

but the principal characteristic of the Greek epigram is ingenuity and simplicity, or what the French term *naïveté*.

The era of dramatic composition among the Greeks is supposed to have commenced about 590 B. C.\* Thespis, who is said to have been the inventor of tragedy,† was contemporary with Solon; and if the drama originated with the Athenians, it is equally certain that they brought it to a very high pitch of perfection. The Greek comedy has been divided into three distinct classes, the *old*, the *middle*, and the *new*. Of the old comedy, which is noted for the extreme freedom and severity of its satire, the principal dramatists were Eupolis, Cratinus, and Aristophanes.

Eupolis atque Cratinus, Aristophanesque poetæ,  
Atque alii quorum Comœdia prisca virorum est,  
Siquis erat dignus describi, quod malus ac fur,  
Quod mœchus foret, aut sicarius, aut alioqui  
Famosus,‡ multa cum libertate notabant.

Hor. Sat. lib. i. sat. 4.

And it had been well if their satire had been confined to the vicious alone and notoriously profligate. We might excuse, when such were the sole objects of castigation, even the unbridled license with which they wielded the iron scourge of sarcasm. Unfortunately their censure was not so discriminating, as appears by the dramas of Aristophanes, yet preserved entire.

If it be true, that under the administration of Pericles at Athens, all compositions for the stage were submitted to the review of certain judges, whose approbation it was necessary to obtain before they were allowed to be performed, it is not easy to account for those gross immoralities and violations of common decency which are to be found in the comedies of Aristophanes. Of this author's composition, we have eleven dramatic pieces, which, it

\* Aristotle considers Homer as the founder of the drama among the Greeks—not as having himself written any composition strictly of a dramatic nature, but as having led the way to it, by his lively representations of life and manners, both in the more serious and graver aspects and in the comic; his *Iliad* and *Odyssey* bearing the same relation to tragedy, that his *Margites* does to comedy.—*Arist. de Poet.* c. 4.

† Mr. Harris thus plausibly accounts for the priority of tragedy to comedy in the poetry of all nations: "It appears, that not only in Greece, but in other countries more barbarous, the first writings were in metre, and of an epic cast, recording wars, battles, heroes, ghosts; the marvellous always, and often the incredible. Men seemed to have thought the higher they soared, the more important they should appear; and that the common life which they then lived was a thing too contemptible to merit imitation. Hence it followed, that it was not till this common life was rendered respectable by more refined and polished manners, that men thought it might be copied, so as to gain them applause. Even in Greece itself, tragedy had attained its maturity many years before comedy, as may be seen by comparing the age of Sophocles and Euripides, with that of Philemon and Menander."

‡ "Eupolis, Cratinus, Aristophanes, and other old writers of comedy, used unbounded license in exposing the knave, the thief, the adulterer, the assassin, or any infamous character whomsoever."

must be owned, do not give a favorable opinion of the taste of the Athenians at this period of their highest national splendor. It is true, that we discern exquisite knowledge of human nature in those dramas, and that they have high value, as throwing light on the manners and customs of the Athenians, and even on their political constitution. But there are coarseness of sentiment and ribaldry of expression in the comedies of Aristophanes, which to modern taste and manners appear extremely disgusting. We must presume, that even in the days of the author, such performances could have been relished only by the very dregs of the populace; and that what chiefly recommended them to these, was the malicious sarcasm and abuse which was thrown upon their superiors, often the best and worthiest members of the commonwealth.

To the old comedy—of which the extreme license and scurrility became at length disgusting, as the manners of the Athenians became more refined—succeeded the middle comedy, which, retaining the spirit of the old, and its vigorous delineation of manners and character, banished from the drama all personal satire or abuse of living characters by name. The writers of this class were numerous, and we have several fragments remaining of their compositions, but no entire pieces. Of these fragments, Mr. Cumberland has published some valuable specimens, admirably translated, in the sixth volume of *The Observer*. Of these specimens, the passages taken from the comedies of Alexis, Antiphanes, Epicrates, Mnesimachus, Phœnicides, and Timocles, will give pleasure to every reader of taste.

