

A Letter to A.H. Esq.; Concerning the Stage (1698) and The Occasional Paper No. IX (1698) eBook

A Letter to A.H. Esq.; Concerning the Stage (1698) and The Occasional Paper No. IX (1698)

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THE OCCASIONAL PAPER: NO. IX (1698)

With an Introduction by H. T. Swedenberg, Jr.

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1698 the rumblings against the excesses of the English stage broke into a roar with the publication of Jeremy Collier's *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*. A wild joyousness marked Collier's attack, and at times it seemed as though the zeal of the Lord had eaten him up. But he was no enthusiast without plan or reason. A man of some learning, he used it for all it was worth to confound the playwrights and the critics.

Collier was careful to make good use of accepted and honored critical principles. He contended that the purpose of the stage is to instruct; he argued for poetic justice; he discussed the unities; he spoke of propriety of manners and language; and he warned of the danger of fancy's overriding judgment—"the Fancy may be gain'd, and the Guards corrupted, and Reason suborn'd against itself." Unfortunately for Collier, however, such argument from reason and critical theory was only part of his book. He pretended to be attacking the current excesses, but a reading of his entire book gives the definite impression that he was really opposing the stage as an institution. His enemies were quick to point this out. He also weakened his argument by finding bawdry where there was none, overlooking the many unquestionably off-color passages in the Restoration plays. Furthermore he was extremely touchy about the clergy, arguing violently that no priest should ever be satirized. In short, Collier weakened a strong position by immoderate demands and contentions.

After a short, uneasy silence, the defenders of the stage began to answer. By the end of the summer, ten rejoinders had appeared, among which was the anonymous *A Letter to A.H. Esq; Concerning the Stage*. The initials in the title have been identified as those



of Anthony Hammond, pamphleteer, small poet, and politician, whom Bolingbroke characterized as “silver-tongued Hammond.” Charles Hopkins has been suggested as the probable author of the pamphlet (E.N. Hooker, *Modern Language Notes*, LIV [1939], 388). Hopkins was a wit, a friend of Hammond, as of Dryden,



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Congreve, Dorset, Southerne, and Wycherley, a clever fellow who loved the bottle and the ladies so much that, according to Giles Jacob, he died at 36, “a Martyr to the cause.” *His Epistolary Poems*, published in 1694, had been dedicated to Hammond and had included an effusive poem addressed to him. Some other wit among Hammond’s friends might have been the author of the pamphlet, however, for Hammond yearned for immortality through the works of others and frequently asked writers of his acquaintance to mention him.

Whoever the author was, he spotted the weaknesses in Collier’s arguments, at the same time pointing out the essential usefulness of the *Short View* as a corrective. He was not particularly original, for many of the points he made were considered public property by writers in the controversy. Thus, along with Dennis and others, the writer admitted the necessity for reform, but opposed Collier’s apparent desire to abolish the stage. He pointed out the fallacy of Collier’s argument from the authority of the church fathers and the absurdity of his contentions about the ridicule of the clergy. And using ancient doctrine, he defended the stage as an instrument of instruction in manners and morals. Of particular interest is his belief that the stage had contributed to the improvement of the language, especially in dissuading the clergy from a fantastic, conceited rhetoric.

The fury of Collier’s attack seemed to dull the wits of the defenders of the stage. Too often they allowed themselves to be drawn into quibbling over trivialities. None of them distinguished himself with a brilliant answer. With the exception of Dennis’s *The Usefulness of the Stage*, the *Letter to A.H. Esq.* is as suave and sensible as any of the answers, and considerably better than many.

Among the pamphlets taking the part of Collier was *The Occasional Paper: Number IX*, attributed to Richard Willia, Chaplain to William III and later Bishop of Winchester. In this paper the approach of literary criticism is abandoned completely, the author feeling that the controversy over the stage has already been obscured by wit and learning. He concerns himself with religion and morality, and argues the danger of going to plays. Though he admits that good plays are possible, it is clear that he considers the stage a bad influence upon Christians. Collier might veil his true attitude toward the theater, but Willis makes no pretense of hiding his. Plays are bad.

The *Letter to A.H. Esq.* was announced in the *Post Man* of June 11-13, 1698; *The Occasional Paper: Number IX* was noted in the same journal for May 19-21, 1698. The copy of the *Letter to A.H. Esq.* reprinted here is owned by the University of Michigan. *The Occasional Paper: No. IX* is reproduced by permission of the The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

H. T. Swedenberg, Jr.



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University of California, Los Angeles

A LETTER TO

A.H. Esq;

Concerning the STAGE.

