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Lecture XLVI. Tragedy - Greek - French - English Tragedy

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LECTURE XLVI.

TRAGEDY—GREEK—FRENCH—ENGLISH TRAGEDY.

LECT. XLVI. **H**AVING treated of the Dramatic Action in Tragedy, I proceed next to treat of the Characters most proper to be exhibited. It has been thought, by several Critics, that the nature of Tragedy requires the principal personages to be always of illustrious character, and of high, or princely rank; whose misfortunes and sufferings, it is said, take faster hold of the imagination, and impress the heart more forcibly, than similar events happening to persons in private life. But this is more specious, than solid. It is refuted by facts. For the distresses of Desdemona, Monimia, and Belvidera, interest us as deeply as if they had been princesses or queens. The dignity of Tragedy does, indeed, require, that there should be nothing degrading, or mean, in the circumstances of the persons which it exhibits; but it requires nothing more. Their high rank may render the spectacle more splendid, and the subject

feemingly of more importance, but conduce very little to its being interesting or pathetic; which depends entirely on the nature of the Tale, on the art of the Poet in conducting it, and on the sentiments to which it gives occasion. In every rank of life, the relations of Father, Husband, Son, Brother, Lover, or Friend, lay the foundation of those affecting situations, which make man's heart feel for man.

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THE moral characters of the persons represented, are of much greater consequence than the external circumstances in which the Poet places them. Nothing, indeed, in the conduct of Tragedy, demands a Poet's attention more, than so to describe his personages, and so to order the incidents which relate to them, as shall leave upon the Spectators, impressions favourable to virtue, and to the administration of Providence. It is not necessary, for this end, that poetical justice, as it is called, should be observed in the catastrophe of the Piece. This has been long exploded from Tragedy; the end of which is, to affect us with pity for the virtuous in distress, and to afford a probable representation of the state of human life, where calamities often befall the best, and a mixed portion of good and evil is appointed for all. But, withal, the Author must beware of shocking our minds with such representations of life as tend to raise horror, or to render virtue an object of aversion. Though innocent persons suffer, their sufferings ought to be attended with such circumstances, as shall make virtue

LECT. appear amiable and venerable; and shall render
XLVI. their condition, on the whole, preferable to that
of bad men, who have prevailed against them.
The stings, and the remorse of guilt, must ever
be represented as productive of greater miseries,
than any that the bad can bring upon the good.

ARISTOTLE'S observations on the characters
proper for Tragedy, are very judicious. He is
of opinion, that perfect unmixed characters,
either of good or ill men, are not the fittest to
be introduced. The distresses of the one being
wholly unmerited, hurt and shock us; and the
sufferings of the other, occasion no pity. Mixed
characters, such as in fact we meet with in the
world, afford the most proper field for displaying,
without any bad effect on morals, the vicissitudes
of life; and they interest us the more deeply,
as they display emotions and passions which we
have all been conscious of. When such persons
fall into distress through the vices of others, the
subject may be very pathetic; but it is always
more instructive, when a person has been himself
the cause of his misfortune, and when his mis-
fortune is occasioned by the violence of passion,
or by some weakness incident to human nature.
Such subjects both dispose us to the deepest
sympathy, and administer useful warnings to us
for our own conduct.

UPON these principles, it surprises me that the
story of *Cædipus* should have been so much cele-
brated by all the Critics, as one of the fittest
subjects for Tragedy; and so often brought upon

the Stage, not by Sophocles only, but by Corneille also, and Voltaire. An innocent person, one, in the main, of a virtuous character, through no crime of his own, nay not by the vices of others, but through mere fatality and blind chance, is involved in the greatest of all human miseries. In a casual rencounter, he kills his father, without knowing him; he afterwards is married to his own mother; and, discovering himself in the end to have committed both parricide and incest, he becomes frantic, and dies in the utmost misery. Such a subject excites horror rather than pity. As it is conducted by Sophocles, it is indeed extremely affecting; but it conveys no instruction, it awakens in the mind no tender sympathy; it leaves no impression favourable to virtue or humanity.

It must be acknowledged, that the subjects of the ancient Greek Tragedies were too often founded on mere destiny, and inevitable misfortunes. They were too much mixed with their tales about oracles, and the vengeance of the Gods, which led to many an incident sufficiently melancholy and tragical; but rather purely tragical, than useful or moral. Hence both the *Cædipus* of Sophocles, the *Iphigenia in Aulis*, the *Hecuba* of Euripides, and several of the like kind. In the course of the drama, many moral sentiments occurred. But the instruction, which the Fable of the Play conveyed, seldom was any more, than that reverence was owing to the Gods, and submission due to the decrees of Destiny.