Last came the *new comedy* of the Greeks, including in point of time a period of about thirty years—from the death of Alexander the Great, to the death of Menander, the last and, perhaps, the greatest ornament of the Grecian drama. In this short period, the Athenian stage was truly a school of morals; and while comedy lost none of her characteristic excellence in the just delineation of manners, she had the additional graces of tenderness, elegance, and decorum. Of this brilliant era, the chief dramatic writers were Menander, Philemon, Diphilus, Apollodorus, Philippides, and Posidippus.

In the comedies of Menander was found a vein of the most refined wit and pleasantry, which never transgressed the bounds of decency and strict morality. His object was at once the exemplary display of the charms of virtue, and the chastisement of vice; and employing, alternately, the grave and the jocose, attempering moral example with keen but elegant satire, he exhibited the most instructive as well as the justest representations of human nature. Quintilian and Plutarch\* have deservedly enlarged on the

\* Quint. l. x. c. i., and Plutarch. Comp. Aristoph. and Menand.

merits of this excellent dramatic poet, expressing their opinion, that he has eclipsed the reputation of all the other writers in the same department among the ancients. By the former of these authors, the plays of Menander are recommended, as a school of eloquence for the formation of a perfect orator; so admirable is the skill of the poet, in painting the manners and passions in every condition and circumstance of life. The eulogium of Menander, by Quintilian, might, in modern times, be held as no exaggerated character of our immortal *Shakspeare*. How much is it to be regretted, that of all the works of this great master of the ancient drama, of which there were near one hundred comedies, there should, unfortunately, remain nothing more than a few detached passages preserved by Athenæus, Plutarch, Stobæus, and Eustathius! Yet even these justify the high character which the ancient critics have given of this poet; and we have yet a completer and more ample proof of his merits in the comedies of Terence, which are now universally considered as little else than versions from Menander.\*

Next in merit to Menander, and not inferior to him in fertility of genius, was Philemon, who is recorded to have written no less than ninety comedies. Of his remains, the few fragments preserved by Athenæus and Stobæus do not derogate from the character given of him by Quintilian and the ancient critics, as second, at least, in dramatical talents to the prince of the comic stage. In the same scale of merit stood Diphilus, of whom Clemens Alexandrinus and Eusebius give a high character in point of morals as well as comic humor. Of his works, as well as those of his rivals, Apollodorus, Philippides, and Posibippus, there remain a few fragments.

Time has happily spared to us more considerable remains of the tragic muse of the Greeks than of the comic, and fortunately those pieces which have been preserved, are the production of the three great ornaments of the drama, Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Among the celebrated tragic poets, Æschylus ranks first in priority of time. Seventy years had only elapsed since the days of Thespis, when the Greek drama had no other stage for its exhibition than a wagon. The improvement that took place from that period, to the time when Æschylus produced those pieces which were crowned at the Olympic games, must have been great indeed. This author is said to have written sixty-six tragedies, for thirteen of which he gained the first prize in that department of poetry. The tragedies of Æschylus abound in strokes of the true sublime; but his genius, not always regulated

\* Mr. Cumberland, in the *Observer*, No. 149, has translated some of the fragments of Menander with great spirit and sufficient fidelity, as also one of Diphilus.

by good taste, frequently betrays him into the bombast: *Sublimis—gravis—et grandiloquus usque ad vitium*, says Quintilian. He studied not in his compositions that regularity of plan, and strict observance of the unities, which the works of the succeeding poets seem to have rendered essential to the Greek drama; but to this very circumstance we are indebted for the wild and romantic nature of his plots, and that terrible grandeur with which his characters are sometimes delineated. The high esteem which Aristophanes had for the talents of Æschylus, is demonstrated by that dispute which in his comedy entitled "The Frogs," he feigns to have taken place in the infernal regions between Euripides and Æschylus for the tragic chair. Bacchus, the judge of the controversy, gives a direct decision in favor of Æschylus; and Sophocles acquiesces in the judgment, and declares that though he himself is ready to contest the palm with Euripides, he yields it willingly to Æschylus.

