



Rereading Banquet Scene Of *Macbeth*: Samuel Johnson's Defence Of Shakespeare For His Tragicomic Mingling

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Abstract: Shakespeare's dramatic works are often criticized for their tragi-comic mingling. Considering the standardized dramatic norms (regarded sacrosanct especially by the Neoclassicists), the charge against Shakespeare seems quite serious. However Samuel Johnson in his *Preface to Shakespeare* takes great pain in defending the Bard against this serious complaint of tragi-comic mingling. Since investigating the vast arena of Shakespearean dramatic works is not feasible in the context of this paper, it focuses on the famous Banquet scene of *Macbeth* (Act iii, scene iv) and tries to list the deviations the Bard makes from standardized dramatic norms. Macbeth's clownish behaviour in such a dreary tragic scene, lays it bare under the scrutiny of the world. The paper parallelly lists Johnson's findings which can be probable reasons of Shakespeare's juxtaposing tragic and comic elements in a single scene. The paper mostly constructs its conflict by juxtaposing Neo-classical and Johnsonian point of views to interrogate Macbeth's huge behavioural change from an all powerful 'hero' to a frail human being (a clown).

Index Terms -- Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson, Macbeth, Tragicomic mingling.

1. Introduction:

Shakespeare's tragicomic mingling in several dramatic works is subject to endless criticisms. Especially the authors (often referred to as Neoclassicists) who appeared roughly between 1660 and the advent of Romanticism in 1798 vehemently criticized the Bard for deviating from what they considered to be standardized dramatic norms like fusing tragic and comic elements. However, Samuel Johnson in his *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765) steps ahead and defends Shakespeare against the serious complaint of tragicomic mingling in a single dramatic work. This paper proposes to conduct a thorough investigation into Johnson's perspective and tries to explicate how rigorous his defence is. Although the rereading of the vast arena of Shakespearean drama is not feasible in the context of this paper. Hence, it chooses the Banquet scene of *Macbeth* (Act iii, scene iv) and seeks to probe into the comic elements that Shakespeare introduces there which might be otherwise not welcome in a dreary tragic scene. To do so, this paper first briefly introduces Neoclassical ideals regarding a dramatic work to clarify the reasons why Shakespeare's tragicomic mingling offended his critics. A quick description of the scene itself is weaved into the second section to better understand the course of events. In the next section, the paper delves deep into the tragic hero's psychology for a comprehensive understanding of his clownish behaviour during the scene on which the comic part is centred. Following this comes the juxtaposition of Neoclassical and Johnsonian point of view to interrogate Macbeth's coming down from the position of an all-powerful 'hero' to a frail human being which mostly constructs the conflict that is later answered from a Johnsonian perspective. Finally, the paper concludes that Johnson did acknowledge the very fact of Shakespeare's deviation from the standardized dramatic norms but considered it to be a deviation with purpose. For Johnson, "adherence to

general nature” (Johnson 1903) was the sole virtue for which he was ready to forgive Shakespeare for his guilt of norm breaking offering a new perspective to look at Shakespearean works.

2. Discussion:

Shakespeare's toying with dramatic genres has been a favourite topic of discourse among his ardent critics. However, not all discourses are meant to reach denouement. Whether his toying with standardized dramatic norms was intentional or not, remains one such unresolved mystery. Having a cursory look at the history of Shakespearean criticism, it seems quite evident, a good number of critics came up with their different views, most of them found him guilty of violating the inviolable rules of classical drama. (For instance, John Dennis' *An Essay On the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare* in 1712 and Thomas Rymer's *A Short View of Tragedy* in 1693) Nevertheless Samuel Johnson shifts to a different assumption and aims to refute those critics in his *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765). It would be fruitful to clarify, this paper seeks to probe into Johnson's perspective and tries to illuminate how rigorous Johnson's defense is. However, the rereading of the vast arena of Shakespearean drama through Johnsonian glass, is not feasible in the context of this paper. So, it would be a brief investigation. This paper chooses the Banquet scene of *Macbeth* (Act iii, scene iv) and proposes to conduct a thorough examination to find out the 'redundant' comic elements present there which were strictly unwelcome in a tragedy from a Neoclassical point of view; at the same time would offer a different view achieved through Johnsonian glass which argues against this label of redundancy.

