CHAPTER V

POPE

The principal points of view we have hitherto met with in Shakespeare criticism find animated reaffirmation in Pope, the most considerable literary figure of his time. Shakespeare as a poet of nature, his superior genius consisting in his not following the classical critical dicta, his lack of formal education being no handicap since he was naturally learned, his dexterity in depicting all manner of human passions, and above all, the magic of his style or language in spite of its being 'verbose' and 'pompous' and in spite of the crude taste that he frequently displays — these indeed are the highlights of Pope's Shakespeare criticism; and these, incidentally, are the principal features of Shakespeare criticism of the period under study.

It will be clear from the following discussion that there is not much that is altogether new in Pope's findings of Shakespeare, although there is often something fresh about his making old discoveries. A thing or two in this connection need special emphasis. Pope, while following much of the beaten track, shows a particularly warm responsiveness to Shakespeare's language, and besides,
unlike most Augustan critics, he discovers individuals instead of types in Shakespeare's characters. Further, Pope does some anticipatory work by indicating a historical approach to Shakespeare and by suggesting that Shakespeare must have had much reading.

One approaching Pope's Shakespeare criticism likes to imagine that Pope bore in mind the words of caution which he chose to administer to a would-be critic, when he himself got down to the job of estimating the works of Shakespeare. Below are some of the words of caution from his Essay on Criticism:

"But you who seek to give and merit fame,
And justly bear a critic's noble name,
Be sure yourself and your own reach to know,
How far your genius, taste, and learning go;
Launch not beyond your depth, but be discreet,
And mark that point where sense and dullness meet."

With "genius, taste and learning" altogether different from those of Shakespeare, Pope came to consider Shakespeare, and while his 'taste and learning' were something of a handicap, his 'genius' responded most warmly to Shakespeare's. Incidentally, the same remark would apply to all Augustan critics. One who has read Pope's Shakespeare's criticism can claim that the author of the Essay brought a fairly competent mind to bear upon the master playwright, and wrote fairly good criticism, considering the critical as well as literary tastes and standards of his time.
Barring a few exceptions here and there, the neo-classical critics confine themselves to general observations and do not enter into details by way of launching upon a threadbare discussion of critical principles involved, or of individual plays. Wartons and Johnsons and Whatelys, from whom the succeeding ages have benefited not a little, are not many. They all attempted detailed criticism of either plays or characters or both. There is Morgan, too, with his memorable study of Shakespeare through Falstaff. Not that suggestive treatment of consequence is altogether impossible in a general critical survey. And Pope's preface is a general critical survey.

Pope begins his job with the happy remark that he is only too well aware that a preface he is not the right place for a full treatment of Shakespeare who is "the fairest and fullest subject for criticism" and who is "justly and universally elevated above all other dramatic writers." Pope's placing of Shakespeare calls to mind similar ungrudging estimates by his predecessors.

Very much like his predecessors Pope comes under the impact of Shakespeare's stupendous genius. He looks rather mystified at Shakespeare's endless creativity. And naturally he questions as to what exactly is at the back of it all, what can
adequately explain it. The answer that he finds is no doubt the answer which most of his predecessors had also found. No learning, no training could suffice to bring into being such products. What one finds in Shakespeare can only be found in nature, can only have originated from her. Shakespeare is nature's mirror. It is not just a question of his imitating her. It is rather a question of Nature projecting herself through the poet's writings. As Pope puts it:

"If ever any author deserved the name of an Original, it was Shakespeare. Homer himself drew not his art so immediately from the fountains of Nature....... The poetry of Shakespeare was inspiration indeed; he is not so much an imitator, as an instrument, of nature; and 'tis not so just to say that he speaks from her, as that she speaks through him."¹

Again, "His characters are so much nature herself, that 'tis a sort of injury to call them by so distant a name as copies of her."²

Pope speaks here of Shakespeare very much in the same vein as Ben Jonson, Dryden, Rowe and Addison, besides many others had done before him. The extraordinarily prolific nature of Shakespeare's genius and the unusual verisimilitude of his characters could only be attributed by the neo-classical critics to Shakespeare's natural endowments and to his having

2. Ibid, P. 43.
sprung direct from Nature, since such astonishing
dramatic effects could not be shown by the
playwrights possessing known academic training. 
This likening of Shakespeare to Nature puts one
in mind of a few lines of his Essay on Criticism
where the young Pope exhorts poets to follow Nature:

First follow Nature, and your judgment frame,
By her just standard, which is still the same
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
One clear, unchag'd, and universal light
Life, force, and beauty, must to all impart,
At once the source, the end, and test of art.

