CONCLUDING REMARKS

With Maurice Morgan we have brought to a close our detailed examination of the Shakespeare criticism of the period in question. This is perhaps as it should be since Morgan, as we have seen, is a fitting introduction to Shakespeare's nineteenth century critics headed by Lamb, Coleridge, and Hazlitt.

We have maintained and tried to demonstrate that the critics from Dryden to Morgan are bound to each other by a certain unity of approach even when its remained flexible enough to be developed in more than one direction by individual critics. We have also tried to show that the Shakespeare criticism of the period achieved considerable penetration and was endowed with a quiet strength which is rather deceptive, more so to one not willing to take an unprejudiced and a close enough look at it; further, that this criticism was peculiarly anticipatory in character in more than one direction and in more than the ordinary sense. So that a study of it is truly rewarding.

In her illuminating book - "The Business of Criticism" (1959) - Miss Helen Gardner makes some valuable observations on the function of criticism. We quote below a few extracts which we consider to be of relevance and interest here.

"Elucidation, or Illumination, is the critic's primary task as I conceive it." (F. 14)

"The beginning of the discipline of literary criticism lies in the recognition of the work of art's objective existence as the product of another mind, which exists not to be used but to be understood and enjoyed." (F. 15)

"All works of art, whatever else they may be, are historical objects, and to approach them as such is, I believe, a fundamental necessity if they are to realise their power fully over us." (P 17).

We believe that we have been able to show by our discussion that the neo-classical criticism of Shakespeare
achieved note-worthy approximation to the requirements and marks of good criticism indicated above. In its own quiet, yet distinctive and meaningful way it can be said to have attempted an "elucidation" of Shakespeare's plays, recognising their "objective existence as the product of another mind," and approaching them as "historical objects." In fact, it sought to understand and enjoy Shakespeare more 'objectively' than the England of the nineteenth century.

To dwell a while on the quality of the work we have studied: the neo-classical Shakespeare criticism leaves us with a very pleasant impression of an almost uninhibited appreciation, and of just and generous recognition of the profundity of Shakespeare's genius. It is certainly not a cabined, confined, and constricted mind that seeks to study Shakespeare, although it would not have been surprising if the mind in question had been dogma-ridden and severely walled-in. Indeed, the tolerance, the capaciousness, and what is even more to the point, the flexibility and depth of mind which the critics display would have been a bit of a puzzle, had it not been for the fact that it was Shakespeare that they brought themselves up against. For Shakespeare, one would like to imagine, must have imparted to them some of the astonishing catholicity and enthralling gusto which are among the qualities making for his deathless appeal.

We hope to have been able to show that the 18th century English mind sought admirably to rise to the occasion when responding to the call of Shakespeare's world. The critics we have discussed are indeed very far from being a bunch of dogmatists. The astonishing thing is that living in an atmosphere of reverence for rules and precepts they could and did warm so large-heartedly to the works of a man who was for above all time-honoured critical ukases.
Her we should like to make one point in particular. Regarding the widely held view that the critics of the classical school were insensitive to Shakespeare's language and poetry, it may be pointed out that their appreciation of Shakespeare, which is never to be mistaken, could only come through the vehicle of his language. Once it is recognised that they had a full appreciation of Shakespeare's greatness, the conclusion becomes inescapable that they had some appreciation of his language as well, since Shakespeare appears to his readers only through his language and poetry. This does not necessarily mean that they had an adequate understanding of Shakespeare's language. They did, find fault with certain aspects of his language, and this could be put down to the training and temper of the age. But the occasional appreciative references to his language by such critics as Dryden, Rowe, Gray, Pope, Warton, Kames and Morgan are significant pointers and should not be lost sight of. Our point is that the native English sensibility responded warmly to the magic of Shakespeare language. Indeed the present day interest in Shakespeare's language and imagery can well be traced back to the comments just mentioned and the pioneering work, however humble, of such critics as Whiter. Not that we give the these critics a clean bill; their limitations have repeatedly been drawn attention to.

The fact that stares us in the face is that in poetry the late 17th and the 18th Century sensibility does appear cabined and confined, whereas in criticism, and
more especially in Shakespeare criticism, it appears to function with a large measure of freedom, and with few of the restrictions the age imposed upon it. And that was perhaps because while in criticism the mind cannot help receiving the impact of what is being contemplated and studied, and even profiting by the complex richness of a great author, it is left entirely to itself in poetry, and therefore cannot but work upon itself.

That being so, it may not be entirely wrong to suggest that in criticism Shakespeare gave a new dimension to the 18th century mind and very nearly emancipated it. At the same time it should however be remembered that the English mind of the neo-classical age by itself had not a little contribution to make towards the richness and strength of the age's criticism of Shakespeare. The English mind never did barter away its individuality and its peculiar genius, whatever borrowings there may have been from the French.

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