic language. Chapter V analyses some Shakespearean passages of the general type for which Johnson, in his Preface to Shakespeare, indicates a preference. Chapter VI considers some Notes in which Johnson specifically praises Shakespeare's poetry. Chapter VII looks at points at which Johnson's adverse comments on the poetry might be argued to be justified.

CHAPTER I

There seems to be an unresolved problem about Dr Johnson's Shakespeare criticism, particularly with regard to Johnson's views on Shakespeare's poetic language.

Modern critics generally consider that Johnson was unable to accept Shakespeare's characteristically free exploitation of language and therefore failed to respond to the full impact of the dramatic poetry.

The current view is to a large extent based implicitly on T. S. Eliot's analysis of the language of Tourneur and Middleton and, by implication, Shakespeare. In *Selected Essays*, he praises those writers because they

exhibit that perpetual slight alteration of language, words perpetually juxtaposed in new and sudden combinations, meanings perpetually *eingeschachtelt* into meanings, which evidences a very high development of the senses... 1.

The bold statement of Elizabethan poetry, its ambiguities and its subtle interplay of allusion, the denseness and compression of statement are qualities which are now universally admired.

These criteria of value in poetic language have become a standard from which other critics of Elizabethan and Jacobean literature have made their judgments.

Dr Johnson would seem to condemn these qualities. In 'Proposals for Printing the Dramatick Works of William Shakespeare', 1756, he wrote:

1. T.S. Eliot, "Philip Massinger", *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932) p. 209.

[Shakespeare] wrote at a time when our poetical language was yet unformed, when the meaning of our phrases was yet in fluctuation, when words were adopted at pleasure from the neighbouring languages, and while the Saxon was still visibly mingled in our diction. The reader is therefore embarrassed at once with dead and with foreign languages, with obsolescence and innovation. ...and in that age, above all others, experiments were made upon our language, which distorted its combinations, and disturbed its uniformity. 2.

Further, when writing of the metaphysical poets, Johnson remarked that 'the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together'.

Eliot counters this by stating that

a degree of heterogeneity of material compelled into unity by the operation of the poet's mind is omnipresent in poetry. 3.

Eliot suggests that 'the force' of Dr Johnson's 'impeachment lies in the failure of the conjunction, the fact that often the ideas are yoked but not united...'.

These qualities which distinguish poetic success from poetic defect have in the main been left unexamined as far as Dr Johnson's criticism of Shakespeare is concerned.

In 1956, F. R. Leavis published his collection of critical essays, *The Common Pursuit*. There, in 'Tragedy and the *Medium*, he stated categorically:

2. Samuel Johnson, "Proposals for Printing, by Subscription, the Dramatick Works of William Shakespeare 1756", in *Johnson on Shakespeare*, (Vol.1), ed. Arthur Sherbo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968) pp. 51-58; this quotation from p.53.
3. T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets", *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932) p. 269.

For Johnson, ... expression was necessarily statement; critically, he couldn't come to terms with the use of language, not as a medium in which to put 'previously definite' ideas, but for exploratory creation. Poetry as creating what it presents, and as presenting something that stands there to speak for itself, or, rather, that isn't a matter of saying, but of being and enacting, he couldn't properly understand. 4.

This is a devastating condemnation of Johnson's critical ability and his powers of appreciation. Leavis's trenchant censure combined with the authority of Eliot's earlier essays has become the critical orthodoxy with regard to Dr Johnson. As the Shakespeare industry has taken over from Shakespeare criticism, the sentence against Dr Johnson has been incorporated into the canon.

The view that Johnson was a critic of strictly limited understanding of Shakespeare's dramatic poetry, was taken up and rephrased in fashionable terms, although less dogmatically, by W. K. Wimsatt in his Introduction to *Dr Johnson on Shakespeare* published in 1960. Wimsatt says, for example:

Not the 'splendours of particular passages' but the whole 'progress of his fable and the tenour' of the 'dialogue' was what [Johnson] found irresistible in Shakespeare. Just how this division in Johnson's appreciation was possible - how he got to the heart of Shakespeare - perceived the progress and the tenor of the drama - except through the aesthetic surface, the particulars of actions and words, may be difficult to understand. Doubtless we confront here some incompleteness of conversion, an unresolved tension between the neoclassic conscience and the liberating impulse. Johnson the lexicographer would of course be most painfully sensitive to the jaggedness of the verbal idiom - the maverick particularities. 5.

4. F.R. Leavis, "Tragedy and the *Medium*", *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952) p.130.

5. Samuel Johnson *Dr Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. W.K. Wimsatt (London: Penguin, 1960) (hereafter cited as Wimsatt) p.19.

'Critical remarks' as Johnson says, 'are not easily understood without examples'.⁶ It is a pity that Professor Wimsatt did not take the trouble to illustrate his comments to make clear what he⁷ thinks are 'the jaggedness of the verbal idiom' and 'the maverick particularities'. It would then be possible to compare his examples with Johnson's use of 'harsh' in the Notes. As it is, we have only a generalized criticism echoing his precursors.

Dr Johnson has, of course, given the critics some justification for their view. From the 'Preface' come the following statements:

In tragedy [Shakespeare] often writes with great appearance of toil and study, what is written at last with little felicity.

and: He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose.

and: His declamations or set speeches are commonly cold and weak. 8.

These quotations alone seem to confirm the rightness of the critical disapprobation already mentioned.

Professor Wellek, in his *History of Modern Criticism*, volume I, summarizes most comprehensively the case against Johnson. His main point is that Johnson is

6. Samuel Johnson 'Cowley', *Lives of the English Poets*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1952) I, 16.

7. My underlinings throughout.

8. Samuel Johnson Preface, in *Johnson on Shakespeare* ed. Arthur Sherbo. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968) (hereafter cited as 'Preface') pp. 59-113; the quotations given are from pp. 69, 71, 73, respectively. All subsequent quotations are taken from the Preface in this edition unless otherwise stated.

'one of the first great critics who has almost ceased to understand the nature of art... Art is no longer judged as art but as a piece or slice of life'. Realism is, however, not just 'accurate copying' nor 'merely selection by moral criteria; it is rather the depiction of the general, the universal, the typical' (p. 85).

Johnson is thus firmly rooted and even enclosed in the taste of his own age. 9.

In addition to this, Wellek says that Johnson, in recognizing that realism is insufficient, 'his usual remedy is moral selection' which 'is assumed to proceed to "general and transcendental truths"' (p.85).

If these statements are broadly true, the value of Dr Johnson as a critic of Shakespeare can be very seriously questioned.

However, I think it can be shown that Johnson's understanding and appreciation of literature did not lead him to choose 'moral selection', but rather to elevate the art of poetry to the highest level. He considered Homer the supreme poet although he recognized that we learn 'few precepts of justice, and none of mercy',¹⁰ from his work.

His primary criterion of good literature is contained within the term 'nature'. By showing what life is really like, literature purifies the imagination and instructs the mind. Johnson uses it in the Notes to Shakespeare to mean human nature operating within social context. It is best to turn to one or two examples to

9. Rene Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1955), I, 93.

10. Samuel Johnson, 'Milton', *Lives of the English Poets*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1952) I, 124.

help define the term. Contrary to Professor Wellek's assertion, the primacy of 'nature' does not lead Johnson to a 'condemnation of the particular'.

In *Cymbeline* (II. iv. 70) Johnson notes that Iachimo's 'language is such as a skilful villain would *naturally* use' to win the wager.¹¹ That is, given that Iachimo, with his unscrupulous moral sense, is determined to succeed, then he would 'naturally' use dishonest and deceptive words to achieve his ends. Here is appreciation of particularity of character and situation.

In a Note to *3 Henry VI* (V. v. 25) where the Prince of Wales refers to Richard as Aesop, Johnson comments:

The Prince calls Richard, for his crookedness, Aesop; and the poet, following *nature*, makes Richard highly incensed at the reproach. 12.

Again, the individuality of Richard's response is grasped by Johnson.

For Johnson then, Shakespeare is 'the poet of nature' because in the specificity of their character and situation the persons of the drama speak 'the language of men' so that 'every man finds his mind... strongly seized' by the plays. Johnson's praise of Shakespeare is inextricably connected with Shakespeare's language.

In the 'Preface', he expresses his commendation by

11. William Shakespeare, *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, ed. Samuel Johnson, 8 vols. 1765: rept. New York: AMS Press, 1968. (Hereafter cited as *The Plays*). The reference here is to Vol. VII, p.306.

All act, scene and line designations are from *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, VII - VIII.

12. *The Plays*, V, 216.

repeatedly using the terms 'speech', 'language', 'dialogue':

Shakespeare's familiar dialogue is affirmed to be smooth and clear.

and: among his other excellencies [Shakespeare] deserves to be studied as one of the original masters of our language.

and: his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion.

Johnson saw Shakespeare as essentially a dramatic poet who expressed 'human sentiments in human language'.

Because every man's mind is seized, the auditors experience, through this emotional involvement, the trials to which they cannot be exposed in the conditions of their ordinary life:

As he commands us, we laugh or mourn,
or sit silent with quiet expectation,
in tranquillity without indifference.

Johnson understood that nothing is more interesting and instructive than the mode of being of other people and that Shakespeare's plays afforded to the auditor, in a unique way, the opportunity of widening his sympathies and extending his experience of life. With the knowledge gained in this way, 'he who thinks reasonably [that is, 'naturally'] must think morally'.

This, then, is the problem; on the one hand we can find Johnson roundly condemning Shakespeare for taking excessive liberties with language: on the other his praise of Shakespeare is based precisely on the power of his language. What needs to be done is to determine, so far as is possible, the nature and extent of Johnson's condemnation.

By a close examination of his use of the key words 'harsh' and 'nature' in the Notes, I shall argue that Johnson had, in fact, a profound understanding and appreciation of Shakespeare's dramatic poetry, and that his censures are of a relatively marginal kind. The obvious deficiency in the modern opinion about this aspect of Johnson's Shakespeare criticism is that it has either neglected to examine the Notes closely or (as in the case of Professor Sherbo's book) examined them rather mechanically, without looking closely enough at the dramatic context of the words on which Johnson comments. This latter point is essential, and the following enquiry, therefore, devotes attention to the Shakespearean material as well as to Johnson's Notes on it.

CHAPTER II

From a scrutiny of Johnson's Notes it is clear that he was quicker than a modern critic to say that certain word usages of Shakespeare's were 'harsh'. He uses the epithet most often in two ways; to mean either that the phrase is difficult of comprehension or more importantly, that the joined connotations of words are too much in opposition.

An example of Johnson's failure to grasp that harshness could be *dramatically* functional is to be found in his Note to *King Henry VIII* (III. ii. 399.):

Wolsey:

May he continue
Long in his Highness' favour, and do justice
For truth's sake and his conscience; that his
bones,
When he has run his course, and sleeps in
blessings,
May have a tomb of orphans' tears wept on him!

Johnson: *A tomb of orphans' tears wept on him*]
The Chancellor is the general guardian
of orphans. *A tomb of tears is very harsh.*^{1.}

Johnson is here pointing out that Shakespeare is not fully utilizing the feeling and connotations of the word 'tomb' in this context. Obviously he reads the line with an emphasis on that word, and the metre bears him out. It is possible however that Shakespeare intended the words 'orphans' tears' to be spoken heavily and 'tomb' touched on mainly for alliterative and onomatopoeic effects. Johnson appears to have missed the fact that Wolsey is speaking hypocritically, which would, in Johnson's own view, justify the use of a harsh expression.

1. *The Plays*, V, 454.

An example from *Measure for Measure* (III. i. 55.) shows how Johnson was occasionally blind to the implications of a word:

Claudio:

Now, sister, what's the comfort?

