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The Works Of Horatio Walpole, Earl of Orford

In Five Volumes

Walpole, Horace

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Thoughts on Tragedy, in Three Letters to Robert Jephson, Esq.

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THOUGHTS ON TRAGEDY:

IN THREE LETTERS

TO

ROBERT JEPHSON, Esq.

L E T T E R I.

AFTER the very great and general applause given to Braganza, my admiration of it, sir, can be of little value, though very precious to me, as it has procured me so very obliging, and, forgive my saying, far too flattering, a mark of attention from you. The pleasure I once had of being acquainted with you naturally attracted my expectation from your play. It is but true to say, that it far exceeded it. I did not expect that a first production in a way in which I did not know you, would prove the work of a master-poet. Even on hearing the three first acts, I was struck, not only with the language, metaphors and similies, which are as new as noble and beautiful, but with the modulation of the numbers. Your ear, sir, is as perfect as your images, and no poet we have excels you in harmony. It enchanted me so much, that it had just the contrary effect from what it ought to have had; for, forgetting how bad a figure I should make by appearing in company with such verses, I could not refuse Mr. Tighe's request of writing an epilogue, though I never was a poet, and have done writing—but in excuse, I must say I complied, only because an epilogue was immediately wanted. You have by this time, I fear, sir, seen it in the newspapers; it was written in one evening; I knew it was not only bad, but most unworthy of such a play; and

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when I heard it spoken, though pronounced better than it deserved, I thought I never heard, to any play, a flatter epilogue. I beg your pardon, sir; I am ashamed of it—the prologue is really a very fine one—but you wanted no assistance, no props; the immense applause which you drew from the audience was owing to yourself alone. Mrs. Yates and Mr. Smith played well, not quite equally to their parts—Two other principal parts were so indifferently performed, that your own merit appeared the greater; and I will venture to say, that Braganza will always charm more when read, than when seen; for I doubt there never will be found a whole set of actors together, who can do it full justice. For my own part, though so discontent with my epilogue, I shall always be proud of having facilitated and hastened Braganza's appearance on the stage, by the zeal with which I solicited the licence, and which I hope atones for my miscarriage in the other. I am indifferent to fame on my own account, but glory in having served yours.

My self-condemnation ought to deter me from obeying your further commands, however graciously laid on me. Can you want counsel, sir, who have produced Braganza? Or am I fit to give counsel, who have written a tragedy that never can appear on any stage? and who am not only sensible of the intrinsic fault in the choice of the subject, but of many others that happily will not come into question?

It is true, I have thought often on the subject, though not of late till I saw your tragedy. I was very attentive to that, and observed what parts made impression on the audience, and which did not; for every part even of so beautiful a composition, and so faultless in the poetry, could not have equal effect on a vast audience, where the greater part could not be judges but from the operation on their passions. My letter, sir, is already too long, nor can I delay thanking you till I have time to recollect my thoughts. I shall certainly never pretend to give you instruction; but if either in the future choice of a subject, or in any observations which I have made on the construction of tragedies, I can furnish you with any hints (for I certainly do not mean to write a treatise, or even methodize my thoughts), I will so far obey you as to lay them before you—though I own I wish rather to see you perform what I am sure I can give no advice upon. As I hold a good comedy the chef-œuvre of human genius, I wish, I say, you would try comedy—though
you

you will be unpardonable too if you neglect tragedy, for which you have so marked a vocation.

I have the honour to be, SIR,

With the greatest respect,

esteem and admiration,

Your most obedient humble servant,

Arlington-Street,
Feb. 24, 1775.

HOR. WALPOLE.

L E T T E R II.

SIR,

IN consequence of your orders and of my own promise, I will venture to lay before you, not advice, but some indigested thoughts on subjects for tragedy, and on the composition of one—rather for the sake of talking with you on a matter agreeable to us both, than to dictate on what I have but once attempted, and never sufficiently studied; indeed not at all till I had executed some part of my piece.

