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**Johann Gottfried Herder: Shakespeare**

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## *Shakespeare*

If any man brings to mind that tremendous image of one “seated high atop some craggy eminence, whirlwinds, tempest, and the roaring sea at his feet, but with the flashing skies about his head,” that man is Shakespeare! Only we might add that below him, at the very base of his rocky throne, there murmur the multitudes who explain, defend, condemn, excuse, worship, slander, translate, and traduce him—and all of whom he cannot hear!

What a library has already been written about, for, and against him! And I have no

mind to add to it in any way. It is my wish instead that no one in the small circle of those who read these pages would ever again think to write about, for, or against him, either to excuse or to slander him; but that they explain him, feel him as he is, use him, and—where possible—bring him to life for us Germans. If only this essay can help in some small way to realize this goal!

Shakespeare's boldest enemies—in how many different guises—have accused and mocked him, claiming that though he may be a great poet, he is not a good dramatist; or if he is a good dramatist, then he is not a classical tragedian equal in rank to men such as Sophocles, Euripides, Corneille, and Voltaire, who raised this art to the highest pinnacle of perfection. And

Shakespeare's boldest friends have mostly been content to *excuse*, to *defend* him from such attacks; to weigh his beauties against his transgressions of the rules and see the former as compensation for the latter; to utter the *absolvo* over the accused; and then to deify his greatness all the more immoderately, the more they were compelled to shrug their shoulders at his faults. That is how things stand even with the most recent editors and commentators—my hope is that these pages can change the prevailing point of view so that our image of him may emerge into a fuller light.

But is this hope not too bold? Too presumptuous, when so many great men have already written about him? I think not. If I can show that both sides have built their case merely on *prejudice*, on an illusion that

does not really exist; if, therefore, I have merely to dispel a cloud from their eyes or at most adjust the image without in the least altering anything in eye or image, then perhaps it is down to my time or even to chance that I should have discovered the spot where I now detain the reader: “Stand here, otherwise you will see nothing but caricature!” If all we ever did was wind and unwind the tangled threads of learning without ever getting any further—then what an unhappy fate we would weave!

It is from Greece that we have inherited the words *drama*, *tragedy*, and *comedy*; and just as the lettered culture of the human race has, on a narrow strip of the earth’s surface, made its way only through *tradi-*

*tion*, so a certain stock of rules, which seemed inseparable from its teaching, has naturally accompanied it everywhere in its womb and its language. Since a child cannot be and is not educated by means of reason but by means of authority, impression, and the divinity of example and of habit, so entire nations are to an even greater extent children in everything that they learn. The kernel would not grow without the husk, and they will never get the kernel without the husk, even if they could find no use for the latter. That is the case with Greek and northern drama.

In Greece the drama developed in a way that it could not in the north. In Greece it was what it can never be in the north. In the north it is not and cannot be what it was in Greece. Thus Sophocles'

drama and Shakespeare's drama are two things that in a certain respect have scarcely their name in common. I believe I can demonstrate these propositions from Greece itself and in doing so decipher a great deal of the nature of the northern drama and of the greatest northern dramatist, Shakespeare. We shall observe the genesis of the one by means of the other, but at the same time see it transformed, so that it does not remain the same thing at all.

Greek tragedy developed, as it were, out of a single scene, out of the impromptu dithyramb, the mimed dance, the *chorus*. This was enlarged, recast: Aeschylus put two actors onto the stage instead of one, invented the concept of the protagonist,

and reduced the choral part. Sophocles added a third actor and introduced scene painting—from such origins, though belatedly, Greek tragedy rose to greatness, became a masterpiece of the human spirit, the summit of poetry, which Aristotle esteems so highly and we, in Sophocles and Euripides, cannot admire deeply enough.