Isabella:

Why, as all comforts are; most good in
Deed:

Johnson comments:

If this reading be right, *Isabella* must mean that she brings something better than *words* of comfort, she brings an assurance of *deeds*. This is harsh and constrained, but I know not what better to offer. 2.

In the *Dictionary* Johnson gives no metaphorical sense in his definitions of 'to constrain', but it is itself given as a meaning of 'to force' (sense 10, 'to constrain; to distort; not to obtain naturally or with ease') and the examples are of metaphorical usage.³

Johnson has not perceived that 'in Deed' when spoken could be a pun, as it could be heard both as two words meaning 'in action' and as one word with sense 1 (In reality; in truth; in verity). At this point in the play Isabella has no doubt that her brother's sense of honour is so great, that 'had he twenty heads to tender... he'd yield them up. Before his sister should her body stoop' to Angelo's request. She is therefore bringing him the comfort of being able to perform an honorable action which, measured by God's laws, is in truth most good.

2. *The Plays*, I, 317.

3. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, in which words are deduced from their originals and illustrated in their different significations by examples from the best writers (London: Harrison and Co., 1786), unpagged.

Shakespeare has carefully established her innocent goodness of character, and thus her easy persuasion to a naive confidence, by Lucio's arguments - 'soon at night, I'll send him certain word of my success'. Her earnest pleading with Angelo in the first interview conveys her 'loving virtue' as he himself describes it, and her passionate rejection of his later proposal, once she realizes what his intention is, confirms a character of youth, virtue and certainty.

The 'affecting' situation of the brother, honorable but deeply desirous of living, and the trusting sister, has blinded Johnson to the fact that the phrase by its very ambiguity carries unconscious irony on Isabella's part, which makes more poignant both the apparent fate of Claudio, then later, the effect on Isabella of Claudio's change of feeling in his plea of 'Sweet sister, let me live'.

There is an interesting example in *Macbeth* of Johnson's failure to see that the ordinary usage of a word makes sense, and he emends the phrase to make a metaphor. *Macbeth* was, of course, the first play he worked on:

Lenox:

What haste looks through his eyes?
So should he look, that seems to speak things
strange. (I. ii. 47.)

Johnson comments:

So should he look, that seems to speak things strange. The meaning of this passage, as it stands, is, *so should he look, that looks as if he told things strange.* But Rosse neither yet told strange things, nor could look as if he told them; Lenox only conjectured from his air that he had strange things to tell, and therefore undoubtedly said, *What haste looks thro' his eyes? So should he look, that seems to speak things strange.*

He looks like one that *is big with something of importance;* a metaphor so *natural* that it is every day used in common discourse. 4.

Warburton understood the sense correctly. His Note says:

that SEEMS to speak things strange
i.e. that seems as if he would speak...

In extenuation of Johnson, however, it is needful to quote his observation that:

As I practised conjecture more, I
learned to trust it less; and after
I had printed a few plays, resolved
to insert none of my own readings in
the text. Upon this caution I now
congratulate myself, for every day
encreases my doubt of my emendations.
(*'Preface'* p.108)

However, a Note to 1 *KING HENRY VI* (II. v. 29.) shows Johnson's occasional hasty judgment on Shakespeare's word use:

Mortimer:

But now the arbitrator of despairs,
Just death, kind umpire of men's miseries,
With sweet enlargement doth dismiss me hence.

Johnson comments:

Umpire of misery] That is, he that terminates
or concludes misery. The expression is harsh
and forced. 5.

The *Dictionary* contradicts Johnson's statement, defining umpire as 'an arbitrator, one who, as a common friend, decides disputes'. Since 'umpire' is used in a primary sense in these lines, it is hard to understand why Johnson calls the expression 'harsh' and 'forced'.

A Note to *Richard II* (V. ii. 56.) shows Johnson failing to grasp the dramatic function of the poetry:

York: Yea, look'st thou pale? Let me see
the Writing.

Johnson comments:

Such harsh and defective lines as this,
are probably corrupt, and might be
easily supplied, but that it would be
dangerous to let conjecture loose on
such slight occasions. 6.

This scene, sandwiched between the poetry of the gathering tragedy of Richard, dramatically requires a different rhythm. Shakespeare has given Aumerle and York an abrupt interchange in broken rhythms which conveys the emotional tension between the two characters. There is suspicion between York and Aumerle, and the Duchess is at odds with her husband over his intended action. The colloquial expression and the monosyllabic statements are appropriate to a scene full of family conflict, and, being laced with humour, it is necessarily in a lower key than those scenes showing the tragic movement to Richard's approaching murder.

Another Note from volume one of Johnson's edition shows an early emendation which takes such liberties with the text as to quite change the meaning:

Theseus:

But earthlier happy is the rose distill'd.
(*A Midsummer Night's Dream* (I. i. 76.))

Johnson comments:

Thus all the copies, yet *earthlier*
is so harsh a word, and *earthlier*
happy for *happier* *earthly* a mode of
speech so unusual, that I wonder none
of the Editors have proposed *earlier*
happy. 7.

In this case, Johnson seems to be suggesting that 'earthlier' is a poetic defect because of its sound. He offers a general term of imprecise meaning in the interests

6. *The Plays*, IV, 90.

7. *The Plays*, I, 92.

of euphony, rather than retaining the sharp specificity of 'earthlier' to contrast with the spiritual life of a nun described in the preceding five lines. This is a case of 'smoothness' being preferred to dramatic significance. That Shakespeare wanted the emphasis on the first syllable, 'earth', is supported by the metre.

In *The Tempest* (III. iii. 86.) Johnson appears simply to have made a mistake.

Prospero:

Of my instruction hast thou nothing 'bated,
In what thou hadst to say; so with good life,
And observation strange, my meaner ministers
Their several kinds have done.

Johnson: *with good life.*] This seems a corruption
I know not in what sense *life* can here be
used, unless for *alacrity*, *liveliness*,
vigour, and in this sense the expression is
harsh... 8.

In the *Dictionary*, 'life' is defined (sense 14) as 'spirit; briskness; vivacity; resolution', any and all of which fit the context and equate with Johnson's explication in the Note. Perhaps, as he said of Pope, his 'mind was liable to absence and inadvertency', and so the contradiction occurred. It is of interest to note that Johnson accepts the secondary use of 'strange' in the following line. That he understood its meaning is clear in his Note to IV. i. 5. of the same play where he comments on a similar use of 'strangely'.⁹

8. *The Plays*, I. 60.

9. *The Plays*, I. 62.

CHAPTER III

Dr Johnson was, however, more often able to accept the harshness of the idiom because he understood its dramatic function. He considered the harsh usage, 'natural' to the circumstances and therefore poetically acceptable. It is clear that Johnson considered the specific dramatic function of words a deeper criterion than that of a generalized neo-classical poetic 'decorum'.

A Note to *Macbeth* (II. iii. 110.) is a good example to show that Johnson was truly in touch with Shakespeare's poetry:

Macbeth:

Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin laced with his golden blood,
And his gashed stabs look'd like a breach in
nature
For Ruin's wasteful entrance;

Johnson comments:

It is not improbable, that Shakespeare put these forced and unnatural metaphors into the mouth of Macbeth as a mark of artifice and dissimulation, to show the difference between the studied language of hypocrisy, and the natural outcries of sudden passion. This whole speech so considered, is a remarkable instance of judgement, as it consists entirely of antithesis and metaphor. 1.

Each of the phrases, 'silver skin', and 'golden blood' has connotations of exalted praise of the King; together they make a hyperbolical statement. The verb 'to lace', understood in sense 2 ('to adorn with gold and silver textures') and sense 3 ('to embellish') has connotations of beautification which raise the line to further heights of value and esteem. All this, in circumstances of murder and spoken by the

1. *The Plays*, VI, 417.

murderer himself, evokes, as Johnson says, the hypocrisy of Macbeth who can use words of regal adornment to describe his bloody deed. This rhetorically inflated line is immediately followed by one containing a simile. Macbeth's use of personification in the third line, and in lines spoken at his entrance into this scene ('Renown and Grace are dead'), maintain the effect of dissimulation compared with the 'natural exclamation of Macduff, 'O Banquo! Banquo! / Our royal master's murder'd!'.²

Sherbo in *Samuel Johnson, Editor of Shakespeare*, seems, in an odd sort of way, to blame Johnson for Shakespeare's use of conceits. Of one line in the above passage (a line in which Johnson says 'every word is equally faulty') he writes:

Characters in distress are made to speak 'artfully' rather than 'naturally' when they play with words. Johnson, it may be remembered, objected to 'silver skin' and 'golden blood' in Macbeth's description of the murdered Duncan for the same reason. 3.

However, it is *Shakespeare*, of course, who makes Macbeth speak 'artfully', it is a verbal equivalent of the emotional insincerity in the character, which the actor would convey in his delivery and physical behaviour in the scene, that is, he would embody the words. Shakespeare's artificiality is in fact an example of his greatness as a dramatic poet, and Johnson has clearly grasped this point.

A second example from *Measure for Measure* shows Johnson's flexibility in accepting an extended meaning of a word in a specific dramatic situation:

2. *The Plays*, VI, 416.

3. Sherbo, *Samuel Johnson, Editor of Shakespeare*, p.81.

Isabella:

Is't not a kind of incest, to take life
From thine own sister's shame?

(III. i. 140.)

Johnson:

In *Isabella's* declamation there is something harsh, and something forced and far-fetched. But her indignation cannot be thought violent when we consider her not only as a virgin but as a nun. 4.

Johnson's use of the epithets, 'harsh', 'forced' and 'far-fetched' is descriptive. The primary meaning of 'incest' has been distorted to the point of straining the mind as we pause, infinitesimally, to grasp Isabella's view of Angelo's suggestion as it affects her relationship to her brother. That her outburst may be considered 'natural' in the circumstances, Johnson allows.⁵

To imply, as Sherbo does, that Johnson had a split reaction to Shakespeare, as man and as critic, is a judgment before the fact for which there is little evidence. The split exists in Sherbo's view of Johnson rather than in Johnson's response to Shakespeare. Of the above Note, Sherbo writes that Johnson 'can condemn the passage on purely aesthetic grounds at the same time that he approves the sentiment expressed'.⁶ But to interpret Johnson's evaluation of Shakespeare's word use as a condemnation of it, is surely mistaken. His comment is of the same type as that he makes on Macbeth's 'unnatural' language.

4. *The Plays*, I, 321.

5. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, in which the words are deduced from their originals and illustrate in their different significations by examples from the best writers. (London: Harrison and Co., 1786) unpagged.

6. Sherbo, p.95.

Despite Sherbo's statement that 'no word is given an unusual meaning', the use of 'incest' in this context, looked at dispassionately, is far from its primary meaning, as Johnson's dictionary definition makes clear (incest - 'unnatural and criminal conjunction of persons within degrees prohibited').

A close examination of Johnson's use of 'harsh' bears out the view that his use of the term in general is by no means necessarily pejorative. Consider the following case from I Henry IV:

Vernon:

Spoke your deservings like a chronicle,
Making you every better than his Praise:
By still dispraising Praise, valu'd with You!
(V. ii. 60).

Warburton says of 'By still' that it is 'evidently the players' nonsense', but Johnson comments:

This line is not only in the first folio, but in all the editions before it that I have seen. Why it should be censured as nonsense I know not. To vilify praise, compared or *valued* with merit superiour to praise, is no harsh expression. 8.

It is worth remarking that this telescoped phrase is an example of Eliot's 'meanings perpetually *eingeschachtelt* into meanings', yet its compression is not considered difficult or unpleasing by Johnson.⁹

There is a typical use of 'harsh' in the following Note to *Richard II*: II. ii. 38.