I am ill qualified, sir, to recommend a subject to you; since, though I confess I thought I had found some talent in myself for tragedy (after having vainly tried at comedy, to which I was more inclined), I have never been able to find a second story that pleased me—at least, that touched me enough to pursue it. My wish was to work on that of sir Thomas More—but the difficulties were various and too great. In the first place, it would not be painting him, to omit his characteristic pleasantry. Yet who but Shakespeare could render mirth pathetic? His exquisite scene of the grave-diggers is an instance of that magic and creative power—now so overwhelmed by the ignorance of French criticism, that it is acted no more!—And would not such barbarous blunders stifle genius itself? Not to miscarry in an imitation of Shakespeare, would be to be Shakespeare—it would be still meritorious to aim at it. But there are other difficulties: one must pass censure on sir Thomas's bigotry; or draw him as a martyr to a ridiculous worship, without censuring that worship; for

even an oblique censure on it out of the mouth of one of his *reformed* persecutors would flatten the glory of his martyrdom.—These two difficulties combined made me drop all thoughts of that story, though so fertile of great and bold situations. Anne Boleyn would please me; but Henry VIII. is too perfectly drawn by Shakespeare to admit a second and much weaker edition.

There is one subject, a very favourite one with me, and yet which I alone was accidentally prevented from meddling with—Don Carlos. Otway, the next to Shakespeare in boldness, though only next but one in strokes of nature, in my opinion, as I prefer the tragic scenes in *The Fatal Marriage* and *Oroonoko* to *Venice Preserved* and *The Orphan*, has miscarried woefully in Don Carlos. Sir Charles Williams, who had long intended to write a tragedy on that subject, and who I believe had no tragic powers, never set about it till he was mad—and madness did not assist him as it did Lee; nor allowed him to finish it. Yet how many capital ingredients in that story! Tenderness, cruelty, heroism, policy, pity, terror! The impetuous passions of the prince, the corrected and cooler fondness and virtue of the queen, the king's dark and cruel vengeance, different shades of policy in Rui Gomez, policy and art with franker passions in the duchess of Eboli—how many contrasts!—And what helps from the religion and history of the times, or even of the preceding reign!—In short, sir, I see nothing against it but the notoriety of the story, which I think always disadvantageous, as it prevents surprise—though a known story saves the author some details—which if exhibited, as the French practice, by telling you all the preceding circumstances in the first scene, appear to me a greater crime than any of the improprieties that Shakespeare has crowded into *The Winter Evening's Tale*; for novelty, however badly introduced, can never be so insipid or more improbable than two courtiers telling one another what each must know more or less, though one of them may have been absent two or three years. Shakespeare's prologues are far more endurable.

Why I gave up this fruitful canvas, was merely because the passion is incestuous, as is most unfortunately that of my *Myfterious Mother*, though at different points of time, and that of Carlos a pardonable and not disgusting one. I shall rejoice at having left it, if you will adopt it.

For

For all other subjects, I have said not one pleased me exactly. I think it would not be unadvisable to take any you like, changing the names and the country of the persons; which would prevent the audience being forestalled—though this is less an inducement to you, sir, who have rendered the last act of Braganza the most interesting, though half the audience expected the catastrophe—not indeed so strikingly as you have made it touch them. Still, as the denouement is your own, and one of the finest coups de théâtre I ever met with, it proves that a known story wants some novelty; and I confess that, in your most tender scenes, I felt less than I should have done had I not fore-known the prosperous event.

Changing the persons and country is just the reverse of the bungling contrivance in *Le Comte de Warvic*, where the author has grossly perverted a known story without amending it.

One art I think might be used, though a very difficult one; and yet I would not recommend it to you, sir, if I did not think you capable of employing it; and that is, *a very new and peculiar style*. By fixing on some region of whose language we have little or no idea, as of the Peruvians in the story of Atabalipa, you might frame a new diction, even out of English, that would have amazing effect, and seem the only one the actors could properly use. It is much easier to conceive this, than to give rules for it—but Milton certainly made a new English language; and Shakespeare, always greater than any man, has actually formed a style for Caliban that could suit no other kind of being. Dryden, vast as his genius was, tried the same thing more than once, but failed. He wanted to conceive how the Mexicans must have felt the miracles of ships, and gunpowder, &c. imported by the Europeans—he wrote most harmoniously for them; and it might be poetry, but was not nature. He miscarried still more, when he wanted to forget all he had learned by eyesight, and to think for blind Emmeline:—he makes her talk nonsense:—when she supposes her lover's face is of *soft black gold*, it conveys no idea at all. When blind professor Sanderfon said, he supposed scarlet was like the sound of a trumpet; it proved he had been told that scarlet was the most vivid of colours, but showed he had no otherwise an idea of it.

