

Preface to Shakespeare Quotations

Writer: Samuel Johnson | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Quote: *"He sacrifices virtue to convenience and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose."*

Explanation:

Johnson says Shakespeare often tries to entertain rather than teach moral lessons. He ignores virtue when it clashes with dramatic excitement. It appears that he has no moral purpose in his writing.

Quote: *"Shakespeare is above all writers, at least, above all modern writers, the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life."*

Explanation:

Johnson calls Shakespeare the poet of real life. His plays reflect human behavior honestly. Readers can see true life in his dramas.

Quote: *"In his tragic scenes, there is always something wanting, but his comedy often surpasses expectation or desire."*

Explanation:

Johnson finds Shakespeare's comedies better than his tragedies. His comedies are witty and rich in language. But the tragedies sometimes feel incomplete.

Quote: *"Shakespeare's plays are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies but compositions of distinct kind."*

Explanation:

Johnson says Shakespeare's plays mix tragedy and comedy. They do not follow classical rules. His plays are a new kind of drama that reflect real life.

Quote: *"Shakespeare has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition."*

Explanation:

Johnson praises Shakespeare for blending comedy and tragedy in the same play. He can make us laugh and cry in one story. This mix shows his genius.

Quote: *"He had no regard for time and place, but he gives to one age or nation, without scruple the customs, institutions and opinions of another."*

Explanation:

Johnson says Shakespeare often mixes historical times and cultures. He gives Roman characters English customs. This is a flaw, but Johnson accepts it as human error.

Quote: *"The unities of time and place are not essential to a just drama."*

Explanation:

Johnson believes a good play does not need to follow strict rules of time and place. Variety and instruction are more important. A play should reflect life, not follow rules.

Quote: *"The spectators are always in their senses, and know... the stage is only a stage and the players are only players."*

Explanation:

Johnson says audiences understand the stage is not real. They don't believe the events truly happen. So unity of time or place is not needed to create belief.

Quote: *"A quibble is the golden apple for which he will always turn aside from his career or stoop from his elevation."*

Explanation:

Johnson criticizes Shakespeare for using too many puns. He thinks Shakespeare sacrifices serious tone just for wordplay. This weakens his style.

Quote: *"He was the man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul."*

Explanation:

Johnson praises Shakespeare's deep understanding of all kinds of people. He could write about kings and commoners equally well. His mind was wide enough to include all human experience.

LxNotes