ABSTRACT

A STUDY OF COLERIDGE'S CRITICISM OF SHAKESPEARE'S
PLAYS AND DRAMATIC CHARACTERS

Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare has not so far been studied by scholars and critics with thoroughness and from a comprehensive viewpoint. The chief reason behind this seems to be the prejudice that Coleridge has psychologised Shakespearian characters and has torn them out of their dramatic contexts treating them virtually as historical beings. The innumerable passing references to Coleridge's Shakespearian criticism in surveys and historical accounts give the impression that Coleridge was the progenitor of the now discredited psychological approach to Shakespearian characters.

The present work is founded on the conviction that Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare's plays and characters has been grossly misunderstood. Inspite of his interest in psychological analysis, Coleridge's approach to Shakespeare cannot be described as essentially psychological since he throughout seems to be engaged in providing an alternative to the Aristotelian theory of mimesis or verisimilitude. As a critic of Shakespeare he considers Shakespeare as a poet of vision who presents his profound understanding of life through his plays.

The present thesis attempts to show that Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare in the ultimate analysis, was not psychological but derived from a poetic that was unitive, organic and philosophical. A part of his total intuitive and metaphysical infrastructure it was based on a radically new theoretical framework. Coleridge developed this theoretical framework after discrediting the traditional Aristotelian method of Shakespearian criticism. It was a part
of his firm conviction that Shakespeare was an "expressionistic" poet who mediates his own vision of life through his plays and characters.

Coleridge gave a new direction to English Shakespearian criticism. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, critics approached Shakespeare in the light of the then prevalent philosophical views. The line of philosophers from Descartes to Hobbes and Locke propounded an empirical, rationalistic philosophy. Descartes insisted on the duality of mind and matter. He considered the mind as indubitable. Since truth can be known only by a process of analytical reason, he denied all types of knowledge other than those rationally and analytically derived. Hobbes, too, was a firm believer in the mechanistic nature of the universe. It was this belief that made him consider geometry as the only science which can provide reliable knowledge. Locke, like Descartes and Hobbes, limited the source of knowledge. According to him our knowledge is based only on our sense experience. Mind is merely a passive receiver of ideas from the external world of sense experience. This empirical and rational philosophy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries made poetry and imagination subservient to scientific laws and reason. In their concern with truth in its experimental aspect, they devalued all kinds of knowledge other than that provided by means of sense experience. Poetry, this tradition felt, was the antithesis of mechanics and mathematics and should be approached with maximum of distrust.

This critical and philosophical thinking provided the groundwork to the contemporary literary men and influenced the fashion of contemporary Shakespearian criticism. It was Shakespeare's remarkable mimetic art that caught the attention of the critics who wrote in perfect
consistency with the prevalent philosophical framework. Shakespeare's characters like Macbeth, Othello, Lear and Hamlet became living realities. When character criticism began in the late seventeenth century it was dominated by considerations of decorum and propriety. Rymer, Dennis and Gildon wrote about Shakespeare's characters purely from the point of view of dogmatic neo-classical theory. Aristotle's conception of character provided them the parameters within which Shakespearian characters were approached by these early critics. With the turn of the century critics like Nicholas Rowe and Lewis Theobald adopted a more liberal approach. Rules were still supreme, credibility and consistency were still the criteria to judge a Shakespearian character but they found new ways to defend and justify Shakespeare. Shakespeare lived under a kind of mere light of nature and therefore he was not acquainted with the regularity of written precepts. In Dr. Johnson we find the culmination of this neo-classical assessment of Shakespeare. Dr. Johnson's praise of Shakespeare's knowledge of human nature and his ability to create life-like characters, too, was derived from the humanistic and the neo-classical concept of decorum. Dr. Johnson's idea later on paved the way for psychological criticism which started in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. While critics like Richardson, Morgann, Mackenzie and others were interested in the psychology of the characters, they could not go beyond this psychological realism. The general theoretical pattern remained the same except the fact that the concept of decorum was replaced by that of psychological realism. For example, Richardson's analysis of the dominant passion of the characters in moral terms, shows his failure to provide any unitive vision through the characters and his going back to the neo-classical theory of poetic justice.
Thus, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries neo-classical rational framework provided theoretical background to the critics. It was Coleridge, who for the first time, provided a new theoretical framework based on his own theories of imagination and organicism so as to analyse Shakespeare's characters in a new and changed perspective. There was a shift of emphasis in his approach from the rational and psychological to the poetic and philosophical. This shift, it must be noted, is closely related with the shift in underlying philosophical assumptions i.e., from empiricism to Kantian idealism.

