

Sidney's View on Tragedy and Comedy

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Spingarn has aptly remarked: "Dramatic criticism in England began with Sir Philip Sidney. Sidney had presented his views not only on poetry but had also expressed his views on Tragedy, Tragi-comedy, Comedy and dramatic unities."

According to Sidney, "the ideal tragedy is an imitation of a noble action, in the representation of which it stirs admiration and commiseration." and teaches the uncertainty of the world and the weak foundations upon which golden roofs are built. "It makes kings fear to be tyrant, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours. Sidney's censure of the contemporary drama is that it outrages the grave and weighty character of tragedy, its elevated style, and the dignity of the personages represented, by mingling kings and clowns, introducing the most inappropriated buffoonery. Never did the ancients, like the English, "match hornpipe and funerals." The English dramas are neither true comedies nor true tragedies, and they disregard both the rules of poetry and honest civility. Tragedy is not tied to the laws of history, and may arrange and modify events as it pleases; but it is certainly bound by the rules of poetry. It is evident, therefore, that the Defence of Poetry, as a French writer has observed, "gives us an almost complete theory of neo-classic tragedy, a hundred years before the 'Art Poétique' of Boileau;

Sidney's conception of tragedy, as Atkins points out is somewhat indeterminate composite in character, made up for the most part of ideas reminiscent of medieval tradition together with fragments drawn from Aristotle as interpreted by Italian critics. Sidney gathered his material from different sources. While basically he adheres to the medieval tradition that tragedy deals with the fall of kings and mighty tyrants and teaches 'the uncertainty of this world', he also echoes the views of Aristotle, Seneca, Horace and some Italian critics such as Scaliger, Minturno and Casteveto. Aristotle said that the function of tragedy is to arouse the feelings of 'admiration and commiseration.' To achieve this end, tragedy must have stately speeches and well

sounding phrases in the Senecan manner.

Tragedy, Sidney maintains 'is tied to the laws of poetry and not of history, not bound to follow the story, but having liberty, either to a quite new matter, or to frame the history to the most tragical convenience.'

Thus he allows the tragic poets sufficient liberty in handling their themes. This point was later exploited by Elizabethan dramatists to justify their romantic plays. Again, like Horace, Sidney points out that many things may be told which can not be showed, if they know the difference betwixt reporting and representing.'

Comedy

Sidney's theory of Comedy is based on the body of rules and observations which the Italian critics, aided by a few hints from Aristotle, had deduced from the practice of the Greek dramatists.

Sidney defines Comedy, 'as an imitation of the common errors of life, which are represented in the most ridiculous and scornful manner, so that the spectator is anxious to avoid such errors himself.' Comedy, therefore, shows the 'filthiness of evil', but only in our private and domestic matters. It should aim at being wholly delightful, just as tragedy should be maintained by a well-raised admiration. Delight is thus the first requirement of Comedy; but the English comic writers err in thinking that delight can not be obtained without laughter, where as laughter is neither an essential cause nor an essential effect of delight. The great fault of English Comedy is that it stirs laughter concerning things that are sinful, i.e. wicked rather than merely ridiculous— forbidden plainly, according to Sidney, by Aristotle himself— and concerning things that are miserable, rather to be pitied than scorned. Not only should Comedy produce delightful laughter, also it should mix with it that delightful teaching which is the end of all poetry. Human follies or errors, rather than human vice and wickedness, or the poverty of men, are the proper themes of Comedy. Sidney's distinction between delight and laughter is psychological and the most original part of his treatise.

The Unities

The unities of time and place were first formulated in Italy and France about the middle of the 15th century. The first mention of the unities in England is to be found, more than a dozen years later, in the *Defence of Poetry*, and it can not be doubted that Sidney derived them directly from the Italian critic Castelvetro. Sidney in discussing the tragedy of *Gorboduc*, finds it "Faulty in time and place, the two necessary companions of all corporal actions; for where the stage should always represent but one place, and the uttermost time presupposed in it should be, both by Aristotle percept and common reason, but one day there is both many days and many places inartificially imagined." He also objects to the absurdities of the English stage, when on one side Africa and on the other Asia may be represented, and where in a hour a youth may grow from boyhood to old age. How absurd this is, common sense, art and ancient examples ought to teach the English will not err in it. If indeed, it be objected that one or two of the Comedies of Plautus and Terence do not observe the unity of time, let us not follow them when they err but when they are right; it is no excuse for us to do wrong, because Plautus, on one occasion, has done likewise.

The rule of the three unities did receive such rigid application in England, as is given by Sidney, until the introduction of the French influence nearly three quarters of a century later. Ben Jonson is considerably less stringent in this respect than Sidney.