LECT. Modern Tragedy has aimed at a higher object,
XLVI. by becoming more the theatre of passion; pointing out to men the consequences of their own misconduct; showing the direful effects which ambition, jealousy, love, resentment, and other such strong emotions, when misguided, or left unrestrained, produce upon human life. An Othello, hurried by jealousy to murder his innocent wife; a Jaffier, ensnared by resentment and want, to engage in a conspiracy, and then stung with remorse, and involved in ruin; a Siffredi, through the deceit which he employs for public-spirited ends, bringing destruction on all whom he loved; a Calista, seduced into a criminal intrigue, which overwhelms herself, her father, and all her friends in misery: these, and such as these, are the examples which Tragedy now displays to public view; and by means of which, it inculcates on men the proper government of their passions.

OF all the passions which furnish matter to Tragedy, that which has most occupied the Modern Stage, is Love. To the Ancient Theatre, it was in a manner wholly unknown. In few of their Tragedies is it ever mentioned; and I remember no more than one which turns upon it, the Hippolitus of Euripides. This was owing to the national manners of the Greeks, and to that greater separation of the two sexes from one another, than has taken place in modern times; aided too, perhaps, by this circumstance, that no female actors ever appeared on the Ancient

Stage. But though no reason appears for the total exclusion of Love from the Theatre, yet with what justice or propriety it has usurped so much place, as to be in a manner the sole hinge of Modern Tragedy, may be much questioned. Voltaire, who is no less eminent as a Critic than as a Poet, declares loudly and strongly against this predominancy of love, as both degrading the Majesty, and confining the natural limits of Tragedy. And assuredly, the mixing of it perpetually with all the great and solemn revolutions of human fortune which belong to the Tragic Stage, tends to give Tragedy too much the air of gallantry, and juvenile entertainment. The *Athalie* of Racine, the *Merope* of Voltaire, the *Douglas* of Mr. Home, are sufficient proofs, that without any assistance from Love, the Drama is capable of producing its highest effects upon the mind.

THIS seems to be clear, that wherever Love is introduced into Tragedy, it ought to reign in it, and to give rise to the principal action. It ought to be that sort of Love which possesses all the force and majesty of passion; and which occasions great and important consequences. For nothing can have a worse effect, or be more debasing to Tragedy, than, together with the manly and heroic passions, to mingle a trifling Love intrigue, as a sort of seasoning to the Play. The bad effects of this, are sufficiently conspicuous both in the *Cato* of Mr. Addison,

LECT. as I had occasion before to remark, and in the
 XLVI. Iphigenie of Racine.

AFTER a Tragic Poet has arranged his subject, and chosen his personages, the next thing he must attend to, is the propriety of sentiments; that they may be perfectly suited to the characters of those persons to whom they are attributed, and to the situations in which they are placed. The necessity of observing this general rule is so obvious, that I need not insist upon it. It is principally in the pathetic parts, that both the difficulty and the importance of it are the greatest. Tragedy is the region of passion. We come to it, expecting to be moved; and let the Poet be ever so judicious in his conduct, moral in his intentions, and elegant in his Style, yet if he fails in the pathetic, he has no tragic merit; we return cold and disappointed from the performance; and never desire to meet with it more.

To paint Passion so truly and justly as to strike the hearts of the Hearers with full sympathy, is a prerogative of Genius given to few. It requires strong and ardent sensibility of mind. It requires the Author to have the power of entering deeply into the characters which he draws; of becoming for a moment the very person whom he exhibits, and of assuming all his feelings. For as I have often had occasion to observe, there is no possibility of speaking properly the language of any passion, without feeling it; and it is to the absence or deadness of real emotion, that we must ascribe the want
 of

of success in so many Tragic Writers, when they attempt being pathetic.

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No man, for instance, when he is under the strong agitations of anger, or grief, or any such violent passion, ever thinks of describing to another what his feelings at that time are; or of telling them what he resembles. This never was, and never will be, the language of any person, when he is deeply moved. It is the language of one who describes coolly the condition of that person to another; or it is the language of the passionate person himself, after his emotion has subsided, relating what his situation was in the moments of passion. Yet this sort of secondary description, is what Tragic Poets too often give us, instead of the native and primary language of passion. Thus, in Mr. Addison's *Cato*, when Lucia confesses to Portius her love for him, but, at the same time, swears with the greatest solemnity, that in the present situation of their country she will never marry him; Portius receives this unexpected sentence with the utmost astonishment and grief; at least the Poet wants to make us believe that he so received it. How does he express these feelings?

Fix'd in astonishment, I gaze upon thee,
Like one just blasted by a stroke from Heav'n,
Who pants for breath, and stiffens yet alive
In dreadful looks; a monument of wrath.

