

The dramatist is a poet in the highest sense of the word. He is the truest "maker",—the exact Saxon word-equivalent of the Greek *ποιητής*,—for he not only pours forth the deepest feelings of one human heart in his creation of the individual, but he also sets forth the action and reaction of mind upon mind when his characters meet in the world of the stage. There are certain rules of dramatic art which the old playwright was supposed to obey. These rules are known by the name of The Three Unities, the Unity of Time, the Unity of Place, and the Unity of Action. The Unities, as influencing us, are derived from the classical dramatists. Two of them are laid down as canons of dramatic art by Aristotle, who makes no direct reference to the Unity of Place. The ancients, generally, observed these rules, and those literatures on which the influence of Latin and of Greek has been strong have regarded the Unities with far greater care than the English. The Unity of Time declares that the play should confine its events to such as would naturally occur within a single revolution of the sun; and the Unity of Place states that all events should transpire in one spot. The Unity of Action, however, does not insist on one action only; there may be two or three in the same play, but they must be subsidiary to the main plot; were they not so, the drama would no longer be one, but two or more distinct writings without any strong link. In other words the Unity of Action proclaims that all minor incidents should lead up to, and be swallowed in, one great event, the *dénouement*. Sir Philip Sidney, in *An Apologie for Poetry*, laments that the English tragedies and comedies he has seen observe rules "neither of honest civility, nor of skilful poetrie, excepting Gorboduck," the first English tragedy, which climbs "to the height of Seneca his style," yet "is faulty both in place, and time, the two necessary companions of all corporal actions."

Of the three Unities Shakespeare invariably keeps the only true one, the Unity of Action, in the highest regard. He does so because it is the natural consequence of a fourth Unity which is found in all its power in him and is wanting in a host of dramatists whose plays are read only by the curious or the student.