Euripides and Sophocles were about fifty years posterior in time to Æschylus; though both of them had begun their dramatic career in his lifetime. The judgment of the critics, both of ancient and of modern times, is almost equally balanced between these great masters of the drama. Quintilian leaves the question undecided with respect to their poetical merits; but prefers Euripides, as affording a better practical model of oratory, as well as on the score of his admirable, prudential, and moral lessons. Euripides is a great master of the passions, and with high skill in the excitement of the grander emotions of terror, rage, and madness, is yet more excellent in exciting the tender affections of grief and pity. In the judgment of Longinus, this poet had not a natural genius for the sublime; though the critic acknowledges that he is capable at times, when the subject demands it, of working himself up to a very high elevation, both of thought and expression. This criticism is certainly fastidious in no small degree. If a poet has it in his power to rise to the sublime when his subject demands it, what better proof can we have of a natural genius for the sublime? But how absurd to deny that the *Medea* is the work of a transcendent native genius for the sublime! As a moralist, Euripides ranks perhaps the highest among the ancient poets. He was the only dramatic writer of whom Socrates deigned to attend the representations. The singular esteem in which Cicero held him as a moral writer, he has strongly expressed in one of his letters to Tiro,\* and it is a remarkable anecdote, that Cicero, in the last moments of his life, when assassinated in his litter, was occupied in reading the *Medea*. It is well known, that that great and good man expected his fate; and we must thence conclude that he thought no preparation for death more suitable than the excellent

\* Cic. Ep. ad Fam. lib. xvi. ep. 8.

moral reflections of his favorite poet. Of seventy-five tragedies written by Euripides, there remain to us nineteen, and the fragment of a twentieth. Quintilian justly gives it as a decisive proof of the high merit of this great dramatist, that Menander admired, and followed him as his model, though in a different species of the drama.\*

Contemporary with Euripides was his great rival, Sophocles, who, in the judgment both of the ancient and modern critics, shares equally with the former the chief honors of the tragic muse. As the principal excellence of Euripides is judged to lie in the expression of the tender passions, so the genius of Sophocles has been thought more adapted to the grand, the terrible, and the sublime. Yet the latter has occasionally shown himself a great master in the pathetic. I know not that either the ancient or the modern drama can produce a passage more powerfully affecting, than the speech of Electra on receiving the urn which she is told contains the ashes of her brother Orestes:

Ω φίλτατε μνημείον ἀνθρώπων ἔμοι, &c.  
Soph. Elect., Act iv.

We perceive in the tragedies of Sophocles great knowledge of the human heart, together with a simplicity and chastity of expression in the general language of the characters, which greatly heightens his occasional strokes of the sublime. Of all the productions of the Greek stage which time has spared to us, that which is generally esteemed the most perfect is the *Œdipus* of Sophocles. There could not, perhaps, be devised a dramatic fable more perfectly suited to the excitement both of terror and pity than that of the unfortunate *Œdipus*; yet it is defective in one great point, which is a moral. There is no useful truth inculcated by the spectacle of a man reduced to the utmost pitch of human misery, and marked out as an object of the indignation and vengeance of the gods, for actions in which it is not possible to accuse him of criminality. I have formerly taken notice of this strange paradox in the ideas of the ancients with respect to morality, † and I will not repeat the observation.

The manner in which the dramatic compositions of the Greeks were performed has afforded much matter for learned inquiry, and given room to considerable diversity of opinion. It is well known that the ancient actors, both in the Greek and Roman theatres, wore masks suited to the characters they represented, of which the enlarged and distended features were calculated to be seen at a great distance; and the mouth was so constructed as to increase

\* Hunc et admiratus maximé est, ut sæpe testatur, et secutus quamquam in opere diverso, Menander. Just. Or. l. x. c. 1.

