

CORREGGIO: A TRAGEDY

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ADAM OEHLENSCHLÄGER & THEODORE MARTIN

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1777-1877

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A TRAGEDY

BY ADAM OEHLENSCHLÄGER

TRANSLATED WITH NOTES BY

THEODORE MARTIN



LONDON
JOHN W PARKER AND SON WEST STRAND
MDCCCLIV

INTRODUCTORY NOTICE.

THE obscurity which hangs over the facts of Correggio's biography is not a little remarkable. Although his prolific pencil had been employed on works of great magnitude, which must, in the natural course of things, have drawn upon him the eyes of all Italy, it is a matter of uncertainty from what condition of life he sprang, under what masters he studied, how far the works of his great predecessors and contemporaries came under his view, and, finally, whether he was poor and sordid, or, on the contrary, fortunate in his circumstances and genial in his character. No authentic portrait of him exists, and although he was born only sixteen years before Vasari, and died when Vasari was twenty-two, that enthusiastic and pains-taking biographer obviously proceeds on the most vague rumours in his record of Correggio's character and life. The enquiries of more recent writers have cleared up many of the particulars of Correggio's history, and dispelled several erroneous impressions both as to the man, and the amount of recognition which he received from his contemporaries. Much, however, is still left in uncertainty, and this

uncertainty allows freer scope for a poetical treatment than would have been proper, had the facts of his life been more minutely and authentically chronicled. Of the true history of Correggio, so far as it has been ascertained, Oehlenschläger was fully cognizant, but he did not hesitate,—and no one will blame him for the license,—to leave these on one side, and to follow closely the ancient biographer of Italian art, whose errors will cling to the memory and quicken the imagination, long after more accurate and prosaic enquirers have shown them to be errors. All the characteristics of Correggio noted by Vasari have been skilfully wrought into the drama by the poet, and the incident, now well known to be apocryphal, of the artist's death from the effects of a draught of cold water, taken while overheated on his way to Correggio from Parma, laden with a sack of copper-money received in payment of a picture, furnishes a striking catastrophe to what is at once the first and the best of the art dramas in which continental writers have been prolific. The struggle of genius with adverse circumstances, its hopes, its dreams, its disappointments, its consolations, its antagonism to whatever is ignoble and mercenary, the purity of its affections, and the unselfishness of its intellect, are depicted in this play with a quiet truth which strikes directly to the heart, and with a fulness of beauty which satisfies the imagination.

The idea of the play was originally conceived by the poet in Paris in 1807, where he had opportunities of

seeing in the Louvre the spoils of the great picture galleries of Europe, with which it was at that time crowded. But it was at Parma, where the grandeur of Correggio's powers is manifested in the frescoes of the churches of San Giuseppe and San Giovanni, that this idea took actual shape.

'As I was gazing,' he says,* 'spectacles on nose, at the glorious cupola in the church of San Giovanni, the church gradually filled with people, who kneeled to their devotions round about me. I did not wish to appear conspicuous; at the same time to have knelt down with them would have appeared a piece of affectation on my part, so I withdrew into a corner, where I was not observed, and there I too prayed after my own fashion. I find this prayer recorded in my journal, along with sundry observations on art, which would be out of place here. It runs thus: 'Oh God, open and purify my heart, that it may recognise thy greatness, goodness, and beauty in nature, and in the works of man! Preserve my country, my king, my beloved, my friends! Let me not die in the land of the stranger, but return happily to my home! Give me alacrity and courage to pursue my course upon thy beautiful earth, with a heart void of hatred towards mine enemies, and strong to resist the prejudices of the world! Above all, bestow on me poetic power! Thou hast formed

* 'Meine Lebens-Erinnerungen von Adam Oehlenschläger,' Leipzig. 1850. Vol. II. p. 196.

my mind for art, and this is the noblest telescope through which I can contemplate thy glory. After I am dead, let me live in my works, like this good Correggio, so that when I am dust, many a young heart may be gladdened and inspired by my poetry!' Such was my prayer beneath Correggio's cupola; and then the thought took palpable shape within my soul of a tragedy in which he should be the hero.'

This idea was immediately afterwards carried into execution in Rome, during the poet's residence there in the winter of 1809, where he lived on terms of close intimacy with the greatest of modern sculptors, his countryman Thorwaldsen. As Thorwaldsen is, of all moderns, the sculptor who approaches most nearly to the masters of Greece, so has Oehlenschläger of all poets been most deeply imbued with the spirit of Italian art in its culminating era. Nowhere has the impression which Italy and its treasures of pictorial art leaves upon the mind been more fully or exquisitely embodied than in this drama of Correggio, while the strength of pathos and tenderness of fancy peculiar to the northern nature give to his treatment of the story a deep and direct human interest, which is rarely to be found in the writers of the south. Tieck and a few critics of his school attacked the drama on its first appearance for what they called its sentimentalism, and in this cry they were joined by Goethe, who appears latterly to have conceived some pique against Oehlenschläger, notwithstanding his early and warm recognition of the

young Dane's remarkable dramatic powers; but the general voice of Europe at once placed it among the foremost efforts of its author's genius. That position it must always retain. Indeed, with the exception of his delightful drama of *Aladdin*, none of Oehlenschläger's numerous plays is so likely, either in subject or in treatment, to sustain his reputation wherever poetry is appreciated. Not only in Denmark, but throughout Germany, this tragedy forms part of the dramatic *répertoire*. When will either English actors or an English audience be educated to such a point as to admit of the performance on our stage of a work of this class?

Except a few extracts translated by Mr. R. P. Gillies in *Blackwood's Magazine* for December, 1820, and by Mrs. Howitt in her *Literature and Romance of Modern Europe*, the translator is not aware that any attempt has hitherto been made to present this drama in an English dress. His object has been to convey as vividly as he could the impression produced on his own mind by the original, and thereby to attract others, it may be, to the study of a writer, of great and various powers, who is too little known in England.

31, ONELOW SQUARE, OLD BROMPTON,
10th March, 1854.