We have already discussed the 18th century
view of nature. We can only observe here that
while Pope, much like the fellow Augustans,
discovered nature's "life, force, and beauty" in
Shakespeare, he yet would not call him 'unerring'.
In fact, he points out some faults in Shakespeare
and here also he is in agreement with the temper of
his age.

Proceeding a little further Pope provides
us with a piece of perception such as was not
quite expected of him. As a rule, the Augustans
deal with generalities and love to speak of generic
instead of specific properties, of types rather than
individuals. Samsual Johnson says that a poet's
function is to create representatives, not individuals.
Against this background, it is indeed refreshing to
find Pope commending Shakespeare for creating
clearly marked individuals. "Every single character in Shakespeare is as much an Individual, as those in life itself: it is impossible to find any two alike."1

It may perhaps be suggested that Whately, whose criticism will be discussed in a subsequent chapter, shares Pope's perception in this regard and shows much the same attitude to Shakespeare's characters. Whately would also seem to subscribe to the thesis that in Shakespeare no two characters are quite alike and that very often apparent similarities clothe sharp differences of traits. His treatment of Macbeth and Richard III is a revealing example. And in a somewhat different manner, Kames can also be said to have some of Pope's approach. We say 'in a somewhat different manner' because Kames also talks of the particular as opposed to the general, but in relation to 'objects' and not exactly characters.

Now in addition to creating characters with clearly defined individualities, Shakespeare, says Pope, preserves them wonderfully well throughout the action of a play:

"To this life and variety of character, we must add the wonderful Preservation of It, which is such throughout his plays, that had all the speeches...

1. Ibid, P. 43.
been printed without the very names of the Persons, I believe one might have applied them with certainty to every speaker.\textsuperscript{1}

It will be recalled that this aspect of Shakespeare's dramatic art received attention and praise at the hands of Rowe and Addison whose attention in this regard, however, was chiefly confined to the supernatural characters.\textsuperscript{2} It is perhaps permissible to remark that by his interest in a consistent character-drawing Pope reveals one of the characteristic neo-classical preoccupations.

Immediately afterwards, Pope makes some comments which once again bring home to us the truth that the Augustan mind was not necessarily, and always, a prosaic one.

"The Power over our Passions was never possess'd in a more eminent degree, or display'd in so different instances."\textsuperscript{3}

Pope's emphasis on the word 'Passions' undoubtedly shows his somewhat 'Romantic' temper. In this connection it is well to recall Dennis on his conception of the nature of poetry.

"Passion is the characterial mark of poetry, and therefore it must be everywhere: for without passion there can be no poetry, no more than there can be painting."\textsuperscript{4}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid, P. 43.
\item Vide P. 136\textsuperscript{2} (The Chapter on Rowe), and P. 154\textsuperscript{45} (The Chapter On Addison).
\item Pope's preface to Shakespeare, in Shakespeare Criticism-1623-1840, ed. D.N. Smith, 1958, P. 43
\end{enumerate}
Dennis evidently insists on ecstasy and mental exaltation as the fundamental element of poetry. And Pope, writing on Shakespeare, would seem in substantial agreement with Dennis on the importance of 'passions', and besides he is struck with Shakespeare's powerful and varied treatment of them in his poetry. And after pointing out the delightfully effortless ease with which Shakespeare found the most natural expression for every emotion, whether obscure or refined, Pope speaks of its effect on the reader (or spectator), and here he cannot refrain from exhibiting something of that thrill and excitement which he must have felt while reading Shakespeare:

"But the heart swells, and the tears burst out, just at the proper places. We are surpris'd, the moment we weep; and yet upon reflection find the passion so just, that we should be surpris'd if we had not wept, and wept at that very moment."