† Supra, book i., ch. 8.

the sound of the voice like a speaking-trumpet. The tragic declamation was loud, sonorous, and inflated, while the tone of the comic actors was nearer to the manner of ordinary discourse. The ancient tragedy may indeed be described, not as an imitation of nature, but as altogether an artificial composition, intended to produce a grand and imposing effect by the united power of music, dancing, strong and expressive gesticulation, and pompous declamation; the whole introduced through the medium of some interesting, but simple story, fitted by its nature to excite powerfully the emotions of terror and of pity. The ancient comedy, with the accompaniments of music and dancing, was an imitation of ordinary life, intended to inculcate good morals by just delineations of the laudable or faulty characters of mankind, as the more serious dramas of Menander and Terence; or to chastise vice by the ruder methods of satire, burlesque, and invective, as the comedies of Aristophanes and Plautus.

As the tragic and comic dramas were thus different in their nature, they were usually performed by different classes of actors.\* Quintilian tells us that *Æsopus* declaimed much more gravely than *Roscius*, because the former was accustomed to act tragedy, and the latter comedy.† The dresses and decorations in the two species of drama were likewise altogether different. The tragic actor used the *cothurnus*, or high-soled buskin, which increased his height some inches, and also a stuffed dress to give a proportional size and breadth to the figure.‡ The comic actor trod the stage with the *soccus*, or low-heeled slipper, and an ordinary garb suited to the character in real life. It was therefore corresponding to their figures that the former declaimed in a loud and solemn tone, or mouthed his part, while the latter spoke in a natural tone and manner: *Comædus sermocinatur*, says Apuleius, *Tragædus vociferatur*.

There are some circumstances regarding the exhibition of the ancient drama, on which the modern critics are not agreed. There is good reason to believe that both the comedy and tragedy of the Greeks and Romans were set to music, and the greater part, if not the whole, sung by the actors, or spoken in musical intonation,

\* Plato, 3 Dial. de Republ.

† *Roscius* citator, *Æsopus* gravior fuit; quod ille comædias, hic tragædias egit.—Just. Or., lib. xi., c. 3.

‡ *Lucian* gives a most ludicrous picture of the costume of the tragic actors and their turgid manner of performance, in his dialogue on stage dancing.—*Περί Ορχήσεως*. "What more absurd and ridiculous spectacle can there be, than to see a man artfully drawing out his figure to a most unnatural length, stalking in upon high shoes, his head covered with a fearful masque, with a mouth gaping wide, as if he was about to devour the spectators; not to mention his stuffed belly and chest, extended to give the long figure a proportional size; then his bellowing and ranting; sometimes blustering and thumping, then singing iambics, or musically whining out the most grievous calamities."

like the recitative of the modern Italian operas. Not to mention the etymology of the words *κωμωδία* and *τραγωδία*, plainly denoting the composition to be of the nature of song, there are many passages of the ancient authors which countenance the foregoing opinion.\*

The ancient actors used in their performance a great deal of gesticulation, which was requisite, from the immense size of their theatres, in order to supply the defect of the voice, which, even with the contrivance before mentioned to increase its sound, was still too weak to be distinctly heard over so large a space. A violent and strongly marked gesticulation was, therefore, in some degree, necessary; and this led to a very extraordinary practice in the latter period of the Roman theatre: namely, that there were two persons employed in the representation of one character. Livy, the historian, relates the particular incident which gave rise to this practice. The poet Livius Andronicus, in acting upon the stage in one of his own plays, was called by the plaudits of the audience to repeat some favorite passages so frequently, that his voice became inaudible through hoarseness, and he requested that a boy might be allowed to stand in front of the musicians, and recite the part, while he himself performed the consonant gesticulation. It was remarked, says the historian, that his action was much more free and forcible, from being relieved of the labor of utterance; and hence it became customary, adds Livy, to allow this practice in monologues, or soliloquies, and to require both voice and gesture from the same actor only in the colloquial parts. We have it on the authority of Lucian, that the same practice came to be introduced upon the Greek stage. Formerly, says that author, the same actors both recited and gesticulated; but as it was observed that the continual motion, by affecting the breathing of the actor, was an impediment to distinct recitation, it was judged better to make one actor recite and another gesticulate. For farther information on this matter I refer to a very ingenious and ample disquisition by the Abbé Du Bos in his *Reflections Critiques sur la Poësie et sur la Peinture*. Tom. i. sect. 42.