This makes his whole reply to Lucia. Now did
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LECT. any person, who was of a sudden astonished and
 XLVI. overwhelmed with sorrow, ever, since the creation of the world, express himself in this manner? This is indeed an excellent description to be given us by another, of a person who was in such a situation. Nothing would have been more proper for a bystander, recounting this conference, than to have said,

Fix'd in astonishment, he gaz'd upon her,
 Like one just blasted by a stroke from heaven,
 Who pants for breath, &c.

But the person, who is himself concerned, speaks on such an occasion, in a very different manner. He gives vent to his feelings; he pleads for pity; he dwells upon the cause of his grief and astonishment; but never thinks of describing his own person and looks, and showing us, by a simile, what he resembles. Such representations of passions are no better in Poetry, than it would be in painting, to make a label issue from the mouth of a figure, bidding us remark, that this figure represents an astonished, or a grieved person.

ON some other occasions, when Poets do not employ this sort of descriptive language in passion, they are too apt to run into forced and unnatural thoughts, in order to exaggerate the feelings of persons, whom they would paint as very strongly moved. When Osmyn, in the Mourning Bride, after parting with Almeria, regrets, in a long soliloquy, that his eyes only see objects that

are present, and cannot see Almeria after she is gone; when Jane Shore, in Mr. Rowe's Tragedy, on meeting with her husband in her extreme distress, and finding that he had forgiven her, calls on the rains to give her their drops, and the springs to give her their streams, that she may never want a supply of tears; in such passages, we see very plainly, that it is neither Osmyn, nor Jane Shore, that speak; but the Poet himself in his own person, who, instead of assuming the feelings of those whom he means to exhibit, and speaking as they would have done in such situations, is straining his fancy, and spurring up his Genius, to say something that shall be uncommonly strong and lively.

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IF we attend to the language that is spoken by persons under the influence of real passion, we shall find it always plain and simple; abounding indeed with those figures which express a disturbed and impetuous state of mind, such as interrogations, exclamations, and apostrophes; but never employing those which belong to the mere embellishment and parade of Speech. We never meet with any subtilty or refinement, in the sentiments of real passion. The thoughts which passion suggests, are always plain and obvious ones, arising directly from its object. Passion never reasons nor speculates, till its ardour begins to cool. It never leads to long discourse or declamation. On the contrary, it expresses itself most commonly in short, broken and interrupted Speeches; corresponding to the violent and desultory emotions of the mind.

LECT. XLVI. WHEN we examine the French Tragedians by these principles, which seem clearly founded in nature, we find them often deficient. Though in many parts of Tragic Composition, they have great merit; though in exciting soft and tender emotions, some of them are very successful; yet in the high and strong pathetic, they generally fail. Their passionate Speeches too often run into long declamation. There is too much reasoning and refinement; too much pomp and studied beauty in them. They rather convey a feeble impresson of passion, than awaken any strong sympathy in the Reader's mind.

SOPHOCLES and Euripides are much more successful in this part of Composition. In their pathetic scenes, we find no unnatural refinement; no exaggerated thoughts. They set before us the plain and direct feelings of nature, in simple expressive language; and therefore, on great occasions, they seldom fail of touching the heart*. This too is Shakespeare's great excellency; and

* Nothing, for instance, can be more touching and pathetic than the address which Medea, in Euripides, makes to her children, when she had formed the resolution of putting them to death; and nothing more natural, than the conflict which is described, as suffering within herself on that occasion:

Φευ, Φευ* τι προσδέρμεθε μ' ὁμῶσιν τέκνῃ;
 Τι προσγελᾶτε τοῦ πανυψίστου γέλων;
 Αἰ, αἰ τι δράσω; κενόδιὰ γὰρ εἵχεται.
 Ἐνναίκες, ὅμῃα Φοῦδρον ὡς εἶδον τέκνων,
 Οὐκ εἰν δυνάμην* χερσὶν βυλεῖν ματα, &c.

EUR. MED. L. 1040.

to this it is principally owing, that his dramatic productions, notwithstanding their many imperfections, have been so long the favourites of the Public. He is more faithful to the true language of Nature, in the midst of passion, than any Writer. He gives us this language, unadulterated by art; and more instances of it can be quoted from him, than from all other Tragic Poets put together. I shall refer only to that admirable scene in Macbeth, where Macduff receives the account of his wife, and all his children being slaughtered in his absence. The emotions, first of grief, and then of the most fierce resentment rising against Macbeth, are painted in such a manner, that there is no heart but must feel them, and no fancy can conceive any thing more expressive of Nature.

