

**FIRMILIAN. THE STUDENT
OF BADAJOZ. A
"SPASMODIC" TRAGEDY**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649474134

Firmilian. The Student of Badajoz. A "Spasmodic" Tragedy by T. Percy Jones

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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T. PERCY JONES

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THE
STUDENT OF BADAJOZ

“SPASMODIC” TRAGEDY

Approved by the Board of Education
BY T. PERCY JONES, 1855



REDFIELD
110 & 112 NASSAU STREET, NEW YORK
1855

PREFACE.

As several passages of the following Poem have appeared in the pages of periodicals, I consider it an act of justice to myself to lay the whole before the public. I am not at all deterred by the fear of hostile criticism—I believe that no really good thing was ever injured by criticism; and, so far from entertaining an angry feeling towards the gentlemen who have noticed my work, I thank them for having brought me forward.

It is a common practice, now-a-days, for poets to appeal to the tender mercies of the public, by issuing prefaces in which they acknowledge, in as many words, the weakness and poverty of their verse. If the acknowledgment is sincere, how can they expect the public to show them any favor? If it is a mere hypocritical affectation, it were better omitted. And the practice is unwise as it is absurd. What would we think of the manufacturer who should entreat us to buy his goods, because they were of an inferior kind, or of the tradesman who should deliberately announce that his stock was of a poor quality? For my part, if I conscientiously believed that my poetry was not worthy of admiration, I never would commit the impertinence of asking any one to read it.

There has been, of late, much senseless talk

about "schools of poetry;" and it has been said, on the strength of the internal evidence afforded by some passages in my play, that I have joined the ranks, and uphold the tenets, of those who belong to "the Spasmodic School." I deny the allegation altogether. I belong to no school, except that of nature; and I acknowledge the authority of no living master. But, lest it should be thought that I stand in terror of a nick-name—the general bugbear to young authors—I have deliberately adopted the title of "Spasmodic," and have applied it in the title-page to my tragedy. It is my firm opinion that all high poetry is and must be spasmodic. Remove that element from Lear—from Othello—from Macbeth—from any of the great works which refer to the conflict of the passions—and what would be the residue? A mere *caput mortuum*. I

differ from those who regard verse and poetry as being one and the same thing; or who look upon a collection of glittering conceits, and appropriate similes as the highest proof of poetical accomplishment. The office of poetry is to exhibit the passions in that state of excitement which distinguishes one from the other; and, until a dramatic author has learned this secret, all the fine writing in the world will avail him nothing. Cato is perhaps the best-written tragedy in the English language; and yet, what man in his senses would dream of reading Cato twice!

I have been accused of extravagance, principally, I presume, on account of the moral obliquity of the character of Firmilian. To that I reply, that the moral of a play does not depend upon the morals of any one character depicted

in it; and that many of the characters drawn by the magic pencil of Shakespeare are shaded as deep, or even deeper, than Firmilian. Set him beside Iago, Richard III., or the two Macbeths, and I venture to say that he will not look dark in comparison. Consider carefully the character of Hamlet, and you will find that he is very nearly as selfish as Firmilian. Hamlet is said to shadow forth "Constitutional Irresolution;"—my object in Firmilian has been to typify "Intellect without Principle."

If the extravagance is held to lie in the conception and handling of my subject, then I assert fearlessly that the same charge may be preferred with greater reason against Goethe's masterpiece, the Faust. I have not considered it necessary to evoke the Devil in my pages—I have not introduced the reader to the low buffooneries of

Auerbach's cellar, or to the Witch with her hybrid apes—nor have I indulged in the weird revelries and phantasmagoria of the Brocken. I do not presume to blame Goethe for his use of such material, any more than I should think of impugning Shakespeare for the Ghost in *Hamlet*, or the Witches in *Macbeth*. I merely wish to show that the "utter extravagance" which some writers affect to have discovered in my play, is traceable only to their own defects in high imaginative development.

If I am told that the character of Firmilian is not only extravagant, but utterly without a parallel in nature, I shall request my critic to revise his opinion after he has perused the histories of Madame de Brinvilliers and the Borgias.

I am perfectly aware that this poem is unequal, and that some passages of it are inferior,