In treating of the Greek drama, it would be an omission not to mention a species of dramatic composition—of a nature very much inferior to the proper tragedy and comedy of the ancients; but which, at length, in the corruption of taste, became greatly in fashion both among the Greeks and Romans, and seems, indeed, to have been carried to as high a degree of perfection as the

\* Suetonius, in speaking of the Emperor Nero, who piqued himself on his talents as a player, and used frequently to exhibit on the stage, says, "*Tragœdías quoque cantavit personatus. Inter cetera cantavit Canacem parturientem* (a strange part for his imperial majesty to perform!) *Orestem matricidam, Oedipodem excecatum, Herculem insanum.*" Some of these characters, it must be allowed, were sufficiently consonant to their actor.

nature of the composition would admit of. What I speak of is the *mimes* and *pantomimes*. The etymology of the words shows that this species of entertainment was considered as a sort of mimicry or ludicrous imitation. The *mimes* originally made a part of the ancient comedy, and the mimic actors played or exhibited grotesque dances between the acts of the comedy. As this entertainment was highly relished, the mimes began to rest on their own merits, and setting themselves up in opposition to the comedians, delighted the vulgar by making burlesque parodies on the more regular representations of the stage. Some of these pieces were published, and were of such merit as humorous compositions, that the philosopher Plato did not disdain to confess his admiration of them.

The pantomimes differed from the mimes in this respect, that they consisted solely of gesticulation, and seem to have been very nearly of the same character with our modern pantomimes. What is termed in France the Italian comedy, seems, on the other hand, to hold a very strict affinity with the ancient mimes. Both the one and the other, if we may judge from the name, were of Greek origin; but they were introduced into Rome towards the end of the commonwealth—and, as the spectacle was greatly relished, the art was proportionally cultivated and improved. The performances became gradually more refined and chaste; and that which was at first little better than low buffoonery, began at last to aspire to the merits of the higher drama, tragedy and comedy. The tragedy of *Œdipus* was in the reign of Augustus performed at Rome by the pantomimes in dumb show, and that so admirably as to draw tears from the whole spectators. The chief actors in this department were Pylades and Bathyllus; and the contentions excited by the partisans of these mimics arose at length to such a pitch, that Augustus thought proper to admonish Pylades in private, and caution him to live on good terms with his rival, for the sake of the public peace. Pylades contented himself with replying, that it was for the emperor's best interest, that the public should find nothing more material to engross their thoughts than him and Bathyllus. The chief merit of Pylades, as Athenæus informs us, lay in the comic pantomime, and that of Bathyllus in the tragic. But however great the perfection to which these performances were carried by the ancients, they were always regarded as a spurious species of the drama, indicating the corruption of a more liberal art.\*

The genius of the Greeks was in no department of literary com-

\* Lucian is a warm apologist of the art of pantomime in his dialogue *Περὶ Ορχήσεως*. And his contemporary, Apuleius, has given, in his florid style of writing, an amusing account of an ancient pantomime on the subject of the Judgment of Paris. *Metamorph.* l. x.

position more distinguished than in history. In attending to the progress of the arts and sciences, it has been generally remarked that there are particular ages in which the human mind seems to take a strong bent or direction to one class of pursuits in preference to all others. Emulation may in a great measure account for this: for when one artist or one learned man becomes confessedly eminent, others are excited by a natural bias to the same studies and pursuits in which he has attained reputation. In treating of the fine arts among the Greeks, we remarked that extraordinary constellation of eminent artists which adorned the age of Pericles. We shall observe a similar phenomenon in the age of Leo the Tenth. In like manner we find the ablest of the Greek historians all nearly contemporary with each other. Herodotus, the most ancient of the Greek historians of merit, died 413 years before the Christian era; Thucydides 391 before that period; and Xenophon was about twenty years younger than Thucydides.