7. Sherbo, p.67.

8. *The Plays*, IV, 217.

9. Further examples of Johnson's acceptance of compressed expressions are *King Henry VIII*, I. i. 122; *I Henry IV*, V. ii. 60; *Richard III*, I. iii. 163.

Queen:

'Tis in reversion That I do possess;
But what it is, that is not yet known, what
I cannot name, 'tis nameless woe, I wot.
(II. ii. 38.)

Johnson: I am about to propose an interpretation which many will think harsh, and which I do not offer for certain. To possess a man, is, in Shakespeare, to inform him fully, to make him comprehend. To be possessed, is, to be fully informed. Of this sense the examples are numerous...
I therefore imagine the Queen says thus:
'Tis in reversion - that I do possess. -
The event is yet in futurity - that I known with full conviction - but what it is, that is not yet known.
In any other interpretation she must say that she possesses what is not yet come, which, though it may be allowed to be poetical and figurative language, is yet, I think, less natural than my explanation. 10.

Johnson feels that his own interpretation is a rigorous exposition of the sense, although many may find it unpleasing poetically. This Note throws some light on Johnson's criteria of poetic success. Both sentiment and style should be 'natural' or 'easy'. This does not exclude 'poetical' or 'figurative' language, but each case needs to be looked at individually and the word usage examined within its context. In this case Johnson thinks the success of the poetic expression is uncertain, and open to differing opinions.

The following Note to *King Henry V* shows Johnson using 'harsh' with reference to the precise meaning of two words.

Ely: It follows then, the Cat must stay at home,
Yet that is but a crush'd necessity;
Since we have locks to safeguard necessities,
And pretty traps to catch the petty thieves.
(I. ii. 174.)

Warburton emended 'crush'd' to 'scus'd', but Johnson rejects this and comments:

Neither the old readings nor the emendation seem very satisfactory. A curs'd necessity has no sense, a scus'd necessity is so harsh that one would not admit it, if anything else can be found. A crush'd necessity may mean, a necessity which is subdu'd and overpowered by contrary reasons. We might read a crude necessity, a necessity not complete, or not well considered and digested, but it is too harsh. ll.

His attempts to find an acceptable meaning for the phrase, clearly demonstrate one of Johnson's most frequent uses of 'harsh'. No sense ('curs'd necessity') is unacceptable, a 'crude necessity' is too puzzling nor is 'scus'd necessity' much easier to explain, yet it is clear from the imagery of 'the cat', 'locks to safeguard' and 'pretty traps' what the sense is.

The *Dictionary* confirms Johnson's explication of 'crush'd necessity': to crush, sense 3, 'to overwhelm; to bend down'; sense 4, 'to subdue; to depress'. As he discerns, it is a way of saying that there used to be necessity, but it no longer exists. The Note reveals Johnson's acute sensitivity to Shakespeare's word usage, the particularity of his response to the poetry.

On occasions Johnson applies 'harsh' to a difficult or complicated construction of syntax. as when Falstaff says:

My lord, I beseech you, give me leave
to go through Glo'stershire; and when
you come to Court, 'pray, stand my good
Lord in your good report.

(2 Henry IV, IV. iii. 80.)

Johnson comments:

Stand my good Lord in your good report.]

ll. *The Plays*, IV, 374.

We must either read, *pray let me stand or by a construction somewhat harsh*, understand it thus. *Give me leave to go - and - stand. To stand in a report*, referred to the reporter, is to *persist*, and Falstaff did not ask the prince to persist in his present opinion. 12.

This Note is an indication of Johnson's breadth of view on syntactical arrangement. If the second meaning is the one chosen, and he allows that it could be, it is only 'somewhat' unpleasing and puzzling, although the first explication is easier of comprehension and accords more closely with Falstaff's intention in the scene.

A similar construction in *Much Ado About Nothing* provides an elucidatory example of his use of 'harsh'. Leonato says:

If such a one will smile and stroke his beard,
And, Sorrow wag! cry; hem, when he should
groan;
(V. i. 15.)

Johnson comments:

Sir Thomas Hanmer, and after him Dr. Warburton, for *wag*, read *waive*, which is, I suppose, the same as, *put aside*, or *shift off*. None of these conjectures satisfy me, nor perhaps any other reader. I cannot but think the true reading nearer than it is imagined.

I point thus,

If such an one will smile, and stroke his beard, And, sorrow, wag! cry; hem, when he should groan; that is, If he will smile, and cry, sorrow, be gone, and hem instead of groaning.

The order in which *and* and *cry* are placed is harsh, and this harshness made the sense mistaken. Range the words in the common order and my reading will be free from all difficulty.

*If such an one will smile, and stroke his beard,
Cry, sorrow, wag! and hem when he should groan. 13.*

12. *The Plays*, IV, 319.

13. *The Plays*, III, 251. 'Harsh' is here used in sense 3; 'crabbed - unpleasing; difficult or perplexing'.

'Harsh' here seems also to suggest 'not easy', 'not neat', 'a far departure from the ordinary', with the resulting perplexity over the meaning. Johnson's explication goes directly to the heart of the problem of these two much argued lines, and he clarifies the sense with simplicity. His account in no way condemns the construction, and his pointing of the lines indicates that he had in mind the actor's delivery of them.¹⁴

Two further examples show his latitude over the unfamiliar usage of words. The first is from *Richard III*, when Stanley says:

Farewel. The leisure, and the fearful time
Cuts off the ceremonious vows of love,
And ample interchange of sweet discourse...
(V. iii. 97)

Johnson comments:

The leisure and the fearful time...]
We have still a phrase equivalent to this,
however harsh it may seem, *I would do this*
if leisure would permit, where *leisure*, as
in this passage, stands for *want of leisure*... 15.

The acting of this scene, on the eve of battle, where all is haste and busy-ness, would overcome any difficulty there may be in grasping the sense. Johnson's comment is an evaluation of its clarity.

The second is from *1 Henry IV*, when Worcester says:

But yet I would your father had been here;
The quality and hair of our attempt
Brooks no division;
(IV. i. 61)

14. A further example of difficult construction occurs in *1 Henry IV*, I. iii. 93, Note 6.

15. *The Plays*, V, 349.

Johnson comments:

The *hair* seems to be *the complexion, the character*. The metaphor appears harsh to us, but, perhaps, was familiar in our authour's time. 16.

Since 'hair' in this usage was obviously no longer in common currency, the metaphor would indeed be initially puzzling, although Johnson has discerned Shakespeare's meaning. The metaphorical use is confirmed in the *Dictionary* (sense 4, 'course; order; grain') and supported by a quotation from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Although he was himself familiar with the expression from his work on the *Dictionary*, this Note shows how Johnson had in mind the 'common man's' response to the verses.

The two Notes also indicate Johnson's awareness of historical factors at work in the living language.¹⁷ He saw Shakespeare, pre-eminently, as 'the poet who caught his ideas from the living world', who, through his use of language, 'shewed life in its native colours'.

16. *The Plays*, IV, 197.

17. Further examples of Johnson's historical awareness are *Macbeth* IV. iii. 195, *Much Ado About Nothing*, IV, i. 127, *Measure for Measure*, II. iv. 26.

CHAPTER IV

We turn now to the word 'nature' and to the more obviously positive side of Johnson's response to Shakespearean language. His praise of Shakespeare in the 'Preface' as 'the poet of nature' is illustrated in many particular instances throughout his Notes to the plays. 'Nature', as has been said, means primarily human nature, and, for Johnson, Shakespeare's presentation of 'human sentiments in human language' was the source of his moral strength. In *Cymbeline* Iachimo describes the picture of,

Proud Cleopatra, when she met her Roman,
And Cydnus swell'd above the banks, or for
The press of boats or pride. (II. iv. 70.)

Warburton described the image here as 'an agreeable ridicule on poetical exaggeration'. Johnson comments:

It is easy to sit down, and give our author meanings which he never had.... That (Shakespeare) intended to ridicule his own lines is very uncertain.... If the language of Iachimo be such as shews him to be mocking the credibility of his hearer, his language is very improper, when his business is to deceive. But the truth is, that his language is such as a skilful villain would naturally use, a mixture of airy triumph and serious disposition. His gayety shews his seriousness to be without anxiety, and his seriousness proves his gayety to be without art. 1.

Johnson's phrase, 'airy triumph' together with his following analysis, reveals the fine distinction of his understanding of 'the tenour of the dialogue'. By Iachimo's convincing blend of gayety and seriousness, any reluctance Posthumus may have initially had to believe the truth of his words, is dissipated. Through the particularity of words, as Johnson appreciated, Posthumus's trust in Imogen is destroyed.

1. *The Plays*, VII, 305.

Iachimo's use of the conceit, "And Cydnus swell'd above the banks", is a metaphorical equivalent of his own feelings of superiority. Johnson finds the conceit 'natural' to the villain's intention in this scene where, by his words and manner, he is able to present to Posthumus apparently overwhelming evidence that he has successfully seduced Imogen.

Johnson's praise of the 'language of Iachimo' refers to the whole exchange between him and Posthumus. As Johnson says in the Preface, '(Shakespeare's) real power is... shown... by the progress of his fable, and the tenour of his dialogue'.

A Note to 2 *Henry VI* III. iii. 32., confirms his grasp of the dramatic movement in the verse. King Henry says:

Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all.
Close up his eyes, and draw the curtain close,
And let us all to meditation. (III. iii. 32.)

Johnson comments:

This is one of the scenes which have been applauded by the criticks, and which will continue to be admired when prejudice shall cease, and bigotry give way to impartial examination. These are beauties that rise out of nature and of truth; the superficial reader cannot miss them, the profound can image nothing beyond them. 2.

One wonders what Leavis meant when he said that Johnson could not 'properly understand' the poetry 'of being and enacting'.³

This quality of 'naturalness' is the basis of Johnson's criteria of 'easy poetry', poetry, that is, as far removed as possible from 'harshness'. In *The Idler*, No. 77, he writes:

2. *The Plays*, V, 73.

3. F.R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit*, p.130.

Easy poetry is that in which natural thoughts are expressed without violence to the language. The discriminating character of ease consists principally in the diction, for all true poetry requires that the sentiments be natural. Language suffers violence by harsh or by daring figures, by transposition, by unusual acceptations of words, and by any license which would be avoided by a writer of prose. 4.

Johnson's example of the 'many licenses which an easy writer must decline' is, interestingly enough, from Pope's *Iliad*, not from Shakespeare or Donne. His analysis details distortion by inversion, superfluities of epithet, harsh metaphor and the use of words 'in an uncommon sense' all of which, he considers, produce 'some degree of obscurity and ruggedness'.⁵

If it is of interest to analyse what exactly Johnson understands by his phrase, 'without violence to the language'. A quotation from *Cymbeline*, III. iii. 35., will serve the purpose.

Arviragus says:

What should we speak of,
When we are old as you? When we shall hear
The rain and wind beat dark December? How,
In this our pinching cave, shall we discourse
The freezing hours away? We have seen nothing;
We're beastly; subtle as the fox for prey,
Like warlike as the wolf, for what we eat;
Our valour is to chase what flies; our cage
We make a quire, as doth the prisoned bird,
And sing our bondage freely. (III. iii. 35.)

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4. Samuel Johnson, *Selected Poetry and Prose (of) Samuel Johnson*, ed. F. Brady and W.K. Wimsatt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) (hereafter cited as *Selected Poetry*) p. 265.
 5. *Selected Poetry*, p. 266. Cf. *Dictionary*; obscure, sense 3, 'Not easily intelligible; difficult and rugged', sense 2, 'Not neat; not regular', and sense 5, 'Rough or harsh to the ear'.