LONDON,

Printed for A. Baldwin, near the Oxford-Arms in Warwick-Lane,
1698.

(I)

TO A.H. Esq; &c.

SIR,

Forgive me if I think it Ill-nature in you to leave the Town, at a Time when it wants your Company, and seems to beg your Assistance: How can you propose to live at Ease in the Country, when so many of your Friends, the Wits, are engag'd here in open War? Let Mr. *Collier* say what he pleases of Mr. *Dryden*, I begin to think 'twas his prophetick Genius mov'd him to declaim against Priests; and there is great reason to complain of their being the Incendiaries of the People, when they set the World on fire by Preaching, which they were only sent to warm. But what can Mr. *Collier* mean by exposing the Stage so? he wou'd not surely have it silenc'd: That wou'd be a little too barbarous, and too much like Cant to be entertain'd by Men of Thought or Ingenuity. I wou'd rather suppose he design'd a Reformation; and that is so reasonable, I wonder any Man should put his Face in disorder, or study a Revenge for the Attempt. But it may be ask'd, Cou'd he not have done that without exposing so many great *Genius's*? Had it not been better to have let Mr. *Durfey* alone? Tho' even this Method wou'd not have pleas'd every body; for whate'er Effect it has had on Mr. *Vanbroug* and *Congreve*; *Motteux* and *Guildon* resent it to the last degree. Is their nothing in their Works Illustrious, or that cou'd merit Censure? Indeed some People are not to be reclaim'd by Ridicule; and Mr. *Collier* knowing their Vertues, with how much Compos'dness and Resignation they can bear a Hiss, out of Compassion, took Example by the Town and neglected both.

It is the Observation of some, That wherever the State flourishes, the Theatre has never fail'd of Encouragement; and that 'tis hardly possible the State shou'd suffer without the others sinking in its Reputation. It is Pity that *England* shou'd be the only Exception, and since we have some of our Nobility, who have a Taste of Eloquence, and all those Vertues which adorn the Stage, that It shou'd want their Assistance by whom it was at first rais'd, and since maintain'd: If it has fallen from its Purity, or never arriv'd to what they fully lik'd, let it not want their Countenance, without whom 'tis impossible to be



any thing at all, and by whom it may become all that we can wish. They alone can free it from Contempt and Censure, by maintaining such an Awe, that the least Glymps of Profaneness and Immorality shou'd not dare to appear on the Stage; and this may be done by encouraging none but those who write well: for when a good Poet takes on him to instruct, we need fear no Immodesty; for 'tis impossible in a Regular Play, he shou'd find



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room for an Indecency. I know you'll ask, Why shou'd I appear so zealous in desiring the Favour of the Nobility for what is deny'd to be lawful; and that I ought not to wish an Encouragement of the Stage, when 'tis affirm'd that from Thence we derive our Corruption of Manners. Mr. *Collier* has endeavour'd to prove this from the Looseness of some of our Plays, and then has brought the Opinion of the Fathers to condemn the Theatre in general.

As to the *First Objection*, *That the Debauchery of the Town is to be attributed to the Looseness of our Plays and Stage*.

If this were true, it is an Objection only against the present Corruption of the Theatre; and is of no force against a regulated Stage; for that admits of nothing Immodest or Immoral.

As to the *Second Objection* brought from Councils and Fathers, if what is quoted were really design'd by them against the Theatre in general, yet it can have but little effect with the People, I mean the Men of Probity and Learning; for they are not to be mov'd by the Opinions of others no longer than those Opinions are agreeable to Reason: No Man ought to pay such a Respect either to Councils or Fathers, as to submit his Judgment contrary to his Reason. Their saying so in this Case ought to have no more effect with us than if they had at the same time given us their Opinion of the Truth of *Transubstantiation*.

I think the Matter ought to be disputed by it self; for the Opinion of the Fathers cannot alter the Nature of the Thing. Sir, give me leave to make this Digression: 'Tis my Opinion, even in Matters of Religion, the preaching up the Fathers so much has been of fatal Consequence. If we run out of our selves to search for Truth, we are expos'd to be deceiv'd; and relying too much upon another's Judgment, may be the occasion of an Errour in our own. A false Quotation or Interpretation by a Man of some Figure, to an easie Credulous Bigot, has been the Conversion of a great many, and of excellent Service in the Church of *Rome*: They cannot attack any without a Father or Council, and that to a Person who knows nothing of the matter, is as good as a Demonstration. The Fathers were but Men, and as capable to be deceiv'd as others: And I do not know why the Bishop of *Worcester* may not deserve an equal Esteem; he understands the Languages, and has as much Sincerity as any of them; and why then shou'd he not be able to give the Sense of the Scripture as well.