The religion of the Peruvians, their demons, which I would allow to be
real

real existencies, oracles and prophecies foretelling their ruin and the arrival of strangers, would add great decoration. I love decorations whenever they produce unexpected coups de théâtre. In short, we want new channels for tragedy, and still more for poetry. You have the seeds, sir; sow them where you will, they will grow. Had I your genius, I would hazard a *future* American story—suppose empires to be founded there—give them new customs, new manners—But I grow visionary—and this letter is too long—I will try to have more common sense in the next, not having left room enough in this to tell you how much I am

Your obedient servant,

HOR. WALPOLE.

L E T T E R III.

YOU have drawn more trouble on yourself, sir, than you expected; and would probably excuse my not performing the rest of my promise: but though I look upon myself as engaged to send you my thoughts, you are neither bound to answer them, nor regard them. They very likely are not new, and it is presumption in me to send hints to a much abler writer than myself. I can only plead in apology, that I interest myself in your fame; and as you are the only man capable of restoring and improving our stage, I really mean no more than to exhort and lead you on to make use of your great talents.

I have told you, as is true, that I am no poet. It is as true that you are a genuine one; and therefore I shall not say one word on that head. For the construction of a drama—it is mechanic, though much depends on it. A bystander may be a good director at least; for mechanism certainly is independent of, though easily possessed by, a genius. Banks never wrote six tolerable lines, yet disposed his fable with so much address, that I think three plays have been constructed on his plot of *The Earl of Essex*, not one of which

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is much better than the original. The disposition is the next step to the choice of a subject, on which I have said enough in a former letter. A genius can surmount defects in both. If there is art in Othello and Macbeth, it seems to have been by chance; for Shakespeare certainly took no pains to adjust a plan, and in his historic plays seems to have turned Hollinshed and Stowe into verse and scenes as fast as he could write—though every now and then his divine genius flashed upon particular scenes and made them immortal; as in his King John, where nature itself has stamped the scenes of Constance, Arthur and Hubert with her own impression, though the rest is as defective as possible. He seems to recall the Mahometan idea of lunatics, who are sometimes inspired, oftener changelings. Yet what signifies all his rubbish? He has scenes, and even speeches, that are infinitely superior to all the correct elegance of Racine. I had rather have written the two speeches of lady Percy, in the second part of Henry IV. than all Voltaire, though I admire the latter infinitely, especially in Alzire, Mahomet and Semiramis. Indeed, when I think over all the great authors of the Greeks, Romans, Italians, French, and English (and I know no other languages), I set Shakespeare first and alone, and then begin anew.

Well, sir, I give up Shakespeare's dramas; and yet prefer him to every man. Why? For his exquisite knowledge of the passions and nature; for his simplicity too, which he possesses too when most natural. Dr. Johnson says he is 'bombast' whenever he attempts to be sublime: but this is never true but when he aims at sublimity in the expression; the glaring fault of Johnson himself.—But as simplicity is the grace of sublime, who possesses it like Shakespeare? Is not the

Him, wondrous Him!

in lady Percy's speech, exquisitely sublime and pathetic too? He has another kind of sublime which no man ever possessed but he; and this is, his art in dignifying a vulgar or trivial expression. Voltaire is so grossly ignorant, and tasteless, as to condemn this, as to condemn *the bare bodkin*—But my enthusiasm for Shakespeare runs away with me.

I was speaking of the negligence of his construction. You have not that fault.

fault. I own I do not admire your choice of Braganza, because in reality it admits of but two acts, the conspiracy and the revolution. You have not only filled it out with the most beautiful dialogue, but made the interest rise, though the revolution has succeeded. I can never too much admire the appearance of the friar, which disfarms Velafquez: and yet you will be shocked to hear, that, notwithstanding all I could say at the rehearsal, I could not prevail to have Velafquez drop the dagger instantly, the only artful way of getting it out of his hand; for, as lady P—— observed, if he kept it two moments, he would recollect that it was the only way of preserving himself. But actors are not always judges. They persisted, for show-sake, against my remonstrances, to exhibit the duke and duchess on a throne in the second act; which could not but make the audience conclude that the revolution had even then taken place.