Johnson comments:

This dread of an old age, unsupplied with matter for discourse and meditation, is a sentiment natural and noble. No state can be more destitute than that of him who, when the delights of sense forsake him, has no pleasures of the mind. 6.

This speech of Arviragus is, it should be noted, typical of Shakespeare's late poetry, where his poetic art had achieved its maximum concentration and flexibility. In ordinary usage, the rain and wind beat 'against' their object, but Shakespeare has slightly dislocated the sense by making 'dark December' the direct object of the verb. Normally too, we speak of the rain and wind beating a physical object, but again, Shakespeare has altered this to an abstract noun, 'December'.

The whole sentence is, in addition, a metaphor for old age. In line four, the epithet 'pinching' carries two meanings, 'cramped' and 'cold'; these double meanings are another characteristic source of power in Shakespeare's poetry. Here again, 'Our valour is to chase what flies', is an example of irony. The last line, 'and sing our bondage freely', is a paradox into which Shakespeare has condensed several ideas. The simile of the previous line leads on to the metaphor encapsulated in 'sing' so that Arviragus and his brother become birds, their free life in the forest is a 'cell of ignorance' within which they are able only to speak of experience of life. The images of birds-brothers, cave-cage and bondage-freedom leading on to the abstract ideas of ignorance-experience crowd upon the mind of the auditor. This 'perpetual slight alteration of language', as Eliot expresses it, is typical of Shakespearean poetry at its finest, yet it is clear that this speech meets Johnson's criteria of 'easy poetry'.

Johnson did not apply the criteria rigidly, but always took the particular dramatic situation into account. The following speech is from *Timon of Athens*; Timon speaks:

Thou art a slave, whom fortune's tender arm
 With favour never claspt; but bred a dog.
 Hadst thou, like us from our first swath, proceeded
 Through sweet degrees that this brief world affords,
 To such as may the passive drugs of it,
 Freely command, thou would'st have plung'd thyself,
 In general riot, melted down thy youth
 In different beds of lust, and never learn'd
 The icy precepts of respect, but followed
 The sugar'd game before thee. But myself,
 Who had the world as my confectionary,
 The mouths, the tongues, the eyes and hearts of men
 At duty, more than I could frame employments,
 That numberless upon me stuck, as leaves
 Do on the oak; have with one winter's brush
 Fall'n from their boughs, and left me open, bare
 For every storm that blows. (IV. iii. 251.)

Johnson comments:

There is in this speech a sullen haughtiness, and malignant dignity, suitable at once to the lord and the manhater. The impatience with which he bears to have his luxury reproached by one that never had luxury within his reach, is natural and graceful. 7.

An analysis of this speech shows in line one the personification of fortune, followed by a metaphor in line two. Line seven has Shakespeare again making a slight shift from ordinary usage; the verb 'melt' is normally followed by a physical object but here Shakespeare has as direct object the abstract noun 'youth' which has sexual connotations contained in the adverbial phrase, 'in ... beds of lust'. The epithet 'icy' in line nine carries two meanings - 'cold' used metaphorically applied to the 'precepts' and 'chilling' applied to the practitioner of them. By using 'sugar'd' as a contrasting epithet in the next line, Shakespeare has shifted his meaning to include connotations of appetite and warmth which he then links to the substantive, 'confectionary', in line eleven which is a metaphor for the world. 'Sugar'd' is further connected to a hunting image by its substantive

7. *The Plays*, VI, 248. Cf. Dictionary; 'natural', sense 4, 'Not forced; not far-fetched; dictated by nature'.

'game' and the verb 'followed' in line nine. The connotations of taste are carried on in 'mouths' and 'tongues' together with the new idea of flattering words spoken, with the whole of line twelve being a metonymy. By the suggestive use of the simile, 'as leaves / Do the oak', the men become leaves and Timon by implication a tree. The metaphor continues in line seventeen with Timon's change of fortune previously imaged as 'winter', leaving him exposed to 'every storm'.

Johnson obviously accepts the conceits within this speech as dramatically functional. In *The Idler*, No. 77, he also says:

Any epithet which can be ejected without diminution of the sense... and all unusual, though not ungrammatical, structure of speech destroy the grace of easy poetry.

Johnson's designation of this speech by Timon as 'natural' and 'graceful' shows his judgment to be much wider and his response much deeper than the narrow application of neo-classical rules.

Wimsatt's criticism that in Johnson we 'confront... an unresolved tension between the neo-classic conscience and the liberating impulse' seems to have little basis in fact. It is hard to reconcile Wimsatt's statement that 'Johnson the lexicographer would of course be most painfully sensitive to the jaggedness of the verbal idiom', with Johnson's high praise of both sentiment and style in Timon's speech, with its continually shifting and extending images.

Wimsatt seems to imply that Johnson responded to 'type' characters, that blinded by preconceptions of neo-classic generalizing, he was unable to respond to 'the particulars of actions and words'. The following Note to *King John* is a clear refutation of the accusation.

Constance speaks:

I will instruct my sorrows to be proud;
For Grief is proud, and makes his owner stout.
To me, and to the State of my great Grief,
Let Kings assemble: (III. i. 68.)

Johnson comments:

In *Much ado about nothing*, the father of Hero, depressed by her disgrace, declares himself so subdued by grief that *a thread may lead him*. How is it that grief in Leonato and lady Constance, produces effects directly opposite and yet both agreeable to nature. Sorrow softens the mind while it is yet warmed by hope, but hardens it when it is congealed by despair. Distress, while there remains any prospect of relief, is weak and flexible, but when no succour remains, is fearless and stubborn; angry alike at those that injure, and at those that do not help; careless to please where nothing can be gained, and fearless to offend when there is nothing further to be dreaded. Such was this writer's knowledge of the passions. 8.

Here the two characters 'act and speak by the influence of those general passions' common to us all, but the speech of Constance could not 'be properly transferred from the present passion to another claimant'. Johnson's understanding of the particular circumstances which generate the two different experiences of grief is both subtle and profound. As he said in the 'Preface', 'no poet ever kept his personages more distinct from each other'.

In view of Leavis's remark that 'for Johnson... expression was necessarily statement', it is worth noting Johnson's own use of metaphorical language in this Note. Sorrow 'softens' the mind when it is 'warmed' by 'hope', but 'hardens' it when it is 'congealed' by despair.

A Note to *Richard II* (III. ii. 207.) will give further confirmation of Johnson's ability to discriminate between occasions of dramatic circumstance and utterance.

Richard speaks:

By heav'n, Ill hate him everlastingly,
That bids me be of comfort any more.
Go to *Flint-castle*, there I'll pine away,
A King, woe's slave, shall kingly woe obey.

Johnson comments:

This sentiment is drawn from nature.
Nothing is more offensive to a mind
convinced that his distress is without
remedy, and preparing to submit
quietly to irresistible calamity, than
these petty and conjectured comforts
which unskilful officiousness thinks it
virtue to administer. 9.

Johnson's delicate response to these individual expressions of grief substantiate his appreciation of Shakespeare's dramatic poetry. He recognizes that minute nuances of expression are the emotional tenour of the drama, that the dramatic context cannot be separated from the language which, for the spectator, communicates a 'vibration to the heart'.

Johnson's view was larger, too, than any neo-classical criterion of 'regularity', as can be seen in the following Note to *Antony and Cleopatra*. Cleopatra speaks:

... and it is great
To do that thing, that ends all other deeds;
Which shackles accidents, and bolts up change;
Which sleeps, and never palates more the dung,
The beggar's nurse, and Caesar's.

(V. ii. 4.)

Warburton had emended the speech, but Johnson defends it:

9. *The Plays*, IV, 60.

I cannot perceive the loss of a line,
or the need of an emendation....
 The difficulty of the passage, if any
 difficulty there be, arises only from
 this, that the act of suicide, and the
 state which is the effect of suicide,
 are confounded.... The speech is abrupt,
 but perturbation in such a state is
 surely natural. 10.

The compression of cause and effect in the language,
 and the broken rhythms used to express the idea, are
 acceptable to Johnson in this particular circumstance. As
 he says in the 'Preface', '(Shakespeare's) characters are
 praised as natural, though their sentiments are sometimes
forced'.

Another example from *Much Ado About Nothing*, will
 again demonstrate his freedom from a rule-ridden judgment
 of syntax. Leonato says:

But mine, and mine I lov'd, and mine I prais'd,
 And mine that I was proud on, mine so much....
 (IV. i. 136.)

Again Johnson rejects an emendation by Warburton, and
 remarks:

Even of this small alteration there is
 no need. The speaker utters his emotion
abruptly. But mine, and mine that I
loved, etc., by an ellipsis frequent,
 perhaps too frequent, both in verse and
 prose. 11.

Johnson is not here condemning the use of ellipsis;
 it is clear from his comment that he has grasped its dramatic
 function in the context.

10. *The Plays*, VII, 235.

11. *The Plays*, III, 239.

Wimsatt's description of Shakespeare's word usage as 'maverick' suggests a lack of understanding of the very development of language. In 'Rhetoric and Poetic Drama', Eliot says:

Examination of the development of Elizabethan drama shows this progress in adaptation, a development from monotony to variety, a progressive refinement in the perception of the variations of feeling, and a progressive elaboration of the means of expressing these variations. This drama is admitted to have grown away from the rhetorical expression, the bombast speeches, of Kyd and Marlowe to the subtle and dispersed utterance of Shakespeare and Webster. 12.

If Wimsatt means by 'maverick particularities', the use of secondary meanings, there is evidence that Johnson was alert and responsive to this aspect of Shakespeare's word usage, as is apparent in the following Note to *Measure for Measure*, where the Duke says:

Angelo,
There is a kind of character in thy life,
That to th'observer doth thy history
Fully unfold. (I. i. 28.)

Johnson comments:

Either this introduction has more solemnity than meaning, or it has a meaning which I cannot discover. What is there peculiar in this, that a man's *life* informs the observer of his *history*? Might it be supposed that *Shakespeare* wrote this? *There is a kind of character in thy look.* 13.

In 1773, however, he added the following:

12. T.S. Eliot, 'Rhetoric and Poetic Drama', *Selected Essays*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1932) p.38.

13. *The Plays*, I. 266.

'History' may be taken in a more diffuse and licentious meaning for 'future occurrences', or the part of life yet to come. If this sense be received, the passage is clear and proper.

Johnson's acceptance of a 'more diffuse' and unconfined meaning equates with Eliot's description of 'the subtle and dispersed utterance of Shakespeare'. The *Dictionary* defines 'to diffuse' (sense 2) as 'to spread; to scatter; to disperse'.

Another example from *Measure for Measure* shows Johnson's ready acceptance of an extended meaning.

Duke: Come no more evasion:
We have with a leaven'd and prepared choice
Proceeded to you; (I. i. 52.)

Warburton emends 'leaven'd' to 'levell'd', but Johnson comments:

No emendation is necessary.
Leaven'd choice is one of *Shakespeare's* harsh metaphors. His train of ideas seem to be this. *I have proceeded to you with choice* mature, concocted, fermented, *leaven'd*. When Bread is *leaven'd*, it is left to ferment: a *leaven'd* choice is therefore a choice not hasty, but considerate, not declared as soon as it fell into the imagination, but suffered to work long in the mind. Thus explained, it suits better with *prepared* than *levelled*. 14.

Here Johnson perceptively threads out the connotations of 'leaven'd' and finds the difficult metaphor acceptable. It is appropriate to the authority of the Duke and, in delivery, the rhythm of the line and the enjambement would bring out the weight of the meaning. 15.

14. *The Plays*, I, 268.