I have a Veneration for them as good Men, and where their Opinion is a Consequent of true Reason, it ought to be embraced; but where 'tis not, I need not say it ought to be rejected; and I think any Man may be allowed to dispute whether it be so or no. The Bishop of *Worcester* cannot publish a Book, but you'll have an Answer to it. It would

indeed be of Reputation to the Councils and Fathers, some of them at least, if what were objected against



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them were of no more force. His Philosophy is too rational to be weak'ned by Sophistry, his Divinity too solid to be shook by Heresie: He seems to have been predestinated to Glory, and the appointed Instrument to deliver us from Popery, Atheism, Deism, and Socinianism, with all those spurious Sectaries which have been spawned into the Worlds: What can resist the Power of his Arguments? And who is able to abide his Force. But to return, I think the Controversie, in short, is this:

Whether the Allowance of a Theatre in a Christian Country, is consisting with the Christian Religion.

The Answer to this Question may be this:

That whatever is approved by lawful Authority, and is not against any positive revealed Law of God, is consisting with the Christian Religion.

Now it lies upon the Adversaries of the Stage to prove, That the Theatre is against Law or Scripture.

'Tis unfair to take the advantage of the present Corruptions, and cry down the Stage, because Men make an ill use of it. The Priests Won't allow this Argument in another Case; and I think an ill Poet is no more an Objection against the Stage, than a Clergyman's being a Blockhead, is to the Pulpit. 'Tis our Misfortune to have too many in both Vocations; tho', as bad as the Stage is, I don't doubt but the World has receiv'd a great many Advantaged from it. I shall name you some, and the first may be the reclaiming the Manners of the Clergy.

'Tis certain, since the Stage has used the Gown freely, and the Laity have not been afraid to look into their Faults, that they are more humble, and less publickly vicious: They know if *Tom D'urfey* can light upon a frail Priest, he won't scruple to expose his Infirmities, tho' he is not the only *Whipping Tom* of the Stage; if they had not others to fear, they wou'd soon grow too many for him. I believe they wou'd be angry, if they thought the People gave the Honour of their Reformation to the Stage; tho' you can't believe otherwise, if you consider the difference of the former and present Clergy, what a strange alteration there is where the Knowledge of Plays have come (I wou'd be understood only of those who needed a Reformation) There are now, and have always been, Men among them able and fit to give Laws, and from whom the World was glad to receive them, who appear'd as burning and shining Lights in their Generation; and it was from them we learnt the difference; it was their Light which expos'd the other, and the Stage only took their evil Deeds, to shew them truly the Evils of them. But besides their Reforming of Manners, the Stage has taught them to speak English, and preach more like Ambassadors of their great Master. It has taught them to argue rationally, and

at once mended their Stile, and Form of their Sermons. How did Religion labour under heavy Language, and how many People rather absented the Church, than come



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to hear the Word of God Burlesqu'd? In what a ridiculous Dress did Religion appear? When to spin out the time in old Proverbs, and wretched Puns, a Fellow wou'd run it up to *Six and thirtiethly*, before he came to his *Use and Applications*. In short, the Drunkenness, Whoring, Insolence, and Dulness that has appear'd under a Black Coat on the Stage, have made the Men of the same Colour of it keep within Bounds: And that a Man might not teize them with the Representation, they have endeavour'd to appear in as differing a Form as possible.

If what Mr. *Collier* says was true, That when a Clergyman is brought on the Stage, it is with a design to ridicule the Function, it wou'd be abominable, and as bad as the Town is, wou'd be hiss'd off the Stage. I dare say, whatever the Intention of the Poet is, 'tis not receiv'd so by the Audience. For at this rate, every foolish Peer who Is brought on the Stage, must be suppos'd to intend a Reflection on all the Men of Condition; and an Alderman, who is a Cuckold, must be look'd on as the Representative of his Brethren. 'Tis absurd to make no distinction; as if a particular Vice in a particular Man, cou'd not be expos'd without a design'd Reflection on all who belong to him. It ought to touch no body but whom it concerns; and it has its end, if it reclaims where it was design'd, and prevents others, by shewing the Danger: And this is the Design of Comedy. But the Question is, Whether our Poets have managed it as they ought? Whether they have not pick'd out a particular Person, and expos'd the Character in general, under the Notion of one Man? I answer to this, That whatever the Design of the Poet has been, it has not had the effect with the People: For who disbelieves the Authority of their Function, or thinks the worse of Good, Learned, and Ingenious Men among them? Are not the Religious very much reverenc'd? Has any Body thought the worse of *Stillingfleet*, *Tillotson*, and *Burnet*, upon this Account? Who can believe, that when Mr. *Vanbroug* disguises a Parson, that he thought of these Men, or any who lives soberly, and makes Religion their Business, and at the same time, don't make it inconsistent with good Manners? The Good among them know the People love them, and that nothing but their own mis-behaviour draws them into Contempt. Any Minister, tho' he was but of mean Understanding, yet if he had other good Qualities, if he liv'd soberly, and did his Duty religiously, that ever such a Man was pickt out to be the Scandal of his Neighbours, or a Ridicule of the Stage. Whence is it then, that the Clergy are so angry? If you hook but one of them, all the rest are upon your Back, and you can't expose his Vices without being an Enemy to the Church: And in this, *Priests of all Religions are the same*.