Johnson's comment-"Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men" (Johnson 1903)-functions as the shield of Achilles that sets out to defend Shakespeare from a torrent of criticism levelled against him over a long period of time. Although it is impossible to be sure whether this comment was inspired by Shakespeare himself or not, an astonishing parallel can be drawn with the dialogue of Macbeth, one of Shakespeare's greatest heroes "what man dare, I dare" (Shakespeare 1993). The reason for bringing this particular reference is that this paper seeks to reckon how far Johnson's defence of Shakespeare is justified against the serious complaint of mingling tragicomic elements in a single drama. In this particular scene (Banquet Scene) of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare is blamed for not following the decorum while composing his tragedies in the model. Macbeth, his tragic hero, begins his journey on a "fair" note as a loyal, valiant combatant "as cannons overcharg'd with double cracks" (Shakespeare 1993), who is "so far before, / That swiftest wing of recompense is slow/ To overtake" him. (Shakespeare 1993) Shakespearean tragic hero usually has a towering personality as here Macbeth is. It cannot be denied that a tragic world is of pomp and heroic combat. Macbeth's valiant combat against the unfaithful Thane of Cawdor at the very beginning perfectly goes in the line of the style suited to tragedy. In the middle he falls prey to the temptation of becoming the ruler which leads him to his downfall. From a broader perspective, it seems not that Shakespeare much sways from the traditional framework of a tragedy, but a closer look will reveal how there is often "an interchange of seriousness and merriment"(Johnson 1903). Here arises the problem. Authors who appeared roughly between 1660 to the advent of Romanticism in 1798, like Alexander Pope, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson himself (often referred to as Neoclassicists) strongly venerated the works of classical writers that is the writers of ancient Greek and Rome and always advocated that each genre should always exhibit the essential properties allotted to it and an author must learn his craft properly to avoid any kind of departure from the accepted norms. These Neoclassical ideals can be traced back in *Ars Poetica* by Roman writer Horace of first century B. C. Horace observes, "the subject matter of comedy does not wish to find expression in tragic verses" and urges that "let each genre keep to the appropriate place allotted to it". (Hardison 1995) Thus Neoclassicists do not permit tragedy to fuse comic elements. For them such a mingling will result in a mismatch, reminding Philip Sidney's protest "against matching hornpipes and funerals" (Szenczi 1937). What Shakespeare was doing was not altogether an invention for the Elizabethan stage. Sidney vehemently criticized Shakespeare's predecessors for mixing genres. Even Johnson himself states in clear words that "according to the laws which custom had prescribed, selected some the crimes of men, and some their absurdities; some the momentous vicissitudes of life, and some the lighter occurrences; some the terrors of distress, and some the gayeties of prosperity. Thus rose the two modes of imitation, known by the names of tragedy and comedy, compositions intended to promote different ends by contrary means..." (Johnson 1903). Before moving on to the Banquet scene, the pivotal point for this paper, it is better to clarify that this scene does not contain comic elements as the popular notion associated with the term comedy. Neither has it exhibited hearty laughter nor a union leading to a happy ending. The Banquet scene of *Macbeth* (Act iii, scene iv) simply presents the drunken blabbering of a 'hero' who could not remain composed and loses the integrity of mind after commanding the heinous murder of his friend, in a party of which Macbeth himself was the gracious host. Such a conduct of him seems odd. Probably Shakespeare did

not pay much heed to the distinctions of tragedy and comedy; rather he was much concerned about the accurate depiction of "the real state of sublunary nature" as says Johnson (Johnson 1903) "Sublunary" or earthly nature indicates the complex psychology of human beings. Human nature is in no way simple or transparent. It is a complex set of overlapping "fair" and "foul" qualities. Therefore, the aim of this paper will be two-fold; to pick up the not so obvious but obviously present comic elements in an otherwise gloomy tragic scene and scrutinize the worth of Johnson's defence of this mingling as something irreplaceable, not a mere superfluity that causes serious violation of decorum.

