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Violation of “three unities” in Shakespearean plays

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Abstract

The ancient Greek dramatists especially Aristotle in his well-known work ‘Poetics’ designed certain rules and regulations for the stage performance of any play for the sake of verisimilitude which generally now known as “The Three Unities”. These three unities are Unity of action, time and place. But in English drama many times these unities have been violated by many dramatists among of them Shakespeare was the leading figure. This paper deals with the violations of “three Unities” concept by William Shakespeare in his plays. The first phase of this paper introduces three unities convention and second phase deals with Shakespeare and his exploitation of these unities.

Keywords: Aristotle, poetics, three unities, unity of action, time and place, Shakespeare and play

Introduction

Shakespeare holds, by general acclamation, the foremost place in the world’s literature and his overwhelming greatness renders it difficult to criticise or even to praise him^[1]. “He was the man” Said Dryden, “who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul”^[2] but the thing for which Shakespeare, most of times is criticised for the violation of Aristotelian three unities. In Dryden’s first important critical work ‘Essay of Dramatic Poesie’ (1668), critic (character) gave privilege to classical writers over moderns because they kept to the so-called Aristotelian unities of time, place and Action^[3]. The concept of “The Three Unities” were deduced from Aristotle, but the Greek philosophers had stressed only one unity, the unity of Action. The action of a tragedy, Aristotle says in ‘the poetics’ must be a “complete whole” and it must have, “organic unity”^[4] S. T. Coleridge defines this organic form of any text as it “is innate, it shapes as it develops itself from within and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form”.^[5] Thus the removal of one part may result in collapse of whole plot.

The next two unities are “Unity of Time” and “Unity of Place”. However, the unities of Time and Place have also been derived from Aristotle but he has stressed only the unity of Action; he says nothing about these two unities^[6]. M.H. Abrams firmly believed that in the 16th and 17th century, critics of drama in Italy and France added to the Aristotle’s Unity of action, which he describes in his poetics, two other unities, to constitute one of the so-called rules of drama as “ The Three Unities”^[7] for verisimilitude i.e. the achievement of an illusion of reality in the audience of a stage play, these critics imposed the requirement of “Unity of Place” and the requirement of the “Unity of Time”, which they define as the action represented be limited to a single location and the time represented be limited to the two or three hours it takes to act the play, or at most to a single day of 24 hours, respectively^[8].

The charges of violation of Unities on Shakespeare is mainly because of Unities of Time and Place not for the Unity of action but it is not that he is free from violation of Unity of Action. Aristotle compares the plot of tragedy, while defining Unity of Action, with a living

¹ William J, Long. English literature; Maple press, 153-154.

² Edward Albert; History of English literature; Oxford University press; 5th edition, 108.

³ David Daiches. A critical history of English literature; supernova publishers, 2, 581.

⁴ Raghukul Tilak; Aristotle’s Poetics; Rama Brothers publishers; 11th edition, 113.

⁵ M.H.Abrams and G.G.Harpham; A glossary of literary terms; Cengage learning publishers; 10th edition, 38

⁶ Raghukul Tilak. Aristotle’s Poetics. Rama Brothers publishers; 11th edition, 115.

⁷ Abrams MH, Harpham GG; A glossary of literary terms; Cengage learning publishers; 10th edition, 406.

⁸ Abrams MH, Harpham GG; A glossary of literary terms; Cengage learning publishers ; 10th edition, 406.