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But after all, why shou'd Mr. *Collier* blame Mr. *Dryden* for making *Dorax* exclaim against the *Mahometan* Priest? Or how can that be a Prejudice to the Character of the Christian Clergy? Is it not natural for such a one as *Dorax* to say as much, and especially against such a one as the *Mufti* in the Play? And does Mr. *Collier* blame Mr. *Dryden* for writing naturally? I think it is a Fault throughout Mr. *Collier's* Book, that in his Criticisms of the Plays, he never considers the Person who speaks; that is, Whether 'tis not natural for a Man of such a Character, to say such a thing? It wou'd have been of more Service to have proved, That no Person is to be brought on the Stage to say an ill thing, and then he had thrown away all the Profaneness, which is so much an Offence, at once. But if such Persons are to be represented, there is not so much Reason against any of our present Plays, as is urg'd by Mr. *Collier*; for you must allow a Coquett to talk like her self, a Lover to vent his Passion in Raptures, and a Rake to speak the Language of the Town.

I have already told you, That I am far from vindicating the present Stage. I don't know a regular Play, or that ought to be represented on a regular Stage; yet I know a great many Plays that I would not loose for want of that Regularity. Who wou'd not have Sir *G. Etheridge*, Mr. *Wicherly*, and even some of Mr. *Dryden's* Plays? Who would reject the *Orphan*, because Mr. *Collier* objects against a loose Speech in it.

But Mr. *Collier* has laid other things to the Poet's Charge besides the Abuse of the Clergy; and that the profane Characters in the Play, has had an ill Effect on the Age, by promoting of Immorality and Vice. This I very much question; for I can't apprehend so much danger even in the present Stage as Mr. *Collier* wou'd suggest. The greatest Faults of our Plays are their being generally, in one part or other, unnatural: That which is regular in any of them can never be an Offence; and where that Monster appears, it rather frightens than allures; so that we are not in so much danger, even from our very bad Plays: For the more monstrous, the less Power it has to please; and whatever looses the Power, can never do much damage. So that if Mr. *Collier* should make a Collection of *D'urfey's* Works, who is there that wou'd become a Convert? And who wou'd turn Parson to be drunk and beat the Watch? Or who wou'd be proud of an Imitation of any of his Heroes? Has any Body brought themselves under his Character, in hopes to recommend them to the World? It would be happy if the World had learnt no more Irreligion from the Pulpit than it has from the Stage; at least, the Consequence of the first has been more fatal. What dismal Effect has the holy Cant had upon the Multitude: What Rebellion, Blood-shed and Mischief have been encourag'd under the Name of *Sanctity*, *Religion*,



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and the *Good old Cause*. Whoever learnt to cut a King's Throat by seeing of Plays? But by going to Church, the People were instructed to *bind the King in Chains, and his Nobles in Fetters of Iron, That the Kingdom ought to be taken away, and given to the Saints*; And who wou'd not be a Saint for such an Inheritance? Who cou'd refuse resisting of Authority, when instead of *Damnation*, it was *coming forth to the Help of the Lord against the Mighty*? But this is but one Mischief of the Pulpit; this is only putting a Kingdom in Civil Broils, intestine Wars, and unnatural Murthers. But when Men of debauch'd Principles shall become the Teachers of the Nation, what may we not expect from their Industry and Sedition.