This is, indeed, a 'Romantic' tribute to the moving power of Shakespeare's poetry — the power on which Longinus had laid the greatest stress, and which enlarged upon in his preface to his translation of Homer. Strictly speaking, the language Pope used in the passage quoted above is the language of a Romantic critic — of a coleridge or Hazlitt, not of a

---

1. Pope's preface to Shakespeare, in Shakespeare Criticism, 1623-1840, ed. D.N. Smith, 1958, p. 43
Pope, such utterances are of course few and far between. Yet the student of 18th century Shakespeare criticism meets with occasional evidences of a similarly fine emotional or imaginative response to situations in the least suspected places. And our impression is strengthened that the native capacity for imaginative appreciation of literature survived all the elaborate classical indoctrination of the period. One remembers that Johnson speaks of a similar emotional disturbance occasioned by his first reading of *Hamlet*, more particularly by the Ghost in the play.

This explicit recognition of the moving power of Shakespeare's creations is largely the result of the profound and pervasive influence that Longinus's 'On the Sublime' came to exert on the minds of the critics and writers of the time. Emotion and Imagination were held by Longinus to be of far greater importance than reason. And it may be repeated that few of the English critics of the time went by the dictates of dry reason completely disregarding the emotional and imaginative values of art.

Shakespeare is astonishingly familiar with every idiom of the heart. Pope recognises this when
"He is not more a master of the Great, than of the Ridiculous in human nature; of our noblest tendernesses, than of our vainest foibles; of our strongest emotions, than of our idlest sensations."  

Rowe, it may be recalled, had also drawn attention to the versatility of Shakespeare in delineating a great variety of human passions. And about the middle of the 19th century Thomas Carlyle speaks in a rather like vein of Shakespeare's amazing mastery over all manner of emotions:

"How could a man delineate a Hamlet, a Coriolanus, a Macbeth, so many suffering heroic hearts, if his own heart had never suffered? — And now, in contrast with all this, observe his mirthfulness, his genuine overflowing love of laughter."  

It may be noted in passing that Pope shows a much keener sensitivity to and hence a much better appreciation of Shakespeare's language and poetry than most of his contemporaries including Johnson. This appreciation of his is doubtless manifest in sundry observations, certainly not the least so in some of his remarks already quoted and discussed. We shall here draw particular attention to the following words:

"The Poetry of Shakespeare was Inspiration indeed."  

1. Ibid, P. 43  
It is well to remember in this connection that not many of Pope's contemporaries or immediate predecessors made much appreciative reference to Shakespeare's language. (One can possibly have some idea of the spell Shakespeare's language cast on Pope, from some of his letters). In his letter to Wycherley, dated May 20, 1709, Pope writes:

"............ I am as indifferent in the Matter as Falstaff was, and may say on Fame as he did on Honour, If it comes, it comes unlook'd for, and there's and End On't..........."1

In a letter to Caryll dated August 14, 1713, he writes touchingly:

"............ What aims and ambitions are crowded into this little instant of our Life, which (as Shakespeare finely words it) is rounded with a sleep? ............"2

Again, writing to Addison on Dec. 14, 1713, Pope uses an astonishingly identical language:

"............ What aims and ambitions are crowded into this little instant of our Life, which (as Shakespeare finely words it) is Rounded with a Sleep? ............"3

The point we wish to make is that there is not as much dearth of the appreciation of Shakespeare's language in the 18th century as is generally maintained.

1. The Correspondence of Pope, ed. Sherburn, Vol I, P. 60.
2. Ibid, P. 186.
True to his background and like the critics of his age Pope finds serious faults with certain aspects of Shakespeare's plays. In fact, at the very beginning of his preface he remarks that there are numerous instances of faults side by side with beauties in Shakespeare. Now he attributes the faults to the dramatist having had to please the populace, and to his having been a player; the necessity of catering to the taste of the common people who formed most of his audience, led to his drawing images from their lives, while his having been a player was responsible for his adopting, often unconsciously, the standard of the tribe of players rather than of the most enlightened class of people. Thus Pope says:

"It must be allowed that Stage-Poetry of all other, is more particularly levell'd to please the Populace, and its success more immediately depending upon the Common Suffrage. One cannot therefore wonder, if Shakespeare having at his first appearance no other aim in his writings than to procure a subsistence, directed his endeavours solely to hit the taste and humour that then prevailed. The audience was generally composed of the meaner sort of people; and therefore the Images of Life were to be drawn from those of their own rank; accordingly, we find, that not our Author's only but almost all the old comedies have their scene among Tradesman and Mechanics."¹

And: "............... Another Cause (and no less strong than the former) may be deduced from our Author's being a Player, and forming himself first upon the judgments of that body of men whereof he was a member." 1

What, it may be asked, are the consequent faults? In the tragedies (as maintained by Pope)—unnatural events and incidents, the most exaggerated thoughts, the most verbose and bombastic expressions, the most pompous rhymes and thundering versifications: in comedies—mean buffoonery, vile ribaldry, and unmannerly jests of fools and clowns.

As we have noted in the relevant chapters, both Dryden and Rowe found more or less similar faults, though not exactly on the grounds Pope mentions. Fundamentally, these complaints reveal practically the same attitude—the attitude of mind that is typically Augustan; it indicates a certain disability—the incapacity to understand some essential features of Elizabethan life and literature.

The complex fullness of life and the rich metaphorical texture of the poetry of the period remained, as a rule, beyond the comprehension of Augustan writers who had an entirely different temper and background. Perhaps Pope could be answered back by saying that, to have to please the 'populate' need

1. Ibid, F. 46.
not always be degrading; in point of fact, the Elizabethan writers took it as an advantage since it enabled them to widen and variegate the appeal of what they wrote without any detriment to its quality. Elizabethan drama certainly enjoyed a far wider patronage than its restoration or 18th century counterpart which, as we know, was restricted in its appeal to the upper classes only. The following passage remarkable for its insight into Shakespeare's language and the relation between the playwright and the audience during the Elizabethan times may perhaps be considered relevant here:

"The theatre seems to have been as necessary to the Elizabethan crowd as bull-fighting is to the Spanish crowd. Having no newspapers, political meetings, clubs or other places of entertainment, the public frequented the play-house for information, education and company. There, people laughed together and wept together. They went there in search of dreams, of morality, of politics, of sensation, and lessons in wit. They were attracted by scenes of violence and bloodshed as well by subtlety and clowning and magic. Witty dialogues, political discussions, Machiavellian confessions, cries of despair or of vengeance, admissions of powerlessness or professions of faith were listened to with passionate interest. The theatre found its natural sustenance in the political, economic and social conditions then prevailing. It was obsessed by religious or philosophical themes, conveyed through the poetry of symbols and allegories, raised to hitherto unsuspected heights, yet within the comprehension of all. Such plays drew upon the whole range of human experience at that time. They did not, like the Restoration Comedy of Manners or the bourgeois drama of the eighteenth century, mirror a limited society. They did not set out to be propaganda plays, defending ideas, assailing abuses or preaching sermons as some twentieth century plays-with-a-purpose have done. Elizabethan
drama was not a philosophy, a moral system, a social doctrine, but it took the place of them because it was, above all, dramatic art. Or rather, it acted as a catalyst, transmuting the substance — thought and emotion — into a work of art....

"The contention, for example, that the average audience of the Elizabethan age — not to speak of the 'groundlings', the porters, sailors, artisans, apprentices, men without a trade, in a word, the public of the Bear-Garden — was gross and uneducated, has been shown to be remarkably false, by the investigations of Mrs. Q.D. Leavis, Mr. L.C. Knights, and Mr. Louis B. Wright."

"It would indeed have been strange had this mixed, uncultivated public been able to interest itself in plays which for subtlety of language, profundity of thought, delicacy of observation, poetic concentration and musical grace are equal to the most remarkable poems of, say, Baudelaire, Mallarme or Valery. For it is in these terms that the problem should be presented. Whereas the three French poets...... never imagined that their verses could be read and appreciated by a tavern — or circus-going public, Shakespeare wrote for the populace as well as for the courtier. Let us not say that he alternates high poetry and force in order to please successively the Court and the Pit. The Court equally with the Pit required clowning of him, and the Pit — the groundlings, who stood in the rain — appreciated, as did the favourites of Elizabeth and James I, Hamlet's soliloquies, the precious verbal fencing of Rosalind and Orlando, and the lyrical outbursts of Romeo. If the reader has still any doubts on the point, let him think of the quality of the songs scattered through almost all the plays of the time."