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organism and says that there should be nothing superfluous, episodes may be introduced but then they should be integral to plot. It should not be possible even to transport them^[9]. But in King Lear, we cannot call Gloucester plot a “sub-plot” which merely touches the main plot, tangentially^[10] The plot construction is inconsistent and discrepant for which Bradley comments “when I regret it (king Lear) strictly as a drama, it appears to me, thought in certain part of overwhelming decidedly inferior as a whole to Hamlet, Othello and Macbeth”.^[11] Somethings in King Lear are left unexplained and other stands doubtfully concluded^[12] whereas Aristotle said it that all such events, which do not contribute logically and inevitably to this process of change (from happiness to misery) must be rigorously eliminated^[13]

While defining the concept of “Unity of Action” Aristotle rules out plurality of Action. This he is against the introduction of subplot, similarly of double ending i.e. tragic end for some of characters and happy ending for the others^[14] which was famous genre of Elizabethan era named as 'Tragicomedy' defined by M.H. Abrams as “A type of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama which intermingled the standard characters and subject matter a serious action which threatened a tragic disaster to the protagonist, yet, by an abrupt reversal of circumstance turned out happily”^[15] Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice by these criteria, is a tragicomedy because the developing threat of death to Antonio is suddenly reversed at the end by Portia’s ingenious casuistry in typical trial scene. Shakespeare wrote his last play Cymbeline and The Winter’s Tale between 1609 and 1611 in this very popular made of tragicomedy romance^[16] Thus where Aristotle rules out tragic comedy and introduction of comic relief Shakespeare deliberately employed it in his plays^[17]. Although Shakespeare violated this rule of Action but many critics defend Shakespeare for this by saying that world is always laughing and always crying at the same moment, tragedy and comedy were presented side by side as they are in life itself^[18]. He pointed out Hamlet’s song after the play that assumed the court but struck the king with deadly fear,

“why, let the stricken deer go weep
The hart ungalld play
For some must watch, while some must sleep
So sun the world away”^[19]

The other two classic album rule for drama are “The Unity of time” and “The Unity of Place”. Time and Place, according this rule, must remain the same; the play could represent a period of only a few hours, and whatever action was introduced must take a place at spot where the play began^[20] but Shakespeare and his Elizabethan contemporaries were severely criticized or rejected as barbarous, for their indifferent to “Unity of time”^[21] Shakespeare’s plays represent frequent changes of Place and Passages of many years^[22]

Aristotle in his Poetics, stated that the action in the play must take place in a single day (unity of time)^[23] but in many plays, Shakespeare has broken this rule for the sake of dramatic excellence, for example, in Romeo and Juliet Friar Lawrence gave a liquor which made Juliet senseless for forty two hours,

“Take thou this vail, being then in bed
And this distilled liquor drinks thou off:

A cold and drowsy humour, for no pulse

Thou shall continue two and forty hours”
(Act-4th, scene -1st)

And after forty hour, Juliet again got her sense i.e. almost the passage of two revolution of Sun whereas Aristotle asserts that, "tragedy attempts, as far as possible, to remain within one revolution of the sun"^[24].

As whole plot should be confined to a single day, the characters therefore, must remain unchanged throughout; there was no possibility of the child becoming a man or of the man's growth with changing circumstances²⁵ but Act-4th of the ‘The Winter's Tales’, takes us to Bohemia sixteen years later, and it is a new world. The lost Princess is now known as Perdita. David Daiches said that The Winter's Tales is notorious for the following the unity of time as well as place^[26].

As per the classical rule, all vigorous action was deemed out of the place on the stage and battles and important events were simply announced by a messenger^[27] so that the “Unity of Action” must be remained in the play but in the plays like Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth etc. all important events and killings took place on the stage by various setting ignoring the “Unity of Action” for example in Julius Caesar, death of Julius Caesar is not revealed by any messenger or any other characters but has shown directly to the audience on the stage. Aristotle said play should be confined to limit of single city and If the scene changes it must not be to; too great a distance^[28] but in Antony and Cleopatra, there is a great shifting of place. Spectacles find themselves first hour

⁹ Raghukul Tilak; Aristotle's Poetics; Rama Brothers publishers; 11th edition, 113.

¹⁰ Dr. Sen S; William Shakespeare King Lear a critical evaluation; Unique publishers, 383.

¹¹ Dr. Sen S; William Shakespeare King Lear a critical evaluation; Unique publishers, 385.

¹² Dr. Sen S; William Shakespeare King Lear a critical evaluation; Unique publisher, 386.