15. Further examples of Johnson's acceptance of secondary meanings are *Antony and Cleopatra*, I. i. 10, Note 3, and *Hamlet*, V. ii. 38. Note 1.

A Note to *Titus Andronicus*, demonstrates Johnson's sensitivity to the significance of even a single word.

Titus speaks:

Lavinia, live; out-live thy father's days,
And fame's eternal date for virtue's praise!
(I. i. 167.)

Warburton emends 'and' to 'in'; Johnson remarks:

To *live in* fame's date is, if an
allowable, yet a harsh expression.
To *outlive* an eternal date is, tho'
not philosophical, yet poetical sense.
He wishes that her life may be longer
than his, and her praise longer than
fame. 16.

This Note, it might be said in passing, casts doubt on Wellek's claim that Johnson judged art 'as a piece or slice of life'. He differentiates between philosophical truth and poetical truth, and his acceptance of the harsh expression shows the prime place he gave to art.¹⁷

Two Notes from *Richard II* will make clear the degree of licence which Johnson thought appropriate. Aumerle, challenged to a duel by Bagot, a social inferior, exclaims:

Shall I so much dishonour my fair stars,
On equal terms to give him chastisement?
(IV. i. 21.)

Johnson comments:

I think the present reading unexceptionable.
The *birth* is supposed to be influenced by
the *stars*, therefore our authour with
his usual licence takes *stars* for *birth*.

16. *The Plays*, VI, 285.

17. Rene Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism*, 1750 -
1950 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1955) I, 93.

A few lines further on Fitzwater replies to Aumerle:

If that thy valour stand on sympathies,
There is my Gage, *Aumerle*, in gage to thine.

Johnson comments as follows on *sympathies*:

Here is a translated sense much harsher than that of stars explained in the foregoing note. *Aumerle* has challenged *Bagot* with some hesitation, as not being his equal, and therefore one whom, according to the rules of chivalry, he was not obliged to fight, as a nobler life was not to be staked in duel against a baser. *Fitzwater* then throws down his *gage* a *pledge* of battle, and tells him that if he stands upon *sympathies*, that is, upon *equality of blood*, the combat is now offered him by a man of rank not inferiour to his own. *Sympathy* is an affection incident at once to two subjects. This *community of affection* implies a *likeness or equality of nature*, and thence our poet transferred the term to *equality of blood*. 18.

The first example shows 'that perpetual slight alteration of language' which Eliot so admires in Shakespearean poetry and which, in this case, Johnson finds acceptable. The use of the words 'much harsher' in the latter Note implies a degree of harshness in the former usage, but not enough to make the expression too puzzling for the auditor. Johnson's long detailed analysis of the process by which 'sympathies' becomes 'equality of blood' clearly illustrates what he considers to be a meaning difficult of comprehension because the connotations of the linked words are too far apart to be easily and quickly grasped. The tone of the Note is descriptive not condemnatory.

A Note to 2 *Henry IV* V. ii. 37., shows Johnson's descriptive use of 'licentious' together with the fact that such usage is not necessarily 'harsh'. The Chief Justice says,

18. *The Plays*, IV, 73.

And never shall you see, that I will beg
 A ragged and forestall'd remission.
 (V. ii. 37.)

Warburton emends 'ragged' to 'rated' but Johnson comments:

Different minds have different perplexities.
 I am more puzzled with *forestall'd* than
 with *ragged*, for *ragged*, in our authour's
licentious diction, may easily signify
beggarly, mean, base, ignominious; but
forestall'd I know not how to apply to
remission in any sense primitive or
figurative. 19.

Johnson finds no difficulty in understanding the extended or 'diffused' sense of 'ragged'. His Note shows that he explored both primary and translated senses of 'forestall'd' and has not been able to make sense of it in this context. Of the three definitions given for 'to forestall' in his *Dictionary* and supported by other quotations from Shakespeare, none makes sense here. His use of the epithets 'harsh' and 'licentious', like that of 'elegant' and 'poetical' is a judicious evaluation of poetic success.²⁰

19. *The Plays*, IV, 340.

20. For further examples of Johnson's descriptive use of 'licentious' see *Measure for Measure*, III. ii. 243, Note 7, 1 *Henry IV*, IV. ii. 29, Note 8, and *Romeo and Juliet*, III. i. 185, Note 6.

CHAPTER V

'Mature' Shakespearean poetry with its continual slight distortions and extensions of meanings, its compressed phrases, allusions, suggestive ambiguities and its bold statement is not incompatible with Johnson's criteria of 'easy poetry'.

Johnson's criticism of Shakespeare's style in certain passages as having 'great appearance of toil and study' must not be taken as a general condemnation. He contrasts the 'laboured' style with its 'tumour, meanness, tediousness and obscurity' with the 'easy poetry' of much of the later works. This 'laboured' style can most obviously be taken to be that of the early tragedies and histories, and we can suggest thus, that Johnson is announcing that preference for the 'mature' Shakespearean style which has, of course, become the orthodox view.

Johnson prefers the style which expresses 'effusions of passion'. It is worthwhile to look at two such speeches that he singles out for praise. In the light of his comments, it is difficult to understand Leavis's view that Johnson had no feeling for truly dramatic poetry.

The first is from *Cymbeline* V. i. 1. It is necessary to quote the speech in full:

Posthumus:

Yea bloody cloth, I'll keep thee: for I wisht,
Thou should'st be colour'd thus. You married ones,
If each of you should take this course, how many
Must murder wives much better than themselves
For wrying but a little? Oh, Pisanio!
Every good servant does not all commands;
No bond, but to do just ones. Gods! if you
Should have ta'en vengeance on my faults, I ne'er
Had liv'd to put on this; so had you saved
The noble Imogen, to repent, and struck
Me wretch, more worth your vengeance. But alack,
You snatch some hence for little faults; that's love

To have them fall no more; you some permit
 To second ill with ill, each elder worse,
 And make them dread it to the doer thrift.
 But Imogen's your own. Do your best wills,
 And make me bless'd t'obey. - I am brought hither
 Among th'Italian gentry, and to fight
 Against my lady's kingdom. 'Tis enough
 That, Britain, I have kill'd thy mistress. Peace!
 I'll give no would to thee: Therefore, good heav'ns,
 Hear patiently my purpose. I'll disrobe me
 Of these Italian weeds, and suit myself
 As does a Briton peasant: so I'll fight
 Against the part I come with: so I'll die
 For thee, O Imogen, even for whom my life
 Is, every breath, a death; and thus, unknown,
 Pitied not hated, to the face of peril
 Myself I'll dedicate. Let me make men know
 More valour in me, than my habits show;
 Gods, put the strength o'th'Leonati in me!
 To shame the guise o'th'world, I will begin
 The fashion. Less without, and more within.

Johnson comments:

This is a soliloquy of *nature*, uttered when the effervescence of a mind agitated and perturbed spontaneously and inadvertently discharges itself in words. The speech, throughout all its tenour, if the last conceit be accepted, seems to issue warm from the heart. He first condemns his own violence; then tries to disburden himself by imputing part of the crime to Pisanio, he next soothes his mind to an artificial and momentary tranquillity, by trying to think that he has been only an instrument of the gods for the happiness of Imogen. He is now grown reasonable enough to determine, that have done so much evil he will not do more; that he will not fight against the country which he has already injured; but as life is not longer supportable, he will die in a just cause, and die with the obscurity of a man who does not think himself worthy to be remembered. 1.

Johnson's comments decisively contradict Leavis's statement. The progress of emotional changes which Posthumus undergoes are skilfully traced. The particularity of such an analysis would be impossible unless Johnson had responded

1. *The Plays*, VII, 368.

deeply to the poetry which creates 'what it presents',². Its effect as drama is the effect of the poetry. As Johnson says in The Preface, 'on our stage, something must be done as well as said'; this scene is no 'inactive declamation' but the living embodiment of a suffering man working through to a deeply felt decision about his next action.

The actor, by exploring the physical life of the text, clarifies its meaning and the clarification leads to a refinement and precision of his embodiment of the character. The unity of inner and outer action contained in the words, which is a persistent quality throughout Shakespeare's plays is a mark of his greatness as a dramatic poet.

For the spectator, the sight of the bloody cloth immediately seizes his imagination, and the form of the poetry, direct address, makes identification with Posthumus instantaneous, so that he 'thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion'. In this way, Shakespeare's drama is 'the mirror of life'. Shakespeare's poetic imagination fuses the objective self-knowledge of the spectator and his subjective self-awareness, through the experience of the drama. This cleansing the imagination of its 'delirious extasies' is the basis of the felicitous moral effect of the poetry. In the light of this Note it is hard to understand why Leavis says that 'critically (Johnson) couldn't come to terms with the use of language ... for exploratory creation'.

The second example is a comparison of Johnson's Note to Hamlet's famous soliloquy with his remarks about Addison's *Cato* which will illuminate the distinction between

2. Leavis, p.130.

his critical appreciation of each. Perhaps we should remind ourselves of the opening lines of the former, in order to see the full force of Johnson's comment:

To be, or not to be? that is the question. -
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind, to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune;
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
 And by opposing end them? - To die, - to sleep -
 No more; and by a sleep, to say, we end
 The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks
 That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation
 Devoutly to be wished. To die, - to sleep -
 To sleep? perchance, to dream. Ay, there's
 the rub....

Johnson comments:

Of this celebrated soliloquy, which bursting from a man distracted with contrariety of desires, and overwhelmed with the magnitude of his own purposes, is connected rather in the speaker's mind, than on his tongue, I shall endeavour to discover the train, and to shew how one sentiment produces another. 3.

There follows a long analysis of the series of emotional shifts contained within the speech. Johnson's comments reveal that, contrary to Leavis's words, he could understand 'poetry as creating what it presents'. It hardly needs adding, of course, that this speech is in the characteristic mature Shakespearean poetic mode.

In the Preface, Johnson says in praise of the soliloquy in *Cato*:

what voice or what gesture can hope to
 add dignity or force to the soliloquy of Cato?

At first sight this seems to be not only elevating the soliloquy of Cato above that of Hamlet, but also confirming that Johnson 'has no sense of theatre'.⁴ But it is his

3. *The Plays*, VIII, 207.

4. F.R. Leavis, 'Johnson as Poet', *The Common Pursuit*, p.118.

very understanding that *Cato* was a 'closet-drama' with no inherent dramatic life, which caused him to make the above remark. His comprehensiveness as a critic is revealed by the next comment:

Cato affords a splendid exhibition of artificial and fictitious manners, and delivers just and noble sentiments in diction easy, elevated and harmonious...

However, he also said:

Cato ... is rather a poem in dialogue than a drama, rather a succession of just sentiments in elegant language than a representation of natural affections, or of any state possible or probable in human life... The events are expected without solicitude, and are remembered without joy or sorrow. Of the agents we have no care: we consider not what they are doing, or what they are suffering; we wish only to know what they have to say. 5.

This is an acute and detailed account of the reasons why the 'hopes and fears' of *Cato* 'communicate no vibration to the heart', the means by which Shakespeare's poetry works its moral effect. 'Other writers disguise the most natural passions ... so that he who contemplates them in a book will not know them in the world', but Shakespeare's persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated'. The Note also very nicely places Johnson's evaluation of 'elegance': it is far from being the highest term of praise which he can bestow on language.

The first ten lines of *Cato*'s soliloquy will clarify Johnson's evaluation.

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5. Samuel Johnson, *Samuel Johnson, Rasselas, Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958) p. 492.

Cato: It must be so - Plato, thou reasonest well
 Else whence this pleasing hope, this fond desire,
 This longing after immortality?
 Or whence this secret dread, and inward horror,
 Of falling into naught? Why shrinks the soul
 Back on herself, and startles at destruction?
 'Tis the divinity that stirs within us;
 'Tis Heaven itself that points out an hereafter,
 And intimates eternity to man.
 Eternity! Thou pleasing, dreadful thought! 6.