After all, my Lord *Foppington* was never design'd to teach People to speak or act like him; nor was it intended that the Ladies shou'd be byass'd by the Example of *Berinthia* to turn Coquetts. These and the like Characters in other Plays, are not propos'd as a Direction for the *Gallant Man*, or the *Vertuous Lady*; but that seeing how such Persons behave themselves on the Stage, that they may not make the like Figure in the World; but if any body shou'd rather be in love than terrified by these Examples, 'tis their Fault, and not the Poets, since the best things are liable to Corruptions. But it may be objected, That our Poets don't make Persons speak like themselves. That indeed is a Fault, and I can't say any thing to excuse it but this; That they who, have the Judgment to know when a Poet speaks improperly, ought to have so much Judgment, as not to be byassed by his Irregularities: The People who don't understand it, generally suppose, that what is Vertuous is to be imitated, and what is Vicious is to be avoided. That this is the general Observation of those who frequent Plays, may justly be inferr'd from the Practice of the Town: For I challenge any Man to prove, That any one Vice, now in being, took its Rise from the Stage. The Stage takes Examples from the Town. The Scene must be really acted in the World before it comes to be expos'd: So that whatever appears Vicious or Ridiculous, is owing to the Wickedness of the Times, and not to the Theatre. It may be objected, That what is generally acted on the Stage, if it was done before; yet it was done in private, but the Stage publishes it. To this I answer, That it does not intend to license it, only to set it in a true Light, that it may be expos'd and shunn'd.

As to those Objections, That the Actors are generally debauch'd, and of leud Conversation; and that no Person who is a known Adulterer, or Profane, ought to be encouraged. That the Play-house is a Resort of vicious Persons, and gives Opportunity to such who have wicked Inclinations. All these wou'd fall upon the advancement of a regular Stage; but as 'tis, the Objections are not levell'd Right; for the State is chargeable with the Immoralities.



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There are Laws for the Punishment of Vice; and if the Magistrate neglect his Duty, he must answer for it. I don't know that any body is oblig'd to a Conversation with the Players; and their Lives can influence only their Associates; and such they wou'd find, whether they are Players or not. When they are on the Stage they are confin'd to the Poets Language: And if we shou'd see Mr. *Powel* acting a Brave, Generous and Honest Part; or Mrs. *Knight*, a very Modest and Chaste one, it ought not to give us Offence; because we are not to consider what they are off the Stage, but whom they represent: We are to do by them as in Religion we do by the Priest, mind what they say, and not what they do. Tho' the Stage is not so abandon'd but that there are some Honest and Vertuous, for any thing the Town can say to the contrary. And I wou'd leave it to themselves, whether they don't find their Account in it; whether the Town is not more favourable on any Occasion; so that it ought to be an Encouragement to persist in their Vertue.

The Objection against the Play-House it self, because it gives Opportunities for Wickedness, is so trifling, it is hardly worth answering, for they who are viciously inclin'd will find an Opportunity; and as long as the Toleration Act is in force, there is never a Meeting in Town but will afford extraordinary Hints of that kind; the Morning and Evening Lectures are precious Seasons, Mr. *Doelittle* may thresh his Heart out, there will be Tares among the Wheat; and those Houses are haunted with a sort of Spirits that are not to be cast out with Prayer and Fasting.

I think from the little I have said, it is certain the Town has not been debauch'd by the Stage, and that 'tis much easier to demonstrate the Good, than prove the Evil Effect even of our bad Plays. I have shew'd that there has been a Vertue in them; and we might very well pardon them if it were only for that one Benefit, of being so serviceable to the reclaiming of the Clergy. If they can give me an Instance of any Play, whose Vices have had so ill Effect with the People as to counter-balance the Good it has wrought in them, I shou'd set my self against the Stage too; but then as to other Advantages which we have receiv'd from the Plays of the first Rank, we are certainly very much in debt to them. The Refinement of our Tongue is principally owing to them; Good Manners and good Conversation is owing to our Comedy; and I don't doubt but some of our Tragedies have fired some with a Greatness of Spirit, and taught to act the Hero with Prudence, Vertue and Courage.

I shall conclude this part of my Letter with this Observation, that if the present Stage has not been so terrible an Enemy to Christianity, but on the contrary, has afforded a great deal of good to the World; that a Regulated Stage wou'd be of infinite Service to the Nation.

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I have proposed it as an Argument in Defence of a Regular Stage, that it lies on its Adversaries to prove it against Law or Scripture, and so might leave it justify'd till some Person or other make the Discovery to the World: But because 'tis my Opinion 'tis utterly impossible, I shall give you some Reasons why I think it not only lawful in it self but very necessary in this populous City. And, First, if we consider the Matter that ought to be represented, whether it be Tragedy or Comedy; there is nothing in either that can offend Religion or Good Manners.