WITH regard to moral sentiments and reflections in Tragedies, it is clear that they must not recur too often. They lose their effect, when unseasonably crowded. They render the play pedantic and declamatory. This is remarkably the case with those Latin Tragedies which go under the name of Seneca, which are little more than a collection of declamations and moral sentiments, wrought up with a quaint brilliancy, which suited the prevailing taste of that age.

I AM not, however, of opinion, that moral reflections ought to be altogether omitted in Tragedies. When properly introduced, they give dignity to the Composition and, on many occasions, they are extremely natural. When persons are

LECT. under any uncommon distress, when they are beholding in others, or experiencing, in themselves, the vicissitudes of human fortune; indeed, when they are placed in any of the great and trying situations of life, serious and moral reflections naturally occur in them, whether they be persons of much virtue or not. Hardly is there any person, but who, on such occasions, is disposed to be serious. It is then the natural tone of the mind; and therefore no Tragic Poet should omit such proper opportunities, when they occur, for favouring the interests of virtue. Cardinal Wolsey's soliloquy upon his fall, for instance, in Shakspeare, when he bids a long farewell to all his greatness, and the advices which he afterwards gives to Cromwell, are, in his situation, extremely natural; touch and please all Readers; and are at once instructive and affecting. Much of the merit of Mr. Addison's Cato depends upon that moral turn of thought which distinguishes it. I have had occasion, both in this Lecture and in the preceding one, to take notice of some of its defects; and certainly neither for warmth of passion, nor proper conduct of the plot, is it at all eminent. It does not, however, follow, that it is destitute of merit. For, by the purity and beauty of the language, by the dignity of Cato's Character, by that ardour of public spirit, and those virtuous sentiments of which it is full, it has always commanded high regard; and has, both in our own country and among foreigners, acquired no small reputation.

THE Style and Versification of Tragedy, ought to

be free, easy, and varied. Our blank verse is happily suited to this purpose. It has sufficient majesty for raising the Style; it can descend to the simple and familiar; it is susceptible of great variety of cadence; and is quite free from the constraint and monotony of Rhyme. For monotony is, above all things, to be avoided by a Tragic Poet. If he maintains every where the same stateliness of Style, if he uniformly keeps up the same run of measure and harmony in his Verse, he cannot fail of becoming insipid. He should not indeed sink into flat and careless lines; his Style should always have force and dignity, but not the uniform dignity of Epic Poetry. It should assume that briskness and ease, which is suited to the freedom of dialogue, and the fluctuations of passion.

ONE of the greatest misfortunes of the French Tragedy is, its being always written in rhyme. The nature of the French language, indeed, requires this, in order to distinguish the Style from mere prose. But it fetters the freedom of the Tragic Dialogue, fills it with a languid monotony, and is, in a manner fatal to the high strength and power of passion. Voltaire maintains, that the difficulty of composing in French Rhyme, is one great cause of the pleasure which the Audience receives from the Composition. Tragedy would be ruined, says he, if we were to write it in Blank Verse; take away the difficulty, and you take away the whole merit. A strange idea! as if the entertainment of the Audience arose, not from the emotions which the Poet is successful in awa-

LECT. XLVI. kening, but from a reflection on the toil which he endured in his closet, from assorting male and female Rhymes. With regard to those splendid comparisons in Rhyme, and strings of couplets with which it was, some time ago, fashionable for our English Poets to conclude, not only every act of a Tragedy, but sometimes also the most interesting Scenes nothing need be said, but that they were the most perfect barbarisms; childish ornaments, introduced to please a false taste in the Audience; and now universally laid aside.

HAVING thus treated of all the different parts of Tragedy, I shall conclude the subject, with a short view of the Greek, the French, and the English Stage, and with observations on the principal Writers.

MOST of the distinguished characters of the Greek Tragedy have been already occasionally mentioned. It was embellished with the Lyric Poetry of the Chorus, of the origin of which, and of the advantages and disadvantages attending it, I treated fully in the preceding Lecture. The Plot was always exceedingly simple. It admitted of few incidents. It was conducted for most part, with a very exact regard to the unities of action, time, and place. Machinery, or the intervention of the Gods, was employed; and, which is very faulty, the final unravelling sometimes made to turn upon it. Love, except in one or two instances, was never admitted into the Greek Tragedy. Their subjects were often founded on destiny, or inevitable misfortunes. A vein of reli-