It will have been clear from the passage quoted above how the theatre and the public were most intimately and vitally related to each other, and how both the 'populace' and the 'courtier' equally appreciated the plays. The further point to note is that Shakespeare did not alternate high poetry and

farce in order to please successively the Court and the Pit. The Court equally with the Pit required him to produce all that he did.

However, it should be noted that Pope, in referring, imperfectly though, to the influence of the audience on Shakespeare's works, did a notable bit of anticipation, since this aspect of Shakespeare's plays has received considerable attention in the 20th century. The names of Robert Bridges, L.C. Knights, Q.D. Leavis, and Louis B. Wright, deserve mention in this connection.

As for Shakespeare having been a player, it, instead of being a disadvantage, positively helped him to learn more about the theatre than he could have otherwise done. In fairness, however, to Pope, it should be pointed out that he allows Shakespeare's unsurpassed qualities to hold the ground even in the midst of lapses.

"Our Author's Wit buoys up, and is borne above his subject; his Genius in those low parts is like some Prince of a Romance in the disguise of a Shepherd or Peasant; a certain Greatness and Spirit now and then break out, which manifest his higher extraction and qualities."

In course of his discussion of the age Pope makes a pronouncement that is definitely memorable.

---

He observes:

"To judge therefore of Shakespeare by Aristotle's rules, is like trying a man by the laws of one country, who acted under those of another." 1

This is indeed a significant statement. It indicates the change that was coming over the climate of the age — the change from rigid orthodoxy to a healthy flexibility in the application of rules and dicta. It is a proof of the spirit of freedom that was fast permeating the artistic and critical temper of the age. It is, in other words, a concrete recognition of the permissibility of a great variety of tastes and sensibilities, standards and criteria in the world of art and literature.

No doubt Pope's contention was that since the poet happened to accomplish his life's work in largely ignorant times, he deserves leniency of treatment, and should not be judged by the far higher literary standards of Pope's own days which would always find him wanting in certain respects. Pope, incidentally, had a good deal of the superior air worn by most writers of his age. What is to our purpose is that without perhaps understanding the full implication of what he said, Pope would seem to have done some significant advance thinking in view of the fact that one important school of Shakespeare criticism.

1. Ibid, P. 45
in existence in the 20th century is the historical school which emphasises the need for studying Shakespeare's work as an exclusive product of the Elizabethan age, which means that Shakespeare, to be adequately understood, must be examined and appreciated in Elizabethan setting. The study of Shakespeare boils down in the main to a study of the various and complex facets of contemporary history having a bearing on Shakespeare's works. There is therefore an undoubted element of anticipation, which is well worth noting.

Even though Pope, like many others of his age, spoke of Shakespeare as a magnificent natural phenomenon, he is sensible enough to recognise that "he (Shakespeare) had much Reading at least, if they will not call it Learning." This too is a sort of anticipation. The old conception of Shakespeare as a comparatively uneducated man has died hard; indeed, it is not yet dead. It began, perhaps, with Ben Jonson's 'small Latin and less Greek', was fostered by Voltaire, and accepted by 18th and 19th century scholars: Malone, R. Farmer, Carlyle, Halliwell-Phillipps and the rest. Today, however, scholars find in Shakespeare a well-educated man who moved easily in the most cultured society of his time. The names

1. Ibid, P. 48.
of C.W. Wallace, C.C. Stopes, and Leslie Hotson may be mentioned in this connection.

To sum up, while most of Pope's criticism is a sort of a summation of previous criticism on Shakespeare, some of his readings, particularly on Shakespeare's language, characters and learning, are, as we have seen, distinctly and refreshingly individual. We have also noticed his suggestive hints towards a study of Shakespeare in the historical perspective. Thus Pope, while being deeply rooted in the Augustan soil, may be said to do a fairly good amount of anticipation.

In the next chapter we take up Joseph Warton whose criticism involves a good deal of Dryden, Rowe, Addison and O Pope.