Tragedy is a Representation of an Action by some Great Man, teaching us to regulate our Passions with exactness, and by shewing the strange and differing Accidents of Life, to which the most important Persons are subject; proving to us that Vice never goes unpunished; and that true Happiness does not chiefly consist in the Enjoyment of this World.

Comedy is a Representation of common Conversation; and its Design is to represent things Natural; to shew the Faults of Particular Men in order to correct the Faults of the Publick, and to amend the People thro' a fear of being expos'd, with this Observation, That the Ridiculous of the Stage is to be only a Copy of the Ridiculous found in Nature.

In short, 'tis the Property both of Tragedy and Comedy to instruct: The Characters in both are to be Natural; and the Persons concern'd in the whole Action, are to be such whose Vertues ought to provoke us to an Emulation, or whose Vices ought to deter us from imitating their Example, The Language and Sentiments are to be suitable to each Character: A Wife, Good, and Great Man is to say nothing but what is natural for such a one to say: The Gallant Man is to appear with all the Qualities of a Man of Honour: and the Fool in his proper colour'd Coat. The Vices of the Wicked are not to be represented so nicely, as punish'd severely; that is, a Vicious Person is not to be allow'd to plead in favour of his Vices, or to represent his Villany so calmly as to tempt any Man to try Practices in another Place. Vice is only to be brought there to be condemn'd, and the reason of this is, that our Terrour may be excited, and all our Passions vent themselves with Strength and Reason. Our Pity is not to be extended in a wrong place. In short, The Disposition of the play is to be such that all the Characters have a proper Effect with us. Our Fear, Love, and Anger are to be exerted with Justice; and we are to learn from a just Fable how to behave our selves in earnest. Thus may we exercise our Souls by examining our reasonable Faculties, and try how we can love to extremity, and yet without a Fault; to be angry and sin not; to be just without partiality, and rejoyce with them that rejoyce. We are there instructed to Love, Hate, and Fear within measure, how we may be Men without debasing our Souls; and all this by moving Examples, which in spite of Stubbornness, will force its Impressions;



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and 'tis our own Fault if they are not lasting. This certainly must recommend the Stage to the Vertuous; and Piety can't be offended at the decent reprov'ing of Vice, and the insinuating recommendation of Vertue. Here we find Morality urg'd by Precept and Example, and the Stage reprehending those Follies which the Pulpit wou'd blush to correct; for tho' the Church is the Place to declaim against Sin, yet there are some sorts of Wickedness which can't be so decently reprov'd there; so that the Stage is serviceable on this account, to supply the Defects of the Pulpit. In short, whatever may be objected against the present management of the Stage, is of no force against such Proceedings as these. Religion and Morality can receive no Damage here; for as long as these Rules are observ'd, they strictly include both.

It was the Opinion of a great Master of Reason, that Tragedy conduces more to the Instruction of Mankind, than even Philosophy itself, because it teaches the Mind by Sense, and rectifies the Passions by the Passions themselves. And there is this further Advantage, that we have always the Example of great Men before us, and are generally inclinable to take our Manners from them. There has indeed Authorities been produc'd against the Stage, tho' there don't want as ancient Advocates for it; and some of the Fathers themselves writ Plays, however Mr. *Collier* came to forget it.

If the Theatre is capable to give us such Advantage, it will easily be prov'd of what necessity there is for its encouragement in this Populous City: If there were no Politick Reasons, yet the Good to Religion that may be done by it, is a convincing Argument at once for its Lawfulness and Use. I know the Gravity of some can't dispense with so much time to be spent in Diversion, tho' I can't think this a reasonable Objection where so much Profit may attend our Delight. If it be lawful to recreate our selves at all, it can never be amiss to frequent such a Diversion, that only takes up our Time to make us wiser. I wou'd to God all of them were directed to the same End. No Man is to employ himself so as to exclude the Duties of Religion; and there is as much danger in minding too much the Business of the World, as the Pleasures of it; both of them are to be kept within bounds, and both subservient to Religion. The Passions of Men are active and restless; and 'tis the Prudence of every State to encourage some publick Exercise to keep them at quiet. If the Theatre was down, the Churches wou'd not be the fuller for't. Or if they shou'd, Religion is not always the design of them who come there; so that I cannot see that any thing can be allow'd for the publick Diversion with so much Innocence and so much, Advantage. I'm only afraid that such a Regularity wou'd be too Vertuous for the Age; and I don't doubt but the Beaux and Poetasters wou'd be full of Exclamation: For it wou'd be a dreadful Time if the Ladies should regard the Play more than