At the same time, however, we see that certain things can be explained in terms of these origins, which, were we to regard them as dead rules, we would be bound to misconstrue dreadfully. That *simplicity of the Greek plot*, that *sobriety of Greek manners*, that *sustained, buskined style of expression*, *song making*, *spectacle*, *unity of time and place*—all these things lay so naturally and inherently, without any artifice and magic, in the origins of Greek

tragedy that it was made possible only as a consequence of their refinement. They were the husk in which the fruit grew.

Step back into the infancy of that age: *simplicity of plot* really was so steeped in what was called the *deeds of olden times*, in *republican, patriotic, religious, heroic action*, that the poet had more trouble distinguishing parts in this simple whole, introducing a dramatic beginning, middle, and end, than in forcibly separating them, truncating them, or kneading them into a whole out of many discrete events. This ought to be perfectly understandable to anyone who has read Aeschylus or Sophocles. In Aeschylus, what is tragedy often but *an allegorical, mythological, semiepic painting*, almost without a succession of scenes, story, sensations? Or is it not even, as the

ancients said, nothing but *chorus* into which a certain amount of story has been squeezed? Did the simplicity of his plots demand the least effort and art? And was it any different in the majority of Sophocles' plays? His *Philoctetes*, *Ajax*, *Oedipus Coloneus*, and so on, are still very close to the uniformity of their origin, the *dramatic picture framed by the chorus*. No doubt about it! This is the genesis of Greek drama!

Now let us see how much follows from this simple observation. Nothing less than this: "the artificiality of the rules of Greek drama was—not artifice at all! It was Nature!" Unity of plot—was the unity of the action that lay before the *Greeks*; which according to the circumstances of their time, country, religion, and manners could be nothing but this oneness. *Unity*

*of place* was just that, unity of place; for the one brief, solemn action occurred only in a single locality, in the temple, in the palace, as it were in the market square of the nation; to begin with, this action was only mimed and narrated and interposed; then finally the entrances of the characters, the scenes were added—but of course it was all still but one scene, where the chorus bound everything together, where in the nature of things the stage could never remain empty, and so on. And even a child could see that unity of time now ensued from and naturally accompanied all this. In those days all these things lay in *Nature*, so that the poet, for all his art, could achieve nothing without them!

It is also evident that the art of the Greek poets took the very opposite path

to the one that we nowadays ascribe to them. They did not *simplify*, it seems to me, but rather *elaborated*: Aeschylus expanded the *chorus* and Sophocles enlarged upon Aeschylus, and we need only compare the most sophisticated plays of Sophocles and his great masterpiece *Oedipus in Thebes* with *Prometheus* or with accounts of the ancient *dithyramb* to see the astonishing artistry with which he successfully endowed his works. But his was never an art of making a simple plot out of a complex one, but rather of making a complex plot out of a simple one, a beautiful labyrinth of scenes. His greatest concern remained, at the most intricate point in the labyrinth, to foster in his audience the illusion of the earlier simplicity, to unwind the knot of their feelings so gently and

gradually as to make them believe they had never lost it, the previous dithyrambic feeling. To this end he expanded each scene, retained the choruses, and turned them into staging posts for the action; their every word ensured that his audience never lost sight of the whole, kept them in expectation, in the illusion of development, of *familiarity with the action* (all of which the didactic Euripides, when the drama had scarcely reached maturity, promptly neglected to do!). In short, he gave action *grandeur* (something that has been terribly misunderstood).

It ought to be clear to anyone who reads him without prejudice and from the standpoint of his own time that this is the art which Aristotle values in Sophocles, that in everything he took almost the op-

posite view to the spin that modern times have chosen to put on him. The very fact that he let Thespis and Aeschylus alone and stuck to the *variety* of Sophocles' poetry; that he took precisely Sophocles' *innovation* as his point of departure and viewed it as the *essence* of this new poetic genre; that it became his dearest wish to develop a new Homer and to compare him favorably with the original; that he did not neglect even the slightest detail that could in performance lend support to his conception of the action possessing *magnitude and grandeur*—all this shows that the great man also philosophized in the grand style of his age, and that he bears no blame at all for the restrictive and infantile follies that have turned him into the paper scaffolding of our stage. In his excellent

chapter on the nature of plot he evidently “knew and recognized no other rules than the gaze of the spectator, soul, illusion!” and expressly states that *limitations* of length, still less of kind or time or place of the structure, cannot be determined by any other rules. Oh, if Aristotle were alive today and could witness the false, preposterous application of his rules in dramas of a quite different kind! But let us keep to calm and dispassionate inquiry.

