

Phillip Sidney's critical views of Drama - Tragedy and Comedy

Phillip Sidney stands as a shining star at the dawn of English Criticism. Before the Elizabethan age the English writers were pre-occupied with the classical principles of Aristotle and nothing of great creative value was produced. The Elizabethan age witnessed a great thrust of creative impulse in all the branches of art. Great Poets and Dramatists were born who enriched literature with innovative creation. Naturally, different literary controversies came into being and criticism became an important aspect of English literature. Sidney also took active part in the literary controversies and strongly expressed his viewpoints on Poetry, Drama as well as Diction and Style. His *Apology for Poetry* mainly contains his critical viewpoints.

Sidney, himself a poet and scholar, derived best of the classical and Italian thoughts and assimilated it with his own learning of the contemporary literature. Like Poetry, he pays considerable attention also to Drama, the most literary popular literary form. He thoroughly and critically examines both Tragedy and Comedy, points out their inherent defects and gives his valuable opinions which serve as touchstones for the latter dramatists. His concept of Tragedy is composite in character - that of medieval tradition and Aristotelian precepts interpreted by the Italian critics. Medievalism still persists in his statement when he says that Tragedy should mainly deal with the falls of the tyrants and the uncertainty of life. However, he maintains the necessity of moral teaching of the manner of Seneca. While describing the function of Tragedy, he uses admiration and commiseration in place of Aristotelian pity and fear. He also insists on the need for the observance of the three unities.

Regarding tragic plot, Sidney presents sound and practical hints towards its handling. He opines that Tragedy should be subject to the laws of Poetry and not to the laws of history. This implies that the dramatist can freely modify or transform his material to the tragic convenience to obtain

proper tragic effect. Further more, recalling Horace's advice, he recommends that the Plot should open not with the tedious account of the origin of history but at some significant point which may bring the readers at once to the heart of the things. In development of Plot, a dramatist should not be bound by strict adherence to the chronological sequence of the original story. He may, if it is necessitated, invent fresh incidents or situation or freely change the order of events. Such advices embody principles subsequently illustrated in Plays and critical remarks of later Elizabethan dramatists.

Sidney finds two most serious defects in the contemporary Drama. They are the gross improbability caused by the neglect of Unities of time and Place and the incongruous mingling of comic with tragic materials. In regard to the first, he asserts, referring to Aristotle and Common Reason, that Unities have been universally observed in antiquity. In fact, his comments on the improbable themes of the contemporary Drama are characteristically picturesque and ironical fashion, couched in the terms of attack on the impossibilities of the medieval romances. He also points out that the stage should be deemed to represent now Asia, now Africa, now a garden, a rock, a cave, a battlefield and in two hours period the vicissitudes of a whole life story should be fitly unfolded. However, this demand for verisimilitude, a result of a wrong interpretation of Aristotle's view point, proved one of the stumbling blocks of later dramatic theory.

On the incongruous mingling of comic with tragic materials, Sidney does not comment much. However, if we judge from the frequency of similar complains, this abuse of very real on the Elizabethan stage. On the general question of blending comic and serious matters, Sidney does not make absolute or unqualified pronouncement. He is able to conceive the circumstances when the Plot may require the presence of both Kings and clowns. In fact strict separation of serious from comic is not pleaded

as a fixed dogma. What ^③ he objects is the ill timed and indecorous mixing of Tragic and Comic elements, when the clowns are made to play a part in magisterial matters with neither decency nor discretion. The consequent result is a mere absurdity, schurrility and vacant laughter.

While commenting on Comedy, Sidney follows the same methods as that of Tragedy. He points out the current abuses of the Comedy and suggests a better way. His chief complain is against the prevailing tendency to make Comedy little more than a rough farce that produces an empty and fleeting laughter. Sidney advocates for a more intellectual Comedy that may give delight and be satisfying and lasting. Therefore, he distinguishes between laughter and delight; delight being the ultimate end of all true arts. He does not approve the current notion that there would be no delight without laughter. He asserts that delight implies a joy that is permanent. This delight results from a sense of convenience existing between specific subjects on the one hand and man and nature on the other. While laughter is merely a scornful licking, momentary and superficial, caused by a sense of disproportion between those subjects as well as between men and nature. He is equally insistent that there can be laughter without delight that is produced by the grotesque forms. At the same time, he holds that delight and laughter can be effectively combined and this combination is the desired production of a true Comedy.

Sidney also gives some practical hints calculated to make Comedy effective. He points out that Comedy has nothing to do with evil and vicious things, because such themes and characters excite merely aversion. Similarly, painful human deformities should also be avoided for they are grievous to behold and give rise to pity rather than amusement. The proper materials for the Comedy should be found in human weaknesses and foibles of a harmless kind.