Coleridge, under the influence of the transcendental philosophy of Kant and Schlegel rejected the empirical idea of mind being a blank sheet of paper. Kant considered this sheet of paper, watermarked with a complicated pattern i.e., a pattern of external world. According to him, forms of mental activity are a priori since they exist independently of sense experience and prior to it. Knowledge is not derived simply from sense perception, it only depended upon them for its material. This view of Kant helped Coleridge in justifying his own belief in the creativity of human mind. For he too, considered the mind as an active, dynamic agent in perception and not as an inertly receptive, passive organ. Unlike the empirical philosophers of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and also against the associationist view of Hartley, Coleridge maintained that the object must be in conformity to the process of our knowledge. Mind is not a passive receiver of sense impressions but an active self creating system.

Kant's view of imagination as a mediating or idealising faculty also influenced Coleridge's idea of imagination which was also a result of his strong
dissatisfaction with the mechanistic views of the time. Coleridge considered imagination as an essential gift of the poet. All creative activity is the product of this faculty of imagination since it is this faculty that helps the poet to image the original faithfully, creatively and vividly. As a mediating faculty, it fuses subject with object, idea with the concrete, thought with feeling and perception with meditation. Coleridge's distinctions between fancy and imagination, between primary and secondary imagination were his significant points of departure from the eighteenth century thinkers. It was in accordance with this idea of imagination that Coleridge studied Shakespeare and thus replaced the Aristotelian framework of imitative and representational realism.

An outcome of Coleridge's views of imagination and fancy is his theory of organicism. Coleridge considered organic form as the product of imagination and mechanical form as the product of fancy. Organic unity, according to Coleridge implies inseparability of form from the content. This also implies that each work of art is unique. It is because of this individuality of a work of art that it must be judged only according to the laws that are intrinsic to it and are not imposed from outside. This again shows the interrelation and interdependence of all the parts and the whole in a work of art. This unity in multeity or individuality in variety helped Coleridge reject the eighteenth century approach to Shakespeare as a child of nature.

Coleridge analysed Shakespeare by exactly the same principles which he used to analyse poetry in general. Throughout his notes and lectures, there recur certain themes and ideas which serve as background to Coleridge's
Shakespearian criticism. Coleridge's insistence that Shakespeare's judgement is commensurate with his genius; his attempt to trace philosophical vision in some of Shakespeare's plays; his idea of poetic versus dramatic nature of Shakespeare's works which led him to arrange Shakespeare's plays in a "psychological" manner; his modification of neo-classical principles of drama as a copy of reality; his justification of the lack of unities in Shakespeare; his views on decorum and on tragi-comedy; his rejection of the pseudo-taste in the eighteenth century; and his views on Shakespeare's language, wit, puns and metre - all occur with unusual insistence and give us his idea of Shakespeare. It must be noted that in his discussion of these general topics, Coleridge is different from his predecessors. Unlike them, Coleridge does not allow these themes to remain isolated, and unintegrated from the practical criticism of the plays as they emanate from his own unitive approach to Shakespeare. Imagination is the key to this unitive approach as it helps him in isolating these individual themes yet integrating them in a larger pattern of the whole i.e., Shakespeare as a poet of vision, and this gives an inner organic unity to his criticism of Shakespeare.