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their *Beaux Airs*; and how wou'd *Vanbroug* be able to pass a Comedy on them, if they shou'd once be so nice in their Taste as to disgust Obscenity; this indeed wou'd be a Vexation, and such a Delicacy which Mr. *Congreve* cou'd not be pleased with: And if the Town shou'd be so refin'd to admit of nothing but what is Natural, we can't expect that ever he will gratifie us with another Tragedy. *Durfey* and *Motteux* wou'd write no more Farces; *Gildon* and *Tom. Brown, &c.* wou'd be the Saints with wry Mouthes and scrue'd Faces: Mr. *Gildon* indeed has Philosophy enough to support himself under such a Calamity, and knows a Method to prevent starving; for who can think that he who writ *Blunt's* Life can be at a loss for a decent dispatch of his own? 'Tis a deplorable Case, indeed, and I pity a Man who cannot get Bread by Writing, and yet must beg or starve without it.

The Prince of *Conti* believ'd the *French* Stage wou'd not have been so bad if the Priests had begun sooner to declaim against it: It is possible that some of our Defects may be owing to such a Negligence. However 'tis never too late to mend; and since Mr. *Collier* has took up the Cudgels, I wish the rest of the same Coat wou'd so far as is just and reasonable, stand his Second: He has his Faults, but they are such as I wou'd not have lost his Book for. I know there are some violent Wits, who will not allow him either Wit or Style, but, in plain terms, to be a Fool. I hope none of them will go about to prove it. I confess he has kept ill Company of late; but surely they don't ground a Conjecture upon that, especially when a Man only converses to convince. The naming Mr. *Durfey*, or examining his Works, is not so contagious as to stain a Man's Reputation. We are indeed to answer for evil Communication; and tho' I cannot justifie a Man who wou'd read Mr. *Durfey* with too much Delight, because we must not set our Affection on things below, yet I wou'd pardon any who wou'd read him only to forewarn others of the Danger.

'Tis a Misfortune to have good Poets stand in need of Assistance; but 'tis very much aggravated when they are deny'd it. A Man who is oblig'd to write for his Bread, is forc'd to be very hasty to prevent starving; And every Man's Genius is not so sharp as his Appetite. This may be one Reason we have so many things appear Abortive. Some Poets have not so much as to save their longing; and if their Muse miscarry, or come with an ugly Mark into the World, are rather to be pity'd than condemn'd. In what Pangs have I seen some poor Creatures to be deliver'd, when at the same time they have fear'd the Poverty of their Brats, and that the World wou'd discover they were very sick in the breeding. A good Poet ought never to want a worthy Patron; and our Nobility and Gentry ought to be Industrious in the Advancement of Letters. They might do it with great ease and little Expencc; for the Number is not so great who deserve their Countenance. In vain we complain of the Irregularity of the Stage, if they who cou'd support its Honour, want support themselves: So that one great Step to advance the Theatre, is to take care, that they who write for the Stage, do not want for Encouragement.



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You see, Sir, I have given my Thoughts freely: I wish they may receive your Approbation; because I wou'd never think but to please you. I dare not now think of excusing any thing I have writ, for I was resolv'd to tie my self to no Method, but to think as much as I cou'd for the advantage of the Stage, which I must believe very lawful, for any thing I have yet met to the contrary. Nor can I be perswaded, that our Plays have had so ill effect as some wou'd imagine. The best of our Plays have nothing in them that is so scandalous; and for the worst, I wou'd not allow them the Credit, nor the Authors the Vanity to think they could influence any one Man. The evil Conversation of some of them wou'd frighten a Man from being vicious; so that they are serviceable against their Wills, and do the World a Kindness through mistake. I dare not stay any longer with you, tho' I have a great Inclination to beg you'd excuse the roughness of my Stile: But you know I have been busie in *Virgil*; and that they say, at *Will's*, is enough to spoil it: But if I had begg'd a more important thing, and ask'd you to forgive the length of my Letter, I might assure my self you wou'd oblige,

Your Humble Servant.

FINIS.

THE Occasional Paper:
Number IX.

Containing some
CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE DANGER
Of going to PLAYS.

In a Letter to a Friend.

LONDON,
Printed for M. Wotton, at the Three Daggers in Fleet Street.
1698.

SIR,

Being well assured that you sincerely desire to live as becomes a Christian, though you are not in Holy Orders; and that your complying with some things in use among those with whom you converse, is rather from a care to avoid being over-nice to the prejudice of Religion, than any want of a due Concern for the Interest of it: I cannot refuse the letting you see all at once, my thoughts of that, which having been at several times discoursed on between us, was never yet brought to a perfect Conclusion.