gious and moral sentiment always runs through them ; but they made less use than the Moderns of the combat of the passions, and of the distresses which our passions bring upon us. Their plots were all taken from the ancient traditionary stories of their own nation. Hercules furnishes matter for two Tragedies. The history of *Œdipus*, king of Thebes, and his unfortunate family, for six. The war of Troy, with its consequences, for no fewer than seventeen. There is only one, of later date than this, which is the *Perseæ*, or expedition of *Xerxes*, by *Æschylus*. LECT.
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ÆSCHYLUS, is the Father of Greek Tragedy, and exhibits both the beauties, and the defects, of an early original Writer. He is bold, nervous, and animated; but very obscure and difficult to be understood; partly by reason of the incorrect state in which we have his works (they having suffered more by time, than any of the Ancient Tragedians), and partly, on account of the nature of his Style, which is crowded with metaphors, often harsh and tumid. He abounds with martial ideas and descriptions. He has much fire and elevation; less of tenderness, than of force. He delights in the marvellous. The Ghost of *Darius* in the *Perseæ*, the Inspiration of *Cassandra* in *Agamemnon*, and the Songs of the *Furies* in the *Eumenides*, are beautiful in their kind, and strongly expressive of his genius.

SOPHOCLES is the most masterly of the three Greek Tragedians; the most correct in the conduct of his subjects; the most just and sublime in

LECT. his sentiments. He is eminent for his descriptive
 XLVI. talent. The relation of the death of Œdipus, in his Œdipus Coloneus, and of the death of Hæmon and Antigone, in his Antigone, are perfect patterns of description to Tragic Poets. Euripides is esteemed more tender than Sophocles; and he is fuller of moral sentiments. But, in the conduct of his plays, he is more incorrect and negligent; his expositions, or openings of the subject, are made in a less artful manner; and the Songs of his Chorus, though remarkably poetical, have, commonly, less connexion with the main action, than those of Sophocles. Both Euripides and Sophocles, however, have very high merit as Tragic Poets. They are elegant and beautiful in their Style; just, for the most part, in their thoughts; they speak with the voice of nature; and making allowance for the difference of ancient and modern ideas, in the midst of all their simplicity, they are touching and interesting.

THE circumstances of theatrical representation on the stages of Greece and Rome, were, in several respects, very singular, and widely different from what obtains among us. Not only were the Songs of the Chorus accompanied with instrumental music, but the Abbé du Bos, in his Reflections on Poetry and Painting, has proved, with much curious erudition, that the dialogue part had also a modulation of its own, which was capable of being set to notes; that it was carried on in a sort of recitative between the

actors, and was supported by instruments. He has farther attempted to prove, but the proof seems more dubious, that, on some occasions, on the Roman stage, the pronouncing and gesticulating parts were divided; that one actor spoke, and another performed the gestures and motions corresponding to what the first said. The actors in Tragedy wore a long robe, called Smyrna, which flowed upon the Stage. They were raised upon Cothurni, which rendered their stature uncommonly high; and they always played in masques. These masques were like helmets, which covered the whole head; the mouths of them were so contrived, as to give an artificial sound to the voice, in order to make it be heard over their vast theatres; and the visage was so formed and painted, as to suit the age, characters, or dispositions of the persons represented. When, during the course of one Scene, different emotions were to appear in the same person, the masque is said to have been so painted, that the Actor, by turning one or other profile of his face to the Spectators, expressed the change of the situation. This, however, was a contrivance attended with many disadvantages. The masque must have deprived the Spectators of all the pleasure which arises from the natural animated expression of the eye and the countenance; and, joined with the other circumstances which I have mentioned, is apt to give us but an unfavourable idea of the dramatic representations of the Ancients. In defence of them, it must, at the same time, be

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LECT. remembered, that their theatres were vastly more
 XLVI. extensive in the area than ours, and filled with
 immense crowds. They were always uncovered,
 and exposed to the open air. The actors were
 beheld at a much greater distance, and of course
 much more imperfectly by the bulk of the Spec-
 tators, which both rendered their looks of less
 consequence, and might make it in some degree
 necessary that their features should be exagger-
 ated, the sound of their voices enlarged, and their
 whole appearance magnified beyond the life, in
 order to make the stronger impression. It is cer-
 tain, that, as dramatic spectacles were the
 favourite entertainments of the Greeks and Ro-
 mans, the attention given to their proper exhi-
 bition, and the magnificence of the apparatus
 bestowed on their theatres, far exceeded any
 thing that has been attempted in modern ages.

IN the Compositions of some of the French
 Dramatic Writers, particularly Corneille, Racine,
 and Voltaire, Tragedy has appeared with much
 lustre, and dignity. They must be allowed to
 have improved upon the Ancients, in introdu-
 cing more incidents, a greater variety of passions,
 a fuller display of characters, and in rendering
 the subject thereby more interesting. They have
 studied to imitate the ancient models in regularity
 of conduct. They are attentive to all the unities,
 and to all the decorums of sentiment and moral-
 ity; and their Style is, generally, very poetical
 and elegant. What an English taste is most apt
 to censure in them, is the want of fervour,

strength, and the natural language of passion. L E C T.
 There is often too much conversation in their XLVI.
 pieces, instead of action. They are too declamatory, as was before observed, when they should be passionate; too refined, when they should be simple. Voltaire freely acknowledges those defects of the French Theatre. He admits, that their best Tragedies make not a deep enough impression on the heart; that the gallantry which reigns in them, and the long fine spun dialogue with which they over-abound, frequently spread a languor over them; that the Authors seemed to be afraid of being too tragic; and very candidly gives it as his judgment, that an union of the vehemence and the action, which characterise the English Theatre, with the correctness and decorum of the French Theatre, would be necessary to form a perfect Tragedy.