Contrary to the general complaint of the critics that in Coleridge little attention has been paid to the form or structure of a play, a systematic study of Coleridge's comments reveals the fact that Coleridge was very much concerned with the form of a play. It must be noted, however, that by form Coleridge does not mean the mechanical conception of form based upon the discussion of Aristotelian categories of a beginning, a middle and an end. Coleridge's discussion of form has its origin in his theory
of organicism where each part contributes to the development of the whole. Thus each Shakespearian play contains his philosophic vision of life and this philosophic truth or thematic concern is revealed through every part of the play, through the dramatic unfolding of the plot and the relationship among different characters. Coleridge does not isolate the external action or the plot from the total dramatic structure of the play since by plot Coleridge means only the story or the fable. The story or fable in this sense is only a manifestation of the spirit that is working within. The outward movement or external action is expressive of that poetic and dramatic vision which a particular play contains. It is significant to note here that this philosophic vision of human experience which a Shakespearian play is believed to contain is not the same as the eighteenth century conception of the moral of the play isolated from the whole. As it has been pointed out earlier this philosophic or unitive vision is revealed through every scene of the play. Romeo and Juliet, thus, presents Shakespeare's philosophy of love and this theme of Platonic love is embedded in the subject matter of "family-feuds" and is revealed through "precipitancy" which is the character of the play. Similarly, the main theme in Hamlet is the superiority of action over thought and the character of Hamlet is only one ingredient of Shakespeare's total thematic concern. The discussion of this theme however, is not simply a matter of isolating the moral from the play as was the common practice in the eighteenth century. This theme is related to character and to the structure of the play. The basic theme in Othello, the undermining of the protagonist's consciousness by a villain of superior intelligence, is unravelled through the parallel and contrast in the two characters. In some of the plays i.e., in The Tempest and in Richard II, Coleridge's purpose is to show
that Shakespeare's judgement is commensurate with his genius. Thus, according to Coleridge, a Shakespearian play has some meaning and significance but it must be studied as an autonomous work of art and its significance lies in the total organic structure of the whole. While Coleridge pays attention to the unitive vision mediated by different plays, attempt is throughout made to relate characters and events to this poetic and philosophic core of the meaning.

The charge often levelled against Coleridge is that he is a psychological critic who was primarily interested in character analysis and sacrificed plot for the sake of lifelikeness of characters. A deeper study of the fragmentary notes of Coleridge makes it amply clear that despite his subtle psychological analyses of Shakespearian characters and despite his interest in their motives, he never fails to make a distinction between art and life. Coleridge cannot be regarded as a character critic as psychology is always made subservient to the philosophic vision that Coleridge attempts to find in a Shakespearian play. Throughout his critical analyses of Shakespeare's plays and characters, Coleridge is engaged in presenting an expressionistic poetics - Shakespeare as a poet-philosopher who mediates his vision of life through his plays i.e., through plot and characters. Thus all the characters in Shakespeare's plays are creations of Shakespeare's imagination and not persons in real life. They are the products not only of the dramatist's acute observations but also of his profound meditation. Hamlet's character, though analysed psychologically is used by Shakespeare for introducing a theme:

Shakespeare wished to impress upon us the truth, that action is the chief end of existence - that no faculties of intellect, however brilliant, can be considered valuable, or indeed otherwise than as misfortunes, if they withdraw us from, or render us repugnant to action, and lead us to think and think of doing, until the time has elapsed when we can do anything effectually.

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In his description of other characters too, Coleridge's analysis is not psychological. Coleridge goes beyond psychological aspects and comes to grapple with the philosophical and thematic issues involved. The description of the different states of minds of Macbeth and Banquo is, no doubt, psychologically convincing but his main concern is with the central theme of the play. Behind the "motive-hunting of motiveless malignity" of Iago, Coleridge tries to unravel the moral and philosophical implications of Shakespeare's design in the play. Psychological analysis of characters is always made subservient to the larger pattern involved in the play.

Coleridge does not consider Shakespearian characters outside the theatre as real men and women. These fictional characters have their existence within the design of the play and this design is always determined by the philosophical insight Shakespeare wished to mediate. Lear's anxiety, his distrust and jealousy, apart from other themes, show his inability to resign the royal power. The characters of the protagonists in Romeo and Juliet, Romeo's infatuation with Rosaline, and his transition to Juliet show Shakespeare's philosophical insight. It is because of this that Shakespeare's characters become universal while at the same time remaining individuals. Dogberry and Nurse are highly individual, there was no Dogberry or no Nurse in real life which Shakespeare imitated.

An important point that emerges out of it is that Coleridge does not over-schematize the plays as is done by many of the twentieth century critics since the focus in Coleridge's analysis is always on the total artistic or dramatic design of the play.

It is clear that Coleridge was not a character
critic or a motive-monger for his characters. He is the real initiator of the twentieth century concern with the themes of the plays. Much of the modern criticism of Shakespeare, in one way or the other, derives its penetrative power from the philosophical insights of Coleridge.