

ELIZABETHAN DRAMATIC CRITICISM

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ENGLISH literary criticism is derived partly from the ancients, and partly from the Italian scholars. Recent research has revealed many Italian sources drawn upon by Sidney and Jonson. The earliest formal treatise touching upon literature in England is Leonard Coxe's *Arte or Crafte of Rhetoryke*, written about 1524; this was derived in part from Melanchthon. Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorike* followed in 1553. More important still is Roger Ascham's *Scholemaster* (1570) which contains the first reference in English to Aristotle's *Poetics*. George Whetstone's *Dedication to Promos and Cassandra* (1578) is a curious criticism of the drama of other nations and an attempt to reconcile Platonism and the drama. The English stage was at several times the subject of controversies between the dramatists and their adherents, and the Puritanical element. The first of these controversies called forth a number of interesting attacks and defenses, among them three or four of some value as criticism of the drama. In 1577 John Northbrooke published his *Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, vaine Playes or Enterluds, with other idle Pastimes, &c., commonly used on the Sabaoth Day, and reproued by the Authoritie of the Word of God and auntient Writers*. Then followed Stephen Gosson's *The School of Abuse* (1579), another attack. Thomas Lodge replied in his *Defence of Poetry, Music, and Stage Plays* (1579). Later in the same year Gosson published his *A Short Apologie of the Schoole of Abuse, etc.* Henry Durham's *A Second and Third Blast of Retreat from Plays and Theatres* appeared in 1580. Gosson's *Playes confuted in five Actions, etc.*, was published about 1582. About this time Sir Philip Sidney wrote his *Defence of Poesy, or Apologie for Poetry* (published 1595), a reply to the Puritan attacks on the stage. Three further attacks may be mentioned; Philip Stubbes' *The Anatomie of Abuses*

(1583), George Whetstone's *A Touchstone for the Time* (1584), and William Rankins' *A Mirrour of Monsters* (1587). William Webbe's *A Discourse of English Poetrie* (1586) is a more ambitious formal treatise on writing, while Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589) furthered the work of classification and introducing foreign -- chiefly Italian -- meters and forms. Sir John Harington's *Apologie of Poetry* (1591) was, like Sidney's similar work, a defense against the Puritan attacks. When Sidney's *Defence* was published in 1595, it was already fairly well known, as it had circulated in manuscript for some years. It is rigidly classical in its sections on the drama, and follows the Italian Renaissance scholars in requiring greater verisimilitude, and an adherence to the Unities. It is curious to note the absence of any such declaration of independence as Lope de Vega's *New Art* among the Elizabethan dramatists, most of whom were opposed in practice to all formulas. The greatest critical treatises of the period were classic in tendency, and the two most important -- Sidney's and Jonson's -- are directed against current practices in playwriting. Bacon's remarks on the drama -- in the *Essays*, the *Advancement of Learning*, and the *De Augmentis* -- could be condensed into one or two pages. The dramatists themselves had comparatively little to say of their art; a dozen Dedications and a few Prologues of Jonson, Chapman, Fletcher, Marston, Middleton, Heywood, Webster, and Field, are practically all that have direct bearing upon the subject. Ben Jonson's *Discoveries* closes the period. This work (published in 1641) is of prime importance, though unfortunately it is, as has been said, not a representative apology or explanation of the current practice, but an attack upon it.