The comparison provides forceful evidence of Johnson's profound understanding of the nature of true dramatic poetry. *Cato* is a conscientious exercise in dramatic form, keeping the classical rules, and motivated by moral philosophy. It may, perhaps, still be read with pleasure, although it lacks all tragic feeling and imagination and therefore no performance of the play could enliven the text to move the spectator. Notwithstanding, Johnson justly assessed that the poetry meets his criteria of 'ease' and that within its narrow genre, the diction is appropriately 'elevated and harmonious'. *Cato* is thus not 'the mirror of life', 'human sentiments in human language', with which the spectator can identify. Apart from the apostrophe and personification, Addison uses words in their primary sense only, thus giving off no verbal resonances.

In Hamlet's soliloquy, the phrase 'slings and arrows' used metaphorically and with connotations of sharpness and pain is followed in line four by a mixed metaphor of which Johnson says:

Shakespeare breaks his metaphors often, and
 in this desultory speech there was less need
 of preserving them. 7.

The use of the metonymy 'flesh' for the body, with its connotations of softness and vulnerability, heightens

6. John Hampden comp. *Eighteenth Century Plays*, selected by John Hampden. (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd; New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1928) p.45.

7. *The Plays*, VIII, 208.

the effect of 'shocks' which, with a shift in emphasis, reinforces the idea of 'slings and arrows' and 'outrageous fortune'. The verbal repetition, the extending and threading out by the use of metaphor of the implications of the opening question, create the dense quality of brooding thought, and the fractured rhythms and broken sentences convey the distracted mind of Hamlet. 'The jaggedness of the verbal idiom'⁸ is dramatically functional, as Johnson appreciates. Dramatic poetry is one thing.

Johnson's long Note to the speech of Polonius (*Hamlet*, II, ii. 86.) is worth reproducing in full as a reinforcement of the points made above. Warburton, at this point in the text, gives a generalised account of Polonius' character, as a 'weak, pedant, minister of state'. Johnson insists, against this, on the complexity of the character:

This account of the character of *Polonius*, though it sufficiently reconciles the seeming inconsistency of so much wisdom with so much folly, does not perhaps correspond exactly to the ideas of our authour. The commentator makes the character of *Polonius*, a character only of manners, discriminated by properties superficial, accidental and acquired. The poet intended a nobler delineation of a mixed character of manners and of nature. *Polonius* is a man bred in courts, exercised in business, stored with observation, confident of his knowledge, proud of his eloquence, and declining into dotage. His mode of oratory is truly represented as designed to ridicule the practice of those times, of prefaces that made no introduction, and of method that embarrassed rather than explained. This part of his character is accidental, the rest is natural. Such a man is positive and confident, because he knows that his mind was once strong, and knows not that it is become weak. Such a man excels in general principles, but fails in the particular

8. Wimsatt, p. 19.

application. He is knowing in retrospect, and ignorant in foresight. While he depends upon his memory, and can draw from his repositories of knowledge, he utters weighty sentences, and gives useful counsel; but as the mind in its enfeebled state cannot be kept long busy and intent, the old man is subject to sudden dereliction of his faculties, he loses the order of his ideas, and entangles himself in his own thoughts, till he recovers the leading principle, and falls again into his former train. This idea of dotage encroaching upon wisdom, will solve all the phaenomena of the character of *Polonius*. 9.

On the surface this account may seem to support the view that Johnson's strength is in getting the general drift of a character and in isolating the 'type' to which it belongs. But that procedure is, in fact, exemplified by Warburton's summary, not by Johnson's, of which the most impressive feature is the delicate response to the shifting qualities of the poetry in which *Polonius*, in the full sense of the phrase, *expresses himself*. An examination of *Polonius*' speeches reveals that, at every point, they respond to Johnson's account, and, as such analysis proceeds, it finds itself talking about subtly varying tones, feelings and movements; it is, in short, analysis of the *poetry*. A full investigation would be too lengthy, but it is, perhaps, sufficient to look at *Polonius*' long speech claiming that he has discovered the source of Hamlet's madness:

But what might you think
 When I had seen this hot love on the wing,
 (As I perceiv'd it, I must tell you that,
 Before my daughter told me:) what might you,
 Or my dear Majesty your Queen here, think
 If I had play'd the desk or table-book,
 Or giv'n my heart a working, mute and dumb,
 Or look'd upon this love with idle sight?
 What might you think? No, I went round to work,

And my young mistress thus I did bespeak;
 Lord Hamlet is a prince out of thy sphere,
 This must not be; and then, I precepts give her,
 That she should lock herself from his resort,
 Admit no messengers, receive no tokens:
 Which done, she took the fruits of my advice;
 And he repulsed, a short tale to make,
 Fell to a sadness, then into a fast,
 Thence to a watching, thence into a weakness,
 Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension,
 Into the madness wherein now he raves,
 And all we wail for. (*Hamlet*, II. ii. 120-140.)

The opening is 'positive and confident'; the product of Polonius' 'knowing-ness'. Then begins a 'sudden dereliction of faculties' as he wanders into an irrelevant compliment to the queen. There is an evident shift of tone and feeling between these two first movements. This is followed by a change into the far-fetched and repetitious descant on his own insight into the situation; he is 'proud of his eloquence' and 'knowing in retrospect'. He then 'falls again into his former train' by repeating 'what might you think?' Having pulled himself together he manages a moment of concise weightiness:

Lord Hamlet is a Prince out of thy sphere,
 This must not be.

But he drifts off again into inconsequentiality and indulges himself with his ridiculous 'mode of oratory'. It is out of detail of this kind that Johnson's account grows, and 'detail' here means *poetic* detail. In what other way *could* the growth occur?

Johnson's masterly explanation of the character of Polonius arises from his grasp of Polonius's use of language. It is 'natural' for a clever and experienced public man, declining into dotage, to speak in disjointed sentences. Despite the partial incoherence of his thoughts, the verse is simple and clear, with none of the defects which mar 'easy poetry'.

Johnson's criteria can be successfully applied to a wide range of Shakespeare's later verse. From *Twelfth Night* are the following lines:

Orsino:

If musick be the food of love, play on;
Give me excess of it; that, surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.
That strain again; - it had a dying fall:
O, it came o'er my ear, like the sweet south,
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour. (I. i. l.)

Warburton objects to the 'impropriety of expression' of 'the appetite may sicken' and emended it. Johnson comments:

It is true, we do not talk of the *death of appetite*, because we do not ordinarily speak in the figurative language of poetry; but that appetite sickens by a surfeit is true, and therefore proper. 10.

Johnson's distinction between ordinary language and the language of poetry is in itself enough to cast doubt on Wellek's charge that for Johnson, 'art' is 'life'. The metaphor of 'music' as 'food' in line one is extended by allusion to 'the appetite' sickening, which Johnson finds appropriate in this context. The 'south' wind elliptically introduced in the simile, is personified in the following line, and its action, 'stealing and giving odours' is an example of Eliot's 'words perpetually juxtaposed' in 'new and sudden combinations'. These lines have the 'naked elegance and simple purity' which Johnson says is 'the true definition of easy poetry'.¹¹

The following lines from *Cymbeline* are different again.

10. *The Plays*, II, 353.

11. *Selected Poetry*, p. 268.

Pisanio:

Well then, here's the point:
 You must forget to be a woman; change
 Command into obedience; fear and niceness
 The handmaids of all women, or, more truly
 Woman its pretty self, to waggish courage;
 Ready in gybes, quick answer'd, saucy, and
 As quarrellous as the weazel. Nay, you must
 Forget that rarest treasure of your cheek;
 Exposing it (but, oh, the harder heart!
 Alack, no remedy) to the greedy touch
 Of common-kissing Titan; and forget
 Your laboursome and dainty trims, wherein
 You made great Juno angry! (III. iv. 158.)

Warburton emends 'heart' to 'hap'. Johnson comments:

I think it very natural to reflect in
 this distress on the cruelty of Posthumus. 12.

Pisanio's speech is of mixed style. The sudden, spontaneous exclamation, 'but ah, the harder heart!' is surrounded by 'poetical' word usage, 'rarest treasure' and 'common-kissing Titan'. The colloquial use of 'waggish', 'saucy' and the simile of the 'weazel' contrast with the classical 'Titan' and 'Juno'.¹³ But all is clear and easy with no 'harsh' or 'daring figures' nor any 'unusual acceptations of words'.¹⁴ One wonders why Wellek said that Johnson 'holds firmly to neoclassical views about decorum in language'.¹⁵

'Simplicity' as a criterion of 'easy poetry' embraces those qualities which Johnson includes in his use of 'nature' in the Notes. A fine example is in *Richard III*;

King Edward:

Have I a tongue to doom my brother's death?

12. *The Plays*, VII, 330.

13. For Johnson's acceptance of other colloquialisms see 'Antony and Cleopatra', I. ii. 36., Note 6, and V. ii. 50., Note 1.

14. *Selected Poetry*, p. 265.

15. Wellek, p. 90.

And shall that tongue give pardon to a slave?
 My brother killed no man; his fault was thought;
 And yet his Punishment was bitter death.
 Who sued to me for him? who, in my wrath,
 Kneel'd at my feet, and bid me be advis'd?
 Who spoke of brotherhood? who spoke of love?
 Who told me, how the poor soul did forsake
 The mighty *Warwick*, and did fight for me?
 Who told me, in the field at *Tewksbury*,
 When *Oxford* had me down, he rescu'd me?
 And said, Dear brother, live, and be a King?
 Who told me, when we both lay in the field,
 Frozen almost to death, how he did lap me
 Ev'n in his garments, and did give himself
 All thin, and naked, to the numb cold night?
 All this from my remembrance brutish wrath
 Sinfully pluck'd, and not a man of you
 Had so much grace to put it in my mind.
 But when your carters, or your waiting vassals
 Have done a drunken slaughter, and defac'd
 The precious image of our dear Redeemer;
 You strait are on your knees for pardon, pardon, -
 And I, unjustly too, must grant it you;
 But for my brother not a man would speak,
 Nor I, ungracious, spake unto myself
 For him, poor soul. The proudest of you all
 Have been beholden to him in his life,
 Yet none of you would once plead for his life.
 - O God! I fear, thy justice will take hold
 On me, and you, and mine, and yours, for this.
 - Come, *Hastings*, help me to my closet. Ah!
 Poor *Clarence*! (II. i. 102.)

Johnson comments:

This lamentation is *very tender* and *pathetick*.
 The recollection of the good qualities of the dead
 is very natural, and no less naturally does
 the King endeavour to communicate the crime
 to others. 16.

The repeated rhetorical questions emphasize the
 authority that 'doth hedge a king',¹⁷ which cannot be
 questioned, and the personal man suffering for his brother's
 death. They also particularize Clarence's brotherly

16. *The Plays*, V, 269.

17. *Hamlet*, IV. v. 124.

behaviour to the King. The response of the surrounding nobles when one of their own household, not even a brother, has committed a 'drunken slaughter' contrasts with their behaviour to Clarence whose 'fault' was only 'thought'. The king's 'unjust' pardon of real murder through loyalty to his followers lays them all open to the 'just' judgment of God. The unelaborated language strikes the listener by its directness, and the sentiments follow one from another with an inevitability that one cannot imagine the speech being otherwise. This is 'simple' and 'natural' and we recall Johnson's statement that:

The discriminating character of ease consists principally in the diction, for all true poetry requires that the sentiments be natural. 18.