Herodotus, a native of Halicarnassus, one of the Greek cities of Asia, has written the joint history of the Greeks and Persians, from the time of Cyrus the Great (599 B. C.) to the battles of Plataea and Mycale, a period of 120 years.\* He treats incidentally likewise of the history of several other nations—of the Egyptians, Assyrians, Medes, and Lydians. His account of Egypt, in particular, is extremely minute and curious. He had travelled into that country, and besides what he relates from actual knowledge and observation, he was at much pains to obtain from the priests every degree of information they could give him of the antiquities and of the manners and customs of the country. He likewise visited the greatest part of Greece, travelling thence into Thrace and Scythia; and in Asia he made a journey to Babylon and Tyre, and the most considerable places in Syria and Palestine. With the object of writing his history, he seems to have been most solicitous to collect information from every quarter; and it is his greatest fault that he has not been sufficiently scrupulous in his admission of many idle and absurd anecdotes, which he had too much good sense to believe, and yet thought not unworthy of being recorded. It is true, that for the most part he puts the reader on his guard in such matters as he considers to be either palpably fabulous or not sufficiently authenticated; but the dignity of history is debased even by the admission of such matter, under whatever caution it is presented. It is not to be denied, however, that the merits of Herodotus are of no common degree. When we consider him as the earliest writer of regular history among the ancients whose works have been preserved; while we

\* Herodotus gives a very brief detail of the preceding period, from the reign of Gyges, king of Lydia (718 B. C.) to the birth of Cyrus: but the history properly commences with Cyrus

observe the valuable and instructive details which we find in him, and in no other historian, and remark that the subsequent writers of reputation have rested for many material facts on his authority; while we attend to the unaffected ease and simplicity of his narrative, the graceful flow of his style, and even the charm of his antiquated Ionic diction—there is perhaps no historian of antiquity who deserves a higher estimation.\* Several of the ancient writers have impeached the character of Herodotus in point of veracity; but none in such severe terms as Plutarch, who has written a pretty long dissertation, expressly to show the want of faith and the malignity of the historian. The fact is, that Plutarch bore strong enmity against Herodotus for a supposed aspersion cast by that historian on the honor of his country. Herodotus had related that, in the expedition of Xerxes, the Thebans, apprehensive of the fate of their own territory, deserted the common cause and joined the Persians. The fact was true; but Plutarch, who was a native of Chæronea, one of the Theban states, could not bear this imputation on his country, and wreaked his spleen on the historian in the treatise before mentioned. The facts which he instances are in general very trifling, and are chiefly such stories as the historian owns he has related on dubious authority. Herodotus is said to have recited history to the Greeks assembled at the solemn festival of the *Panathenaia*, or, as others say, at the Olympic games—an expedient for the good policy of which Lucian gives him credit, as there could be no means half so speedy of making known his genius and circulating his reputation. Those public recitations had an admirable effect. It was this display of the talents of Herodotus and the fame which attended it, that kindled the enthusiasm of genius in the young Thucydides.

Thucydides was a native of Athens, and of an illustrious family; being allied, by the female line, to the kings of Thrace, and by the male, a descendant from Cimon and Miltiades. A contemporary, and familiarly acquainted with many of the most remarkable men of his country, with Socrates, Plato, Pericles, Alcibiades, it was no wonder that he felt the noble emulation of raising himself a name in future ages. He was bred to the profession of arms, and distinguished himself honorably, in the beginning of the war of Peloponnesus; but having miscarried in an attempt to relieve Amphipolis, then blockaded by the Lacedæmonians, he was banished, on that account, from his country, for the space of twenty years. He retired to the island of Ægina, and employed the long period of his exile in composing his history of the Peloponnesian war, of the progress and detail of which, besides his own personal knowledge, he spared no pains to obtain

\* In Herodoto, cum omnia, (ut ego quidem sentio,) leniter fluunt, tum ipsa δὲ ἀλεερός habet eam jucunditatem ut latentes etiam numeros complexa videatur.—Quint. de Just. Or. lib. ix. c. 4.