CORNÉILLE, who is properly the Father of French Tragedy, is distinguished by the majesty and grandeur of his sentiments, and the fruitfulness of his imagination. His genius was unquestionably very rich, but seemed more turned towards the Epic than the Tragic vein; for, in general, he is magnificent and splendid, rather than tender and touching. He is the most declamatory of all the French Tragedians. He united the copiousness of Dryden with the fire of Lucan, and he resembles them also in their faults; in their extravagance and impetuosity. He has composed a great number of Tragedies, very unequal

LECT. in their merit. His best and most esteemed pieces,
 XLVI. are the *Cid*, *Horace*, *Polyeucte*, and *Cinna*.

RACINE, as a Tragic Poet, is much superior to Corneille. He wanted the copiousness and grandeur of Corneille's imagination; but is free of his bombast, and excels him greatly in tenderness. Few Poets indeed, are more tender and moving than Racine. His *Phædra*, his *Andromaque*, his *Athalie*, and his *Mithridate*, are excellent dramatic performances, and do no small honour to the French Stage. His language and versification are uncommonly beautiful. Of all the French Authors, he appears to me to have most excelled in Poetical Style; to have managed their Rhyme with the greatest advantage and facility, and to have given it the most complete harmony. Voltaire has, again and again, pronounced Racine's *Athalie* to be the "Chef d'Oeuvre" of the French Stage. It is altogether a sacred drama, and owes much of its elevation to the Majesty of Religion, but it is less tender and interesting than *Andromaque*. Racine has formed two of his plays upon plans of Euripides. In the *Phædra* he is extremely successful, but not so, in my opinion, in the *Iphigenie*; where he has degraded the ancient characters, by unseasonable gallantry. Achilles is a French Lover; and Eriphile, a modern Lady*.

* The characters of Corneille and Racine are happily contrasted with one another, in the following beautiful lines of a French Poet, which will gratify several readers.

VOLTAIRE, in several of his Tragedies, is LECT.
inferior to none of his predecessors. In one great XLVI.

CORNEILLE.

*Illum nobilibus majestas evehit alis
Vertice tangentem nubes: stant ordine longo
Magnanimi circum heroës, fulgentibus omnes
Induti trabeis; Polyuctus, Cinna, Seleucus,
Et Cidus, et rugis signatus Horatius ora.*

RACINE.

*Hunc circumvolitat penna alludente Cupido,
Vincla triumphatis internens florea scenis;
Colligit hæc mollis genius, levibusque catenis
Heroas stringit dociles, Pyrrhosque, Titosque,
Pelidasque, ac Hippolytos, qui sponte sequuntur
Servitium, facilesque ferunt in vincula palmas.
Ingentes nimirum animos Cornelius ingens,
Et quales habet ipse, suis heroibus afflat
Sublimes sensus; vox olli mascula, magnum os,
Nec mortale sonans. Rapido fluit impetu vena,
Vena Sophocleis non inficianda fluentis.
Racinius Gallis haud vifos ante theatri
Mollior ingenio teneros induxit amores.
Magnanimos quamvis sensus sub pectore verset
Agrippina, licet Romano robore Burrhus
Polleat, et magni generosa superbia Pori
Non semel eniteat, tamen esse ad mollia natum
Credideris vatem; vox olli mellea, lenis
Spiritus est; non ille animis vim concitus infert,
At cœcos animorum aditus rimatur, et imis
Mentibus occultos, syren penetrabilis, ictus
Insinuans, palpando ferit, læditque placendo.
Vena fluit facili non intermissa nitore,
Nec rapidos semper volvit cum murmure fluctus,
Agmine sed leni fluitat. Seu gramina lambit
Rivulus; et cœco per prata virentia lapsu,*

LECT. article, he has outdone them all, in the delicate
 XLVI and interesting situations which he has contrived
 to introduce. In these, lies his chief strength.
 He is not, indeed, exempt from the defects of
 the other French Tragedians, of wanting force,
 and of being sometimes too long and declamatory
 in his speeches; but his characters are drawn
 with spirit, his events are striking, and in his
 sentiments there is much elevation. His *Zaire*,
Alzire, *Merope*, and *Orphan of China*, are four
 capital Tragedies, and deserve the highest praise.
 What one might perhaps not expect, Voltaire
 is, in the strain of his sentiments, the most
 religious, and the most moral, of all Tragic Poets.