As everything in the world changes, so Nature, the true creator of Greek drama, was bound to change also. *The Greek worldview, manners, the state of the republics, the tradition of the heroic age, religion, even music, expression, and the degrees of illusion* changed. And so naturally enough the material for plots disappeared, too, as well as

the opportunity to adapt it and the motive for doing so. To be sure, the poets could draw on older or foreign material and dress it up in the tried-and-tested manner, but that had no effect. Consequently it was devoid of soul. Consequently (why should we mince our words?) it was no longer the thing it once was. It was effigy, imitation, ape, statue, in which only the most devoted lover could still detect the demon that had once brought the statue to life. Let us immediately turn to the new Athenians of Europe (for the Romans were too stupid or too clever or too wild and immoderate to establish a completely Hellenizing theater), and the matter becomes, I think, quite clear.

There is no doubt that this effigy of Greek theater can scarcely be more perfectly conceived and realized than it has

been in France. I am thinking not only of the so-called dramatic rules that have been attributed to dear old Aristotle: *the unity of time, place, and action, the connection of the scenes, the verisimilitude of the scenery*, and so on. The question I really want to ask is whether anything in the world possibly exceeds the sleek, classical thing that the Corneilles, Racines, and Voltaires have produced, the series of beautiful *scenes, dialogues, verses, and rhymes* with their *measure, decorum, brilliance*. Not only does the author of the present essay doubt it, but all the admirers of Voltaire and the French, particularly those noble Athenians themselves, will positively *deny* it—indeed, they have done so often enough already, they are still doing it, and they will continue to do so: “There is nothing better!

It cannot be surpassed!” And from the point of view of this outward conformity, with this effigy treading the boards, they are right and must daily be more so, the more every country in Europe is besotted with this slick superficiality and continues to ape it.

But for all that, there is still the oppressive, inescapable feeling that “this is no Greek tragedy! This is no Greek drama in its purpose, effect, kind, and nature!” And that even the most partisan admirer of the French cannot deny, once he has experienced the Greeks. I do not even propose to inquire “whether they observe their Aristotelian rules as scrupulously as they claim to, for Lessing has recently raised serious doubts about the pretensions they trumpet most loudly.” But even if we

admit that they do keep to these rules, French drama is still not the same thing as Greek drama. Why? Because nothing in their inner essence is the same—not action, manners, language, purpose, nothing. So what is the good of carefully preserved outward similarities? Does anyone really believe that a single one of the great Corneille's heroes is a Roman or French hero? They are Spanish-Senecan heroes! Gallant heroes; adventurous, brave, magnanimous, love-struck, cruel heroes, and therefore dramatic fictions who outside the theater would be branded fools and who even in those days, at least in France, were almost as outlandish as they are in most modern plays. Racine speaks the language of sentiment—granted, in this single instance of agreement he is unsur-

passed, but then again—I would not know where sentiment ever spoke in such a way. They are thirdhand pictures of sentiment; they are never or only rarely the immediate, original, unadorned emotions, searching for words and finding them at last. Voltaire's beautiful verse, its arrangement, content, economy of images, polish, wit, philosophy—is it not beautiful verse? Indeed it is! The most beautiful that one can imagine, and if I were a Frenchman, I would despair at writing poetry after Voltaire—but beautiful or not, it is not theatrical verse appropriate to the action, language, manners, passions, and purpose of a drama (other than the French kind); it is never-ending rhetoric, lies, and galimatias! And the ultimate *aim* of it all? It is certainly not a Greek aim, a tragic purpose! To