The "humble host" Macbeth and his lady amiably welcome the guests to celebrate Macbeth's enthronement. Just before entering the banquet Macbeth secretly commanded the murder of his friend Banquo. At the beginning of the scene, readers get to see the 'hero' who has complete control over himself to successfully conceal his "black and deep desire" (Shakespeare 1993). The moment Macbeth is informed about Banquo's murder, his poise starts collapsing. The 'hero' disappears, and a 'man' emerges. John Dennis strongly suggests in his *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare*, in 1712 that Shakespeare "has offended against the Equality of the Manners even in his Hero himself. For Coriolanus who in the first part of the Tragedy is shewn so open, so frank, so violent, and so magnanimous, is represented in the latter part by Aufidius, which is contradicted by no one, a flattering, fawning, cringing, insinuating Traytor." (Dennis 1903) Therefore it seems quite evident that generally a tragic 'hero' is expected to be "frank", "violent", "magnanimous" just the way Macbeth was in the beginning. Shakespeare makes Macbeth quote that he "had else been perfect;/ whole as the marble, founded as the rock, / As broad and general as the casing air" (Shakespeare 1993) which goes perfectly in line with the general notion associated with the attributes of heroism. If this be true, then Macbeth's subsequent conduct does not fit into this category of heroism in any way. Macbeth starts hallucinating Banquo's ghost, the fear of which leaves him lunatic. This becomes hard to digest when a valiant general who spent almost his entire life in bloodshed, becomes so scared that he starts blabbering all his misdeeds in front of everybody. His fear leaves him as a clown on whom the comic part of this scene is centred. This 'clownification' of a 'hero' was somewhat disrespectful and equally shocking but it cannot be denied that Shakespeare executed his plan in so effortless ease that Macbeth's horror became laughable. Surge of criticism rose against Shakespeare when he failed to provide the due treatment a tragedy demands and made 'clownification' of a tragic hero who was traditionally treated as something sacrosanct. Dennis claims that "our Author has sometimes made gross Mistakes in the Characters which he has drawn from History, against the Equality and Conveniency of Manners of his Dramatical Persons. Witness Menenius in the following Tragedy, whom he has made an errant Buffoon, which is a great Absurdity." (Dennis 1903) Here Johnson comes to Shakespeare's rescue. He states in clear words that "Shakespeare's plays are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind" (Johnson 1903) which releases Shakespeare from every charge of violating the norms. It is useful to question, why was then Shakespeare creating altogether a drama of "distinct kind", what was his hidden agenda? Speculations can be made that Shakespeare felt the urge just like his hero Macbeth to "play the humble host"(Shakespeare 1993) in order to "mingle with society" (Shakespeare 1993) Johnson advocated in favour of everything that "approaches nearer... to the appearance of life"(Johnson 1903). Shakespeare did complete justice with Macbeth's dialogue when he willingly pulls him down from his sacred altar of a tragic hero and presents him with all his human weaknesses and follies to make him less venerated but more acceptable leaving an easy way for him to "mingle with society". This reading may gain ground when Johnson further talks about Shakespeare's need to exhibit "the real state of sublunary nature" which is a queer mingling of "fair" and "foul" qualities as is mentioned earlier. It is Macbeth's journey, as complicated as human psychology, from "fair" to "foul" then again "foul" to "fair". Banquet scene (Act iii, scene iv) is a junction where Macbeth's overlapped "fair" and "foul" qualities reach almost equilibrium as if "both sides are even, and [he] sits i' the midst" (Shakespeare 1993). Macbeth loses his calm when he starts hallucinating Banquo's ghost in the party, He screams at it to quit his sight. Macbeth's conduct can be interpreted in several ways. Perhaps he was "yet too young for the deed"(Shakespeare 1993) that for him "murders have been performed/ Too terrible for the ear"(Shakespeare 3.4. 77-). In a metaphorical sense, Banquo's ghost can even be seen as Macbeth's long-lost conscience that makes a return with this hallucination. Therefore, neither his "fair" qualities were ever entirely vanquished nor the "foul" ones. When the ghost disappears Macbeth claims that "I am a man again" (Shakespeare 1993). The word "man" is repeated several times throughout the Banquet scene. As explained earlier, Neoclassical ideals always expect a tragic hero to be "frank", "violent", "magnanimous". But Shakespeare's ulterior motive was to present Macbeth as a human being who can be "cabin'd, cribb'd, confined, bound in/ To Saucy doubts and fears" (Shakespeare 1993) undermining all his heroism. A 'hero', a lion-heart then, can behave in a way of a clown. Johnson offers only one condition for the writers that the end of their writing should "instruct by