THOUGH the musical Dramas of Metastasio
 fulfil not the character of just and regular Trage-
 dies, they approach however so near to it, and
 possess so much merit, that it would be unjust
 to pass them over without notice. For the
 elegance of Style, the charms of Lyric Poetry,
 and the beauties of sentiment, they are eminent.
 They abound in well-contrived and interesting
 situations. The dialogue, by its closeness and
 rapidity, carries a considerable resemblance to that
 of the Ancient Greek Tragedies; and is both more

*Aufugiens, tacita fluit indeprensus arena;
 Flore micant ripæ illines; huc vulgus amantum
 Convolat, et lacrymis auget rivalibus undas:
 Singultus undæ referunt; gemitusque sonoros*

*Ingeminant, molli gemitus imitante susurro.
 Templum Tragediæ, per FR. MARSY,
 è Societate Jesu.*

animated

animated and more natural, than the long declamation of the French theatre. But the shortness of the several Dramas, and the intermixture of so much Lyric Poetry as belongs to this sort of Composition, often occasions the course of the incidents to be hurried on too quickly, and prevents that consistent display of characters, and that full preparation of events, which are necessary to give a proper verisimilitude to Tragedy.

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It only now remains to speak of the state of Tragedy in Great Britain; the general character of which is, that it is more animated and passionate than French Tragedy, but more irregular and incorrect, and less attentive to decorum and to elegance. The pathetic, it must always be remembered, is the soul of Tragedy. The English, therefore, must be allowed to have aimed at the highest species of excellence; though, in the execution, they have not always joined the other beauties that ought to accompany the pathetic.

THE first object which presents itself to us on the English Theatre, is the great Shakespeare. Great he may be justly called, as the extent and force of his natural genius, both for Tragedy and Comedy, is altogether unrivalled *. But,

* The character which Dryden has drawn of Shakespeare is not only just, but uncommonly elegant and happy.
“ He was the man, who of all modern, and perhaps
“ ancient Poets, had the largest and most comprehensive
“ soul. All the images of Nature were still present to him,
“ and he drew them not laboriously, but luckily. When

LECT. at the same time, it is genius shooting wild;
 XLVI. deficient in just taste, and altogether unassisted
 by knowledge or art. Long has he been idolised
 by the British nation; much has been said, and
 much has been written concerning him; Criticism
 has been drawn to the very dregs, in commenta-
 ries upon his words and witticisms; and yet it
 remains, to this day, in doubt, whether his
 beauties, or his faults, be greatest. Admirable
 scenes, and passages, without number, there are
 in his Plays; passages beyond what are to be
 found in any other Dramatic Writer; but there
 is hardly any one of his Plays which can be
 called altogether a good one, or which can be
 read with uninterrupted pleasure from beginning
 to end. Besides extreme irregularities in conduct,
 and grotesque mixtures of serious and comic in
 one piece, we are every now and then interrupt-
 ed by unnatural thoughts, harsh expressions, a
 certain obscure bombast, and a play upon words,
 which he is fond of pursuing: and these inter-

“ he describes any thing, you more than see it; you feel
 “ it too. They who accuse him of wanting learning, give
 “ him the greatest commendation. He was naturally learn-
 “ ed. He needed not the Spectacles of Books to read
 “ nature. He looked inward, and found her there. I can-
 “ not say he is every where alike. Were he so, I should
 “ do him injury, to compare him to the greatest of man-
 “ kind. He is many times flat and insipid; his comic wit
 “ degenerating into clenches; his serious swelling into
 “ bombast. But he is always great, when some great,
 “ occasion is presented to him.” DRYDEN’S Essay of
 Dramatic Poetry.

ruptions to our pleasure too frequently occur, L E C T.
 on occasions, when we would least wish to meet XLVI.
 with them. All those faults, however, Shakespeare redeems, by two of the greatest excellencies which any Tragic Poet can possess; his lively and diversified paintings of character; his strong and natural expressions of passion. These are his two chief virtues; on these his merit rests. Notwithstanding his many absurdities, all the while we are reading his plays, we find ourselves in the midst of our fellows; we meet with men, vulgar perhaps in their manners, coarse or harsh in their sentiments, but still they are men; they speak with human voices, and are actuated by human passions; we are interested in what they say or do, because we feel that they are of the same nature with ourselves. It is therefore no matter of wonder, that from the more polished and regular, but more cold and artificial performances of other Poets, the Public should return with pleasure to such warm and genuine representations of human nature. Shakespeare possesses likewise the merit of having created, for himself, a sort of world of præternatural beings. His witches, ghosts, fairies, and spirits of all kinds, are described with such circumstances of awful and mysterious solemnity, and speak a language so peculiar to themselves, as strongly to affect the imagination. His two master-pieces, and in which, in my opinion, the strength of his genius chiefly appears, are, Othello and Macbeth. With regard to his historical plays,