The many passages of 'easy poetry' are not confined to Shakespeare's 'mature' plays, as this quotation from the early *Richard III* shows.¹⁹

The depth and comprehensiveness of Johnson's principle of 'simplicity' can be seen in a speech in *Cymbeline*. Posthumus describes how the tide of battle turned from defeat to victory for the Britons:

Close by the battle; ditch'd and walled with turf,
Which gave advantage to an ancient soldier
An honest one, I warrant, who deserved
So long a breeding as his white beard came to,
In doing this for's country. 'Thwart the lane,
He with two striplings, lads, bore like to run
The country base, than to commit such slaughter;
With faces fit for masks, or rather fairer
Than those for preservation cas'd, or shame,
Made good the passage; cried to those that fled,
'Our Britain's harts die flying, not our men,
To darkness fleet souls that fly backwards! Stand,
Or we are Romans and will give you that

18. *Selected Poetry*, p. 265.

19. Other tracts of 'easy poetry' are '3 Henry VI', III. ii. 165., Note 4, 'King John', IV. ii. 231., Note 4.

Like beasts which you shun beastly and may save
 But to look back in frown. Stand, stand! These three,
 Three thousand confident, (in act as many;
 For three performs are the file, when all
 The rest do nothing) with this word, stand, stand
 Accommodated by the place, more charming
 With their own nobleness which could have turned
 A distaff to a lance, gilded pale looks;
 Part shame, part spirit renewed; that some turned coward
 But by example, oh, a sin in war
 Damned in the first beginners, 'gan to look
 The way that they did, and to grin like lions
 Upon the pikes o'th'hunters. Then began
 A stop i'th'chaser, a retire; anon,
 A rout, confusion thick. Forthwith they fly
 Chickens, the way which they stooped eagles; slaves
 The strides they victors made: and now our cowards,
 Like fragments in hard voyages, became
 The life o'th'need; having found the back door open
 Of the unguarded hearts, heavens, how they wound
 Some slain before, some dying, some their friends
 O'erborne i'th' former wave; ten, chas'd by one,
 Are now each one the slaughter man of twenty;
 Those that would die ere resist, are grown
 The moral bugs o'th'field (V. iii. 41.)

Warburton hyphenates 'confusion thick' to make, as he puts it,
 a 'very beautiful compound epithet'. Johnson comments:

I do not see what great addition is made
 to 'fine diction' by this compound. Is it
 not as *natural* to enforce the principal
 event in a story by repetition, as to
 enlarge the principal figure in a picture? 20.

This speech, which Johnson evidently finds admirable
 as it stands, is in the late Shakespearean - condensed,
 elliptical and complex. The first lines are descriptive
 narrative. Line six introduces a simile leading in the next
 line to a contrast followed by a comparison. The simile
 'like beasts' linked to 'beastly' is an example of a slight
 shift in meaning of a word being utilized dramatically. The
 actor's voice and body would convey the different nuances.
 A few lines further on, there is a hyperbolic description of

20. *The Plays*, VII, 373.

the 'nobleness' of the 'three performers' crystallized in the sharp imagery of 'distaff' and 'lance'. Another simile, 'like lions', leads on to the crucial point, 'a rout, confusion thick'. The reversal is announced in a hunting metaphor, 'they fly / Chickens, the way which they stooped eagles', reinforced by a contrast, 'slaves' and 'victors'. The ironical 'our cowards' are first described in a simile which is extended in a metaphor, 'became / The life o'th'need'. This is a common construction in Shakespeare's later poetry and one of the chief sources of its richness and dramatic vividness. To enforce the immediacy and impact of the transformed 'cowards', the verse uses the present tense in the last six lines. This is 'poetry as creating what it presents'.²¹ Or, to use Johnson's word, it is 'natural', and, therefore, meets the criteria of 'ease'. There are no embellishments in this long speech, nor 'luxuriance of imagery'.²² What is there, carries on the action and illuminates the event purposefully for dramatic effect. The versification is smooth, and the syntax shows no 'violence' done to the language. There is no departure from 'simplicity and ease'.²³ It is hard to understand why Professor Wellek condemns Johnson for his incomprehension of the centrally metaphorical character of poetry.

21. Leavis, p. 130.

22. *Selected Poetry*, p. 266.

23. *idem*, p. 267.

CHAPTER VI

We will now consider cases where Johnson praises Shakespeare's poetry. He praises unsystematically because the Notes, which are themselves occasional, are primarily concerned with other things, but it can be seen that the passages which he singles out are in the characteristic Shakespearean manner. Johnson's praise of 'to sweat in the eye of Phoebus' in the following quotation is very revealing of his poetic values. Such examples as these have largely been ignored by Johnson's commentators. King Henry broods on the difficulties of kingship and the happiness of peasants:

Not all these, laid in bed majestical,
Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave;
Who, with a body fill'd, and vacant mind,
Gets him to rest, cramm'd with distressful bread,
Never sees horrid night, the child of hell,
But, like a lacquey, from the rise to set,
Sweats in the eye of *Phoebus*, and all night
Sleeps in *Elysium*. (*Henry V*, IV. i. 263.)

Johnson comments:

These lines are exquisitely pleasing.
To sweat in the eye of Phoebus, and
to sleep in Elysium, are expressions
very poetical. 1.

In line two, there is a compressed juxtaposition of antithesis followed in line three by the epithet 'distressful' used in a transferred sense with 'bread'. There follows a personification of 'night' in line four, a simile in line five, and two metaphors in lines six and seven. Shakespeare freely mixes different stylistic levels: 'cramm'd' and 'sweats' are colloquial, while 'Phoebus', 'child of hell' and 'Elysium' are poetical. The metaphor 'eye of Phoebus' which Johnson particularly notes, is characteristic of many in which Shakespeare includes a hint of secondary meaning

1. *The Plays*, IV, 443.

without developing the idea fully. The 'eye of Phoebus' is a frequent metaphor for the sun, but Shakespeare by the form of his poetry, is able to include the suggestion of the eye of the slave's overseer. Johnson evidently considers that in these lines there are no 'harsh or... daring figures, no transpositions', no 'unusual acceptations of words' nor 'any licence which would be avoided by a writer of prose'.²

A Note to *Macbeth* I. vi. 1. similarly shows Johnson's appreciation of the Shakespearean poetic use of words. Duncan admires the day-time beauty of Macbeth's castle:

This Castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses. (I. vi. 1)

Warburton in a long Note emends 'gentle senses' to 'general sense'. Johnson comments:

All this coil is to little purpose.
Senses are nothing more than *each man's sense*, as *noses* would have been each man's nose. *Gentle senses* is very elegant, as it means *placid, calm, composed*, and intimates the peaceable delight of a fine day. 3.

Johnson is very finely touching in the appropriateness of the connotations attached to the phrase 'gentle senses'. The phrase, it will be seen, is a good example of what Eliot describes as 'that perpetual slight alteration of language, words perpetually juxtaposed in new and sudden combinations', which he rightly regards as the hallmark of Shakespearean poetry.

In a quotation from *Twelfth Night* II. ii. 18., Johnson finds the use of an extended meaning suitable to

2. *Selected Poetry*, p. 265.

3. *The Plays*, VI, 396.

poetry. Viola describes Olivia's reaction to her:

She made good view of me; indeed, so much,
That, sure, methought her eyes had lost her tongue;
For she did speak in starts distinctedly.

(II. ii. 18.)

Warburton emends 'lost' to 'crost'. Johnson comments:

That the fascination of the eyes was called *crossing* ought to have been proved. But however that be, the present reading has not only sense but beauty. We say a man *loses* his company when they go one way and he goes another. So *Olivia's* tongue *lost* her eyes; her tongue was talking of the Duke and her eyes gazing on his messenger. 4.

Again he lucidly explains the expression and considers that its usage in this context comprehends an aesthetic quality which enhances the poetry. Johnson makes a judgement about the use of 'lost' as effective poetry. The device - the extension of meaning in that way - again is a staple feature of Shakespeare's verse.⁵

Lines from *King John* II. i. 300. can be used to illustrate Shakespeare's 'easy poetry'. The French herald addresses the people of Angiers:

Ye men of *Angiers*, open wide your gates,
And let young *Arthur* Duke of *Bretagne* in;
Who by the hand of *France* this day hath made
Much work for tears in many an *English* mother,
Whose sons lye scatter'd on the bleeding ground:
And many a widow's husband groveling lies,
Coldly embracing the discolour'd earth;
While victory with little loss doth play
Upon the dancing banner, of the French,
Who are at hand triumphantly display'd,
To enter conquerors, and to proclaim
Arthur of *Bretagne*, *England's* King, and yours.

(II. i. 300.)

4. *The Plays*, II, 378.

5. Further examples of Johnson's praise of the poetry are 'Richard II', II. iv. 8, Note , 'Richard III, I. i. 12, Note 2.

Johnson comments:

This speech is very poetical and smooth,
and, except the conceit of the widow's
husband embracing the earth, is just
and beautiful. 6.

Here is the bold statement so characteristic of Elizabethan language at its highest point of development yet the rhetoric and the rhythm do not interrupt the flow of the syntax. The personification of victory is appropriate in this context, and the movement of the whole speech is easy. The one flaw, the conceit of the 'widow's husband', is incidental to the speech.

There are several examples where Johnson uses 'harsh' to point to precise defects in word usage such as this one. A speech from *Henry V* III. iii. 30. will show the proportion of the verse to which Johnson's stricture frequently applies. It is again necessary to give the speech in full - Henry's ultimatum to the people of Harfleur:

How yet resolves the Governor of the town?
This is the latest parle we will admit;
Therefore to our best mercy give yourselves,
Or, like to men proud of destruction,
Defy us to our worst. As I'm a soldier,
A name, that, in my thoughts, becomes me best,
If I begin the batt'ry once again,
I will not leave the half-atchieved *Harfleur*
'Till in her ashes she lie buried.
The gates of mercy shall be all shut up;
And the flesh'd soldier, rough and hard of heart,
In liberty of bloody hand shall range
With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass
Your fresh fair virgins, and your flow'ring infants.
What is it then to me, if impious war,
Array'd in flames like to the Prince of fiends,
Do with his smircht complexion all fell feats,
Enlinkt to waste and desolation?
What is't to me, when you yourselves are cause,

If your pure maidens fall into the hand
 Of hot and forcing violation?
 What rein can hold licentious wickedness,
 When down the hill he holds his fierce career?
 We may, as bootless, spend our vain command
 Upon th' enraged soldiers in their spoil
 As send our precepts to th' *Leviathan*
 To come a shoar. Therefore, you men of *Harfleur*,
 Take pity of your town and of your people,
 While yet my soldiers are in my command;
 While yet the cool and temp'rate wind of grace
 O'er-blows the filthy and contagious clouds
 Of heady murder, spoil and villainy.

Johnson comments only on the metaphor in the final three lines:

This is a *very harsh* metaphor. To *overblow*
 is to *drive away*, *or* to *keep off*. 7.

We are led 'through tracts of *easy* and *familiar*' language until the penultimate line where the one word 'o'erblows' makes the metaphor difficult to understand; Shakespeare has related it but loosely to the preceding line, 'While yet my soldiers are in my command'. It would be absurd to attempt exact calculation in these matters, but the proportion, there, of acceptable language and language adversely commented on is roughly representative.

The exaggeration by the critics of Johnson's condemnation of Shakespeare's poetry because of his frequent use of 'harsh' in the Notes, has become, as this example shows, out of all proportion to the truth. The particularity of his use of the term makes it clear that the defects were, in his opinion, occasional only and not ingrained into the texture of the verse.⁸

7. *The Plays*, IV, 413.