¹³ Raghukul Tilak ; Aristotle's Poetics ; Rama Brothers publishers; 11th edition, 114.

¹⁴ Raghukul Tilak ; Aristotle's Poetics ; Rama Brothers publishers; 11th edition, 114.

¹⁵ Abrams MH, Harpham GG; A glossary of literary terms; Cengage learning publishers; 10th edition, 111-112.

¹⁶ MH Abrams and G.G.Harpham ; A glossary of literary terms ; Cengage learning publishers ; 10th edition ; page no. --412

¹⁷ Raghukul Tilak ; Aristotle's Poetics ; Rama Brothers publishers; 11th edition; page no.--115

¹⁸ William J.Long ; English literature; Maple press ; page no. – 127

¹⁹ William Shakespeare; Hamlet ; Rama Brothers publishers ; 25th edition; page no. -- 320

²⁰ William J.Long ; English literature; Maple press ; page no. – 126

²¹ Raghukul Tilak ; Aristotle's Poetics ; Rama Brothers publishers; 11th edition; page no.--115

²² M.H. Abrams and G.G.Harpham ; A glossary of literary terms ; Cengage learning publishers ; 10th edition ; page no. --406

²³ Anand B.Kulkarni and Ashok G. Chaskar ; An introduction to literary theory and criticism; Orient blackswan publishers ; page no.--295

²⁴ Raghukul Tilak ; Aristotle's Poetics ; Rama Brothers publishers; 11th edition; page no.--115

²⁵ William J.Long ; English literature; Maple press ; page no. – 126

²⁶ David Daiches; A critical history of English literature Vol- 1st ; supernova publishers ; page no.--300

²⁷ William J.Long ; English literature; Maple press ; page no. – 127

²⁸ Raghukul Tilak ; Aristotle's Poetics ; Rama Brothers publishers; 11th edition; page no.--116

at Alexandria, and the next at Rome. Similarly in play 'As you like it' also has two settings i.e. forest of Arden and royal court and also in Othello we have two different settings for the stage i.e. Cyprus and Venice.

The Shakespearean dramas are entirely free from that narrow and cramping effect of the unities, which marks a number of French plays ^[29] It is very difficult to find whether Shakespeare rejected unities by design or deviated from them or he just ignored them. John Dryden defends Shakespeare for the violation of these convention of Unities he affirmed that the French preoccupation with "rules" at the cost of the spirit of writing. He said that "in most irregular plays of Shakespeare there is a more masculine fancy and great spirit in writing than there is in any of the French " ^[30]. Also, if these unities were not followed by the Shakespeare, then it is also there, his plays demonstrate that "unity of atmosphere" is not violated and dramatic illusion can be kept up even when the scene shift from Venice to Cyprus ^[31]. this violation of Unities by Shakespeare in his plays resulted that these Unities have been regarded as optional devices, available as needed by the play with to achieve special effects of dramatic concentration ^[32]. So Shakespeare with a largeness of vision and flexibility of technique, worked with the popular dramatic tradition of his time and produced an English poetic drama which owned nothing to any external doctrine of correctness but which developed out of a pressure of its own vitality, its own kind of form and unity ^[33] and with 'preface to Shakespeare' by Dr. Johnson gave a death blow to the unities and nothing has been heard of them ever since. There interest now is merely historical ^[34].

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²⁹ Raghukul Tilak ; Aristotle's Poetics ; Rama Brothers publishers; 11th edition; page no.--116

³⁰ Dr.T.Singh ; A history of English literature; student store publishers; 19th edition ; page no.--227

³¹ Raghukul Tilak ; Aristotle's Poetics ; Rama Brothers publishers; 11th edition; page no.--116

³² M.H. Abrams and G.G.Harpham ; A glossary of literary terms ; Cengage learning publishers ; 10th edition ; page no. --406

³³ David Daiches ; A critical history of English literature Vol- 1st ; supernova publishers ; page no.--309

³⁴ Raghukul Tilak ; Aristotle's Poetics ; Rama Brothers publishers; 11th edition; page no.--116