pleasing"(Johnson 1903). Macbeth could not sustain the outcome of his decision after having his friend Banquo murdered. Had his behavioural change not occurred, there would have been no difference between Macbeth and a cold-blooded murderer. His hallucination remained for a few minutes, but the reader could very well understand his momentary helplessness. Reducing the all-powerful Macbeth in such a paralyzed position as a result of his misdeed, Shakespeare successfully instilled the moral lesson among the audience keeping in line with the office of a dramatist. At the same time Johnson is accurate in his judgement that "mingled scenes seldom fail to produce the intended vicissitudes of passions" (Johnson 1903). Macbeth's hallucination and his subsequent frantic outburst almost forecasted his impending doom. Shakespeare better understood the pulse of his audience. The air became already heavy with two murders and Shakespeare knew that he had to prepare his audience to witness subsequent murders as well. To dissipate the cloud for a while, a jester was needed. Shakespeare smartly appointed the 'hero' to that job and aptly utilizes the opportunity to present him in a more humanized and less heroic form. Therefore, it seems mingling is nothing new. Human psychology itself is a mingled form of various emotions and to convincingly portray so Shakespeare takes help of "mingled drama" as advocates Johnson.

3. Conclusion:

Hence there remain two ways of understanding as always. If the reader remains abide by the norms of Greek drama, Shakespeare's violation of laws will be too obvious to her. Johnson has his own way of comprehending Shakespeare. For him, Shakespeare's adhering to basic human traits, released him from every charge of violating mannerisms. Johnson explicitly criticized the editors for categorizing Shakespeare's dramatic works into comedies, histories and tragedies. For Johnson, they "seem not to have defined the three kinds by any very exact or definite ideas" (Johnson 1903) Ironically, Johnson himself stands at the verge of being criticized for his personal inclination towards Shakespeare and for having tried to gloss over the faults of the dramatist. Presumably, Johnson too was in agreement with the charge and well understood that Shakespeare's dramatic works fail to match traditional dramatic standards but what makes him stand apart is his deep observation that something different, something fresh was there in the works which nobody acknowledged. Shakespeare does 'deviate' from the norms, but Johnson essentially discards the negativity associated with the term 'deviation' and conceives it as a new mode of interpretation. As a way of self-defence Johnson lets the argument remain open-ended. Shakespeare brings a jester who is in no way welcome in an ill-lit tragic scene. But a drama of a "distinct kind" does accept it. Now it is completely the reader's choice whether she would enjoy a Shakespearean drama keeping in mind the traditional dramatic standard or explore a complete new set of norms established by a "distinct kind" of drama that is realistically weaved and offers a faithful image of the time. To conclude, Shakespeare, a 'man', sets out to explore a conventional genre in his way to tell a 'story' of another 'man', in an unconventional way. Such an approach permits a 'hero' to step into the shoes of a clown and pleads the empathetic reader to accept him in his dwindled humanized form. Although Johnson humbly admits that he is providing his very own conception which may be subject to follies. But it is undeniable that his perception provides a rare opportunity to read in between the lines of the canonical text and re-asserts the claim to approach literature in a less rigid way. The discussion of whether this unconventional way of Shakespeare was proper or not, is not fruitful in the context of this paper; rather it is better to say, for Johnson this unfamiliarity meant a new way of approaching Shakespeare that threw light upon some seeming obscurities and anomalies. Johnson provides a surplus of logic in the support of his stand that it was a violation with a purpose. It seems Johnson might have said 'saat Khoon maaf' that is forgiving all vices for the sake of one virtue, if he were an Indian; for Johnson, sticking to reality was that sole virtue for which he was ready to overlook subsequent vices of norm breaking.

Throughout the discussion there have been attempts to capture comic elements present there in the scene and evaluate how flawless Johnson's estimation is regarding their presence. Juxtaposing Neoclassical and Johnsonian point of view about tragicomic mingling, this paper mostly tries to construct the conflict, which has later been answered from a Johnsonian perspective. It talks at length about complex human psychology what Johnson refers to as "the real state of sublunary nature" which leads to believe that Johnson acknowledged the natural kinship of human emotions; for him, all human emotions, "fair" or "foul", spring from the same source. Such a claim negates the imposed boundaries that attempt to predetermine how a character is expected to behave in a certain situation to match the standardized dramatic norms. If this be true, then tragic and comic elements are overlapping and complementary. Hence, in a realistic representation of human nature, tragicomic mingling is not an offense. To return to the promise made in the introduction, that this paper would investigate how far the comic elements remain extraneous in a dreary tragic scene, seems to have been answered.

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