8. Some of the many examples of occasional defect are '1 Henry IV', V. iv. 107, Note 4, 'Othello', V. ii. 21, Note 5, 'Twelfth Night' IV. i. 58, Note 7, 'Richard II', III. iii. 156, Note 4.

One further example may reinforce the point. In *Richard III* the Queen, lamenting the fate of the two princes, explains:

Stay; yet look back, with me, unto the *Tower*.
 Pity, you ancient stones, those tender babes,
 Whom envy hath immur'd within your walls!
 Rough cradle for such little pretty ones!
 Rude ragged nurse! old sullen play fellow,
 For tender Princes; use my babies well!
 (IV. i. 102.)

Johnson comments:

To call the *Tower nurse* and *playfellow* is
very harsh: perhaps part of this speech is
 addressed to the *Tower*, and part to the
 Lieutenant. 9.

The direct address, the personification of 'envy', and the metaphor of 'rough cradle' are all acceptable to Johnson. It is only the joined connotations of 'tower', 'nurse' and 'playfellow' which are too much in opposition for him. It is, perhaps, a too studied use of words for the situation; 'where any artifice appears in the construction of the verse, that verse is no longer easy'.¹⁰ And a modern critic may perhaps feel, with Johnson, that the effect is a little too obvious, to the point of seeming contrived.

Finally two quotations from '*Othello*' summarize the main point of this chapter: Shakespeare's 'mature' poetry matches Johnson's criteria of 'easy poetry' and his understanding of Shakespeare's drama is based on a specific response to the particular words of which it is comprised.

The first is *Othello*'s prophetic exclamation:

Excellent Wretch! - Perdition catch my soul,
 But I do love thee; and when I love thee not,
 Chaos is come again! (III. iii. 91.)

9. *The Plays*, V, 316.

10. *Selected Poetry*, p. 266.

Theobald emends 'wretch' to 'wench'. Johnson comments:

The meaning of the word *wretch*, is not generally understood. It is now, in some parts of *England*, a term of the softest and fondest tenderness. It expresses the utmost degree of amiableness, joined with an idea, which perhaps all tenderness includes, of feebleness, softness, and want of protection. *Othello*, considering *Desdemona* as excelling in beauty and virtue, soft and timorous by her sex, and by her situation absolutely in his power, calls her *Excellent Wretch*. It may be expressed, *Dear, harmless, helpless Excellence*.

We may add to that, Johnson's paraphrase of the final line and a half:

When my love is for a moment suspended by suspicion, I have nothing in my mind but discord, tumult, perturbation, and confusion. 11.

It is hard to imagine a modern critic more ably delineating the shades of meaning of 'wretch' in this context. Johnson finds the colloquially unfamiliar word wholly appropriate in terms of the character of *Desdemona* and her relationship with *Othello*. The implications which Johnson threads out, chime with the tone of the exchange between the two, of which these lines are the conclusion. His explication of the connotations of 'chaos' together with his paraphrase of the whole sentence reveals his sensitive and subtle grasp of the emotional significance of each word, and the words conjoined. This is Johnson responding fully to Shakespeare's poetry through his understanding of individual words.

It is difficult to reconcile the perception and penetration shown in this Note with Wimsatt's suggestion of Johnson's divided and limited appreciation:

11. *The Plays*, VIII, 391.

Just how he got to the heart of Shakespeare
 ... except through the aesthetic surface,
 the particularities of actions and words,
 may be difficult to understand.

Johnson's appreciation of 'wretch' is also an example of his acceptance of the use of colloquialisms, words which in terms of strict 'decorum' are not 'poetical'. Eliot's excuse of Johnson's inability to appreciate Elizabethan language, 'we must remember in what a narrow discipline he was trained', seems, all in all, to be distinctly questionable.

The second quotation is from Othello's account of his wooing of Desdemona (I. iii. 128.):

Her father lov'd me, oft invited me;
 Still question'd me the story of my life;
 From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes,
 That I have past.
 I ran it through, e'en from my boyish days,
 To th' very moment that he bade me tell it:
 Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances,
 Of moving accidents by flood and field;
 Of hair-breadth 'scapes in th' imminent deadly breach;
 Of being taken by the insolent foe,
 And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence,
 And portance in my travel's history:
 Wherein of antres vast, and desarts idle,
 Rough quarries, rocks, and hills, whose heads touch
 heav'n,
 It was my hint to speak; such was the process;

Pope emends 'idle' to 'wilde' and remarks ironically on the whole speech. Johnson comments:

Whoever ridicules this account of the progress of love, shews his ignorance, not only of history, but of nature and manners. It is no wonder that, in any age, or in any nation, a lady, recluse, timorous, and delicate, should desire to hear of events and scenes which she could never see, and should admire the man who had endured dangers, and performed actions, which, however great, were yet magnified by her timidity.

Of Pope's particular emendation, Johnson remarks:

Every mind is liable to absence and inadvertency, else *Pope* could never have rejected a word so poetically beautiful. 12.

Johnson is sensible of the particular circumstances of character and situation which arouse the general passion of love in Desdemona. The ideas are simply expressed and the verse flows freely: 'it is the prerogative of easy poetry to be understood as long as the language lasts'.¹³ His preference for 'idle' rather than 'wilde' points to his scrupulous attention to even a single word, and to his appreciation of the wider Shakespearean usage. Although on this occasion he does not make explicit the connotations of 'idle' it is obvious that he responded to the delicate shades of feelings of emptiness, space and timelessness contained within the word in its poetic context compared with the restricted meaning of 'wilde'.¹⁴ Johnson's praise of word, sentiment and style is praise of the dramatic texture of the poetry.

12. *The Plays*, VIII, 342.

13. *Selected Poetry*, p. 267.

14. Some of the many examples of Johnson's attention to a single word are 'Henry V', IV. i. 300, Note 9, 'Othello' I. ii. 26, Note 3, 'Othello', I. ii. 2, Note 8, 'Timon of Athens', III. ii. 82, Note 6.

CHAPTER VII

In the second chapter we discussed cases where Johnson seems wrong in his adverse comments on Shakespearean language: there remains the question how often Johnson is, in fact, right when he uses 'harsh' meaning 'involved', 'clumsy', 'not vivid', 'not dramatic', to point to a poetic defect in Shakespeare's verse. Poetic drama is drama of the highest order, and it is inevitable that in a body of writing as large as Shakespeare's there will be poetic defects as well as poetic excellence. In the 'Preface', Johnson writes:

The poetical beauties or defects I have not been very diligent to observe. Some plays have more, and some fewer judicial observations, not in proportion to their difference of merit, but because I gave this part of my design to chance and caprice.... To the end of most plays, I have added short strictures, containing a general censure of faults, or praise of excellence.

We may consider a Note to *Antony and Cleopatra* as our first particular example, since it is representative of one common type of adverse comment. Lepidus, defending Antony from criticism says:

I must not think there are
Evils enow to darken all his goodness;
His faults in him seem as the spots of heav'n,
More fiery by night's blackness. (I. iv. 12.)

Johnson comments:

If by spots are meant stars, as night has no other fiery spots, the comparison is forced and harsh, stars having been always supposed to beautify the night; nor do I comprehend what there is in the counter-part of this simile, which answers to *night's blackness*. 1.

1. *The Plays*, VII, 124.

In line one, Antony's goodness is implied to be 'light' then in line two his faults are equated with the stars so that 'blackness' in line three means Antony's goodness.

Although Johnson makes no reference to line one it must be taken into account since it is joined to the following lines by a semi-colon in his edition and by a colon in modern editions. Because two statements are not separated by a full stop, the actor's voice would suggest a connection between them.

Johnson's stricture is confined to lines two and three. There is a contradiction between the connotations of beauty commonly associated with 'stars' and the idea of 'faults' which replaces them in this context. It is the omission of an equivalent to 'night's blackness' in the counterpart which deprives the simile of dramatic vividness and causes the confusion with line one. In using 'stars' to represent 'faults', Shakespeare has reversed a popular, traditional image. This idea is contained within another apparent reversal of 'light' to 'blackness' in Antony's goodness.

The New Arden editor defends the simile in this way:

His faults are made more conspicuous
by his goodness, as the stars by
night's blackness. The simile aims only
at force of contrast, disregarding
correspondence of quality in the things
compared, *faults* and *stars*, *goodness*
and *blackness*. 2.

This seems to be an attempt to justify Shakespeare at all costs. It is a specious argument to explain away the

2. William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* ed. M.R. Ridley, based on the edition of R.H. Case (London: Methuen, 1954) The Arden Shakespeare. p. 32.

clash of ideas by saying that the simile is utilizing only a very restricted range of the connotations contained within it. Nor does one understand how the editor can state so dogmatically what Shakespeare intended. The implication of this explanation is that Shakespeare must always be right and Johnson must be wrong.

It is possible to justify the simile in an ingenious way. Johnson's *Dictionary* gives for 'spot': sense 2 (A taint; a disgrace; a reproach) and sense 4 (A small extent of place). If the phrase 'spots of heav'n' carries these paradoxical implications also, then the translated sense of the smallness of the 'taints' in comparison with the 'heav'n' is brought in.

Or the idea behind the simile could be that when darkness comes, the sky is not pure black but 'spotted' with stars, as Antony's goodness is spotted with faults.

The first seems an over-elaborate explanation, and the second lacks precision and clarity of thought. Both still contradict the implication of line one. It would be, surely, rather unjust to regard Johnson's stricture merely as the product of a biased neo-classical taste.

In a second instance, Johnson considers that the link between the ideas has been omitted with the result that the sense is disjointed. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Caesar, hearing of Antony's death, exclaims:

The round world should have shook
Lions into civil streets, and citizens
Into their dens. (V. i. 15.)

Johnson comments:

I think here is a line lost, after
which it is vain to go in quest. The
sense seems to have been this:
'The round world should have shook,'
and this great alteration of the system
of things should send 'lions into streets,

and citizens into dens'. There is sense still, but it is harsh and violent. 3.

'The round world' suggests completeness, unity, harmony in nature. The idea that such a 'whole' or 'natural' state should shake 'lions into streets' denies the connotations of 'the round world'. Johnson considers that by an ellipsis the predicate of the sentence does violence to the subject. Again I do not think that Johnson's criticism can simply be rejected: an unprejudiced reader even today might find the lines somewhat strained.

A final example may be taken from *King John*, when the dying Melun exhorts the English rebels:

Fly noble *English*, you are bought and sold;
Unthread the rude eye of Rebellion,
And welcome home again discarded faith. (V. iv. 11.)

Johnson comments:

The metaphor is certainly harsh, but I do not think the passage corrupted. 4.

The personification of 'rebellion' justifies 'eye', which then becomes the 'eye' of a needle and so leads back to the verb 'unthread'. Johnson seems to suggest that the way in which these three 'poetic' words are linked leads to a turgid and distasteful metaphor. Its effect could be to distract the auditor from the 'progress of the fable' by his feeling aesthetically offended by the image provoked of a 'human' eye being unthreaded.

Eliot says 'the greatest drama is poetic drama, and dramatic defects can be compensated by poetic excellence.... We can cite Shakespeare'. 5.

3. *The Plays*, VII, 232.

4. *The Plays*, III, 495.

5. T.S. Eliot, 'A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry' *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932) p. 50.

EPILOGUE

This, then, is the praise of Dr. Johnson, that through his fine and subtle response to the language, he got to the heart of Shakespeare's dramatic poetry. Sheakespeare's plays, which exhibit 'the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination' exemplified his highest moral and literary values.

The case against Johnson - the claim that he was baffled by Shakespearean poetry - seems to have rested on the power of a few influential general statements backed up by inert reliance on the same few stock examples from the Notes. I hope that the above will have at least made it clear that the case needs to be reconsidered.

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