If I could find a fault in your tragedy, sir, it would be a want of more short speeches, of a sort of serious repartee, which gives great spirit. But I think the most of what I have to say may be comprised in a recommendation of keeping the audience in suspense, and of touching the passions by the pathetic familiar. By the latter, I mean the study of Shakespeare's strokes of nature, which, soberly used, are alone superior to poetry, and, with your ear, may easily be made harmonious.

If there is any merit in *my* play, I think it is in interrupting the spectator's fathoming the *whole* story till the last, and in making every scene tend to advance the catastrophe. These arts are mechanic, I confess; but at least they are as meritorious as the scrupulous delicacy of the French in observing, not only the unities, but a fantastic decorum, that does not exist in nature, and which consequently reduce all their tragedies, wherever the scene may lie, to the manners of modern Paris. Corneille could be Roman; Racine never but French, and, consequently, though a better poet, less natural and less various. Both indeed have prodigious merit. Phedre is exquisite, Britannicus admirable; and both excite pity and terror. Corneille is scarce ever tender, but always grand; yet never equal in a whole play to Racine. Rodogune, which I greatly admire, is very defective; for the two princes are so equally good, and the two women so very bad, that they divide both our esteem and indignation. Yet I own, Racine, Corneille, and Voltaire ought to rank before all

our tragedians, but Shakespeare. Jane Shore is perhaps our best play after his. I admire All for Love very much; and some scenes in Don Sebastian, and Young's Revenge. The Siege of Damascus is very pure—and Phædra and Hippolitus fine poetry, though wanting all the nature of the original. We have few other tragedies of signal merit, though the four first acts of The Fair Penitent are very good. It is strange that Dryden, who showed such a knowledge of nature in The Cock and Fox, should have so very little in his plays—he could rather describe it than put it into action. I have said all this, sir, only to point out to you what a field is open for you—and though so many subjects, almost all the known, are exhausted, nature is inexhaustible, and genius can achieve any thing. We have a language far more energetic, and more sonorous too, than the French. Shakespeare could do what he would with it in its unpolished state. Milton gave it pomp from the Greek, and softness from the Italian; Waller now and then, here and there, gave it the elegance of the French. Dryden poured music into it; Prior gave it ease; and Gray used it masterly for either elegy or terror. Examine, sir, the powers of a language you command, and let me again recommend to you a diction of your own*, at least in some one play. The majesty of Paradise Lost would have been less imposing, if it had been written in the style of The Essay on Man. Pope pleases, but never surprises; and astonishment is one of the springs of tragedy. Coups de théâtre, like the sublime one in Mahomet, have infinite effect. The incantations in Macbeth, that almost border on the burlesque, are still terrible. What French criticism can wound the ghosts of Hamlet or Banquo? Scorn rules, sir, that cramp genius, and substitute delicacy to imagination in a barren language. Shall not we soar, because the French dare not rise from the ground?

You seem to possess the *tender*. The *terrible* is still more easy, at least I know to me. In all my tragedy, Adeliza contents me the least. Contrasts, though mechanic too, are very striking; and though Moliere was a comic writer, he might give lessons to a tragic. But I have passed all bounds; and yet shall be glad if you can cull one useful hint out of my rhapsodies. I here put an end to them; and wish, out of all I have said, that you may remember

* Mr. Jephson followed this advice in his Law of Lombardy—but was not happy in his attempt. H. W.

nothing, sir, but my motives in writing, obedience to your commands, and a hearty eagerness for fixing on our stage so superior a writer.

I am, Sir,

With great esteem and truth,

Your most obedient humble servant,

HOR. WALPOLE.

P. S. I must beg you, sir, not to let these letters go out of your hands; for they are full of indigested thoughts, some perhaps capricious, as those on novel diction—but I wish to tempt genius out of the beaten road; and originality is the most captivating evidence of it.