The present work aims at a study of S.T. Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare's plays and dramatic characters. There is no doubt that any one dealing with Coleridge's Shakespearian criticism for the first time, particularly in the context of the most obvious developments at the meeting-point of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, would get the impression that it was mainly psychological. Assuming the primacy of character over plot, believing in the life-likeness of Shakespeare's characters and analysing enthusiastically the inherent subtleties of motivation and behaviour in those characters, Coleridge would appear to have exemplified the psychological approach to the study of Shakespeare. It is, therefore, not surprising that in the great majority of passing references to Coleridge his Shakespearian criticism is described as mainly of psychological interest.

With a changed perspective, however, and with greater acquaintance with Coleridge's critical aims and methods it would be realized that Coleridge's engagement with Shakespeare was of a different nature. Catherine Belsey in her Critical Practice (London, 1980) speaks of the growth of an expressionistic poetics in the beginning of the nineteenth century along with what she calls the realistic ideal coming down from Aristotle. Rene Wellek, too, tells us of the romantic view of art as essentially symbolic and expressionistic as opposed to the mimetic neo-classicism. Taking these general considerations into account and keeping in mind the reflection of Coleridge's theoretical interests in his Shakespearian criticism, we will see that the psychological focus in spite of its sharpness gives a distorted picture of what Coleridge has actually achieved in his writings and lectures on Shakespeare. We discover that despite the subtlety of his psychological analyses, Coleridge was really engaged in evolving an expressionistic poetics - literature as mediation of an
intensely personal vision of life and experience. This is what Coleridge probably kept in mind when he spoke of Shakespeare as a philosophical poet or when he insisted that Shakespeare's judgement was commensurate with his genius. Psychology, we have discovered, was subservient in Coleridge's Shakespearian criticism to philosophy, analysis to visionary grasp and intuitive understanding of life.

The present thesis is based on the conviction that Coleridge was not a "character-chaser" in the sense in which the term is applied to Bradley by those who misunderstand him. Moreover, Coleridge seldom confuses art with life. He does indulge in the analysis of motives, perhaps a little excessively, but the aim always is to unravel the artistic design of a particular play. Even when the total design is not explicitly stated, Coleridge does succeed in bringing into light the experiential relevance of parts of a play.

After the preliminary matters discussed in the Introduction, I have gone on to highlight the main features of Coleridge's poetic theory. Unlike Badawi (Coleridge: critic of Shakespeare) I have laid stress on the epistemological background of Coleridge's view of the imagination and organismism (Chapter II). Chapter III gives a brief account of character criticism in the eighteenth century. This chapter, I earnestly believe, is very relevant to the present study since without it the exact nature of Coleridge's concern with character cannot be highlighted. Chapter IV discusses some general Shakespearian topics in Coleridge's criticism. This is followed by the two main chapters of the present thesis in which I have discussed Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare's plays (Chapter V) and dramatic characters (Chapter VI). In these chapters, the subject is studied in the light of Coleridge's theoretical framework described in Chapter II.
I have attempted to show that Coleridge's approach to the play and character is essentially unitive, organicist and philosophical. In the Conclusion, I have cast a brief glance at some of the aspects of twentieth century Shakespeare criticism which seem to be traceable to Coleridge.

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