**How does Dr. Johnson defend Shakespeare against the charges of violating the Dramatic Unities?**

In the discussion of drama in “Poetics” Aristotle mentions the three unities as the three formal requirements of a play. These are the unities of time, place and action. The unity of time demands that the action should take place within a day. The unity of place demands that the action should take place within one building or city. The unity of action implies that these be a single plot of limited extent.

The unites of time, place and action were considered essential by Renaissance critics. Many dramatists such as Shakespeare paid little attention to the unities of time and place. In his “Preface to Shakespeare” Johnson shows that only unity of action has the critical justification.

In drama neo-classicism is marked by devotion to the “rules” derived from ancient practice and Aristotelian precept. Johnson questions the absolute validity of these rules.

As regards the unity of action, Aristotle says that the plot being an imitation of an action must imitate one action. Then he says that the drama is a whole. The structural unionof its parts is such that, if any one of them is displaced as removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. Johnson accepts only the unity of action, among the three unities because the unity of action ensures an effect of compactness and intensity. It helps getting to the centre of things in a play.

Conventions are techniques that are accepted by common agreement. The unities are dramatic conventions. They are necessary but excessive dependence on them makes a play conventional. Johnson shows that Shakespeare, being a great playwright avoids conventionally by avoiding the unities of time and place.

The classicism of the later 17th and 18th centuries was supported by rationalism. This rationalism in the end undercut the authoritarian element in classicism. Johnson in questioning the use of three unities proves himself an exponent of rationalism. He places stresses on being reasonable. Here Johnson might be considered as a reasonable classicist. In his literary criticism he makes constant to firm literary conventional to a general knowledge of life literature. There is always an appeal open from criticism to nature. Some of his ideas may be rigid.

Johnson demands that during the enactment of a play a spectator remains “in a state of elevation above the reach of reason or of truth.” So, Johnson can firmly proclaim that the mind of a spectator wanders in ecstasy while a theatre is being enacted in front of him. But, the spectators always remain in their senses and never forget that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players who are upon the stage to recite a certain number of lines with just gesture and elegant modulation. These lines relate to some actions which may happen in places very remote from each other. And there is no absurdity of allowing that space to represent first Athens, and then Sicily; as all spectators know it to be a modern theatre in actuality. Johnson thus expunges the Aristotelian concept of Unity of Place in dramatic poetry.

Then to comment upon the Unity of Time, Johnson claims that by supposition a place is introduced. Time is all of modes of existence, most obedient to the imaginations. In Johnson’s view the audience does not find it in the least offensive or absurd if the action of the play is located in the first hour at Alexanderia and the next at Rome. A lapse of year may easily be conceived of as a passage of hours. Similarly the audience can accept the change of locations on the stage. On imagination the audience can easily contract the time of real actions and also allow the shifts of settings on the stage.

Thus the unites of time and place are not necessary for creating theatrical illusion. Shakespeare didn’t want the counsels and admonitions of scholars and critics and never bothered the unities of time and place.

Johnson believes that ‘nothing is essential to the fable but unity of action.’ Shakespeare is a supreme by gifted artist. His gifts are intuition and imagination. These help him in maintaining the unity of action. And the unity of action ensure in Shakespeare the arrangements of events by which the initial situation is modified and developed until the final situation is brought out.

The consistency is always maintained. This consistency and continuity of action make his plays plausible and creates successful moment of theatrical illusion.

**How does Johnson defend Shakespeare's Violation of the three unities in "Preface to Shakespeare" and what are the major points in the "Preface to Shakespeare? (Long essay with major points)**

Johnson claims that with Shakespeare's histories, the unites of time, place, and action are largely irrelevant since, in his plays, "the changes of action be so prepared as to be understood, that the incidents be various and affecting, and the characters consistent, natural and distinct. No other unity is intended, and therefore none is to be sought."

With his other works (comedies and tragedies), Johnson adds that Shakespeare sustains the unity of action; even when the events are out of order or superfluous, Shakespeare does stick to Aristotle's linear progression of having a discernible beginning, middle, and end.

In terms of time and place, the law of the unities states that for a play to be credible (believable), the events of the play should be limited to a particular place and the time limited to 24 hours. Otherwise, the audience will have trouble suspending disbelief (believing the events could happen) which is to say the audience will have trouble forgetting that they are watching a play. Johnson counters this by saying that all plays are plays:

The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players.

Therefore, these limitations based on being credible to the audience can not be applied. Johnson also adds that the pleasure of watching theater is that it is fictional; it is not necessary that they have to believe it could happen: "The delight of tragedy proceeds from our consciousness of fiction; if we thought murders and treasons real, they would please no more."

Johnson adds that "the unities of time and place are not essential to a just drama . . . " and that simply sticking to the rules does not make a drama good. That which makes Shakespeare's plays "just" is how deeply they apply to human nature. This is perhaps the most significant praise in the essay. For Johnson, there is something true and universal about Shakespeare's appreciation of human nature and this is what makes him timeless. Johnson notes that: "This therefore is the praise of Shakespeare, that his drama is the mirror of life . . . "

Johnson does fault Shakespeare for focusing too much on the convenience of the storyline, therefore ignoring the use of his plays as instruction (showing how good could/should triumph over evil). But overall, it is Shakespeare's ability to copy nature (art imitating life), being believable or unbelievable, that makes any of Shakespeare's so called faults irrelevant.

**Three Unities**

Unities, in drama, the three principles derived by French classicists from Aristotle's Poetics; they require a play to have a single action represented as occurring in a single place and within the course of a day. These principles were called, respectively, unity of action, unity of place, and unity of time.

**What is the theory of the three unities How does Shakespeare violate the three unities and how does Johnson defend him?**

Shakespeare clearly violates this principle in many of his dramas. Macbeth, for example, begins on a battlefield and has scenes in Macbeth's castle and England, among other places. Second, Aristotle thought that a drama should only portray events over the course of a single day (this is unity of time).