stage a beautiful play, as long as it is also a beautiful action! To let a series of respectable, well-dressed ladies and gentlemen recite beautiful speeches and the most beautiful and useful philosophy in beautiful verse! And then to put them all in a story that produces the illusion of reality and thus captivates our attention! Finally, to have it all performed by a number of well-rehearsed ladies and gentlemen, who do their very best to win our applause and approval through declamation, stilted delivery of the sententious speeches, and the outward expression of emotions—all this might serve excellently as a living manual, an exercise in correct expression, in conduct and decorum, as a portrait of good or even heroic manners, and even as a complete academy of national wisdom

and decency in matters of life and death (without taking into account all its subsidiary aims). Beautiful, formative, instructive, and excellent all this may be, but it shows neither hide nor hair of the purpose of Greek theater.

And what was this purpose? Aristotle has declared it to be—and there has been enough dispute about it ever since—no more nor less than a *certain* convulsion of the heart, the agitation of the soul to a *certain degree* and in *certain aspects*; in short, a *species of illusion* that surely no French play has ever achieved or ever will achieve. And consequently (no matter how lovely and useful the name that we give it) it is not Greek drama. It is not Sophoclean tragedy. It is an effigy outwardly resembling Greek drama; but the effigy lacks

spirit, life, nature, truth—that is, all the elements that move us; that is, the tragic purpose and the accomplishment of that purpose. So can it still be the same thing?

This does not yet decide the value or otherwise of French drama but only raises the question of difference, which I believe my foregoing remarks to have put beyond doubt. I shall leave it to the reader to determine for himself “whether a half-truthful copying of foreign ages, manners, and actions, with the exquisite aim of adapting it to a two-hour performance on our stage, can be thought the equal or indeed the superior of an *imitation* that in a certain respect was the highest expression of a people’s national character.” I shall leave it to the reader to determine (and here every Frenchman will have to wriggle out of this difficulty or sing so tunelessly that he

drowns out the reproaches of his critics) whether a poetic work that properly speaking has *no purpose at all* as a whole—for according to the testimony of the best philosophers its virtue lies only in the selection of detail—whether such a copy can be equal in value to a *national institution* whose every little particular produces an effect and betokens the highest, richest culture. Whether, finally, a time may come when, just as the greater part and most artificial of Corneille's plays are already forgotten today, Crébillon and Voltaire will be regarded with the same admiration that we now reserve for the *Astrea* of d'Urfé and all the *Clélie*s and *Aspasias* from the age of chivalry: "How clever, wise, inventive, and well-crafted they are! There would be so much to learn from them, but what a pity it is to be found in

the *Astrea* and *Clélie*.” Their whole art is unnatural, fanciful, dainty! How fortunate if that time had already arrived for our taste for truth! The whole of French drama would have transformed itself into a collection of beautiful verses, sentimentousness, and sentiments—but the great *Sophocles will still stand where he is today!*

So let us now suppose a nation, which due to particular circumstances that will not detain us here, did not care to ape the Greeks and settle for the mere walnut shell, but preferred instead to *invent its own drama*. Then, it seems to me, our first questions must once again be: *When? Where? Under what conditions? Out of which materials should it do so?* And no proof is needed that this invention can and will be

the result of these questions. If this people does not develop its drama out of the chorus and dithyramb, then it can have no choral or dithyrambic parts. If its *history, tradition, and domestic, political, and religious relations* have no such simple character, then naturally its drama cannot partake of this quality either. Where possible, it will *create* its drama out of its history, out of the spirit of the age, manners, opinions, language, national prejudices, traditions, and pastimes, even out of carnival plays and puppet plays (just as the noble Greeks did from the chorus). And what it creates will be drama if it achieves its dramatic purpose among this people. As the reader will see, we have arrived among the *toto divisis ab orbe Britannis* and their great Shakespeare.