LECT. they are, properly speaking, neither Tragedies
 XLVI. nor Comedies; but a peculiar species of Dramatic
 Entertainment, calculated to describe the manners
 of the times of which he treats, to exhibit the
 principal characters, and to fix our imagination
 on the most interesting events and revolutions of
 our own country *.

AFTER the age of Shakespeare, we can
 produce in the English language several detached
 Tragedies of considerable merit. But we have not
 many Dramatic Writers, whose whole works are
 entitled either to particular criticism, or very
 high praise. In the Tragedies of Dryden and
 Lee, there is much fire, but mixed with much
 fustian and rant. Lee's *Theodosius*, or the
 "Force of Love," is the best of his pieces,
 and, in some of the scenes, does not want
 tenderness and warmth; though romantic in the
 plan and extravagant in the sentiments. *Otway*
 was endowed with a high portion of the Tragic
 spirit; which appears to great advantage in his
 two principal Tragedies, "the *Orphan*," and
Venice Preserved." In these, he is perhaps too
 Tragic; the distresses being so deep, as to tear
 and overwhelm the mind. He is a Writer,
 doubtless, of genius and strong passion; but, at
 the same time, exceedingly gross and indelicate.
 No Tragedies are less moral than those of *Otway*.

* See an excellent defence of Shakespeare's Historical
 Plays, and several just observations on his peculiar excel-
 lencies as a Tragic Poet, in Mrs. Montague's Essay on the
 Writings and Genius of Shakespeare.

There are no generous or noble sentiments in them; but a licentious spirit often discovers itself. He is the very opposite of the French decorum; and has contrived to introduce obscenity and indecent allusions, into the midst of deep Tragedy.

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Rowe's Tragedies make a contrast to those of Otway. He is full of elevated and moral sentiments. The Poetry is often good, and the language always pure and elegant: but, in most of his plays, he is too cold and uninteresting; and flowery rather than tragic. Two, however, he has produced, which deserve to be exempted from this censure, *Jane Shore* and the *Fair Penitent*; in both of which, there are so many tender and truly pathetic scenes, as to render them justly favourites of the Public.

DR. YOUNG'S *Revenge*, is a play which discovers Genius and fire; but wants tenderness, and turns too much upon the shocking and dreadful passions. In Congreve's *Mourning Bride*, there are some fine situations, and much good Poetry. The two first Acts are admirable. The meeting of *Almeria* with her husband *Osmyn*, in the tomb of *Anselmo*, is one of the most solemn and striking situations to be found in any Tragedy. The defects in the catastrophe, I pointed out in the last Lecture. Mr. Thomson's Tragedies are too full of a stiff morality, which renders them dull and formal. *Tancred* and *Sigismunda*, far excels the rest; and for the plot, the characters, and sentiments, justly deserves a

LECT. place among the best English Tragedies. Of later
XLVI. pieces, and of living Authors, I have all along
declined to speak.

UPON the whole; reviewing the Tragic Compositions of different nations, the following conclusions arise: A Greek Tragedy is the relation of any distressful or melancholy incident; sometimes the effect of passion or crime, oftener of the decree of the Gods, simply exposed; without much variety of parts or events, but naturally and beautifully set before us; heightened by the Poetry of the Chorus. A French Tragedy, is a series of artful and refined conversations, founded upon a variety of tragical and interesting situations; carried on with little action and vehemence; but with much poetical beauty, and high propriety and decorum. An English Tragedy is the combat of strong passions, set before us in all their violence; producing deep disasters; often irregularly conducted; abounding in action; and filling the Spectators with grief. The Ancient Tragedies were more natural and simple; the Moderns are more artful and complex. Among the French, there is more correctness; among the English, more fire. *Andromaque* and *Zaire*, soften; *Othello* and *Venice Preserved*, rend the heart. It deserves remark, that three of the greatest master-pieces of the French Tragic Theatre, turn wholly upon religious subjects: the *Athalie* of Racine, the *Polyeucte* of Corneille, and the *Zaire* of Voltaire. The first is founded upon a historical passage of the Old

Testament; in the other two, the distress arises L E C T.
from the zeal and attachment of the principal XLVI.
personages to the Christian faith; and in all the
three, the Authors have, with much propriety,
availed themselves of the Majesty which may be
derived from religious ideas.