I have always found you doubting the *Lawfulness*, at least the *Expedience* of going to *Plays*, as they are now acted amongst us; and sometimes you have seem'd to think it



did not consist with the Faith of the *Gospel*, considering the Outrage committed there for the most part upon it, in one instance or other. And a fresh sense of this I perceive has been given you, by the late *lively Account of the Stages*, the natural colours of which indeed are so black as to be more than enough to affright those who have any *Fear of Him that ought to be feared*, or any Dread of the Ruin of Men.

But for as much as the thread of that serious *Design* may seem broken too often with Observations of Learning, and Reflections of Wit, to be closely follow'd by those who are either not used to the one, or too fond of the other; the same good End may perhaps be helped forward a little, by setting this matter in a less interrupted Light, and a Simpler View.



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And if things are as bad as they are there represented apart, looking on them together, you will scarce think those expressions too hard, which in a more large and general State of the Case, you sometimes thought did a little exceed. And very possibly the Zeal of some may have proceeded too far in running down to the ground, all *Diversions of this kind* without any distinction: Tho' at the same time 'tis easie accounting for that seeming distance between those who agree that *Vertue* shall be their common Design.

For they that are most for condemning these Entertainments, do not deny but some proper Instructions for civil Conduct at least, might thereby be gently instill'd; nor are they wholly against *Unbending* the Mind, as if they suppose the Spirits of Men wou'd carry them through the Business of Life without any Relief: But they think these, as they stand, are *dangerous Schools*: And, as for *Refreshment*, they see none in that which *unfits* us for our respective duties. And thus much is granted by those who wou'd shew a regard to the weakness of Nature, and not be over severe upon the Practice of those they think well enough of in other Respects.

Whenever you have inclined to savour these *Idle Amusements*, you have set them before you in an Innocent Dress, and contended for nothing but what might *Please* without giving *Offence*, you never design'd that what was *Prophane* or *Immodest*, should have your *Protection*; or to allow your self or your Friends a *Conversation* that was apt to *Corrupt*. You always hoped such *Spots* might be separated from those things you took in to *Divert*, and when you had made them as clear as you cou'd, you was easie to own, they might still be too freely indulged: For which reason I do not believe we shall differ much when we come to the End.

Taking then these *Plays* at the best, *pure* from all those *defiling Ingredients*, and *free* from the blemish of a *Vicious Resort*, a condition so perfect as we never yet saw the *Theater* in: All this would not make it a Place to be greatly frequented by those, that desire to keep their Minds in a suitable frame. No one wou'd chuse to converse always with *Fiction* and *Show*, that cared to preserve something *Real* within; Mens Minds in effect being nothing else but their usual Thoughts, which passing continually through them with repeated delight, are sure to leave their Image upon them; as we can't but observe the *Admirers* of *Scenes* to have something Romantick in all that they do.



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Were we daily to be in the *House of Feasting* and the soberest Mirth, our Spirits wou'd grow by degrees so frothy and light, that we shou'd not easily bring them to settle again on any thing that was worthy our care: Without something now and then to raise them a little, they wou'd be dull and unactive, but *all* Relaxation wou'd make them too airy, and of no sort of Use. They wou'd not serve to keep up our Souls from sinking under the pleasures of sense, but so unawares betray us into them, by loosning the strength we have to resist, and improving the Charm, that tho' we supposed the whole Concern of the *Stage* to set out all Virtuous at first, we cou'd not expect its continuing long in that primitive State, before it run into some foolish Excess. For if Mens coming often and many together, on business, or kind and friendly Occasions, is apt to lay a snare in their Way; Nay if *Societies* form'd for the very promotion of Virtue; and ti'd to all the Discipline of it, are yet hardly kept from growing irregular: What can we hope from such places of Concourse, where Imagination expects to be rais'd, and the End is Delight?

But I doubt we never began so fairly as this, because our present *Corruption* is greater, than can well be conceiv'd to have sprung from a *Root* that had at first no *Bitterness* in it.

Was there nothing *ill* in the *Representations* themselves, yet there is so much of that by agreement of All, in the *Vain Behaviour of those that are there*; that they must needs be very fond of a *Play*, that can bring themselves to sit often and long in such *Company* for it.

And yet one wou'd think sufficient care had been taken by those on the *Stage*, to heighten and please the most vicious *Tast*. They appear to have study'd all the *Arts* of an easie *Defilement*, and to have left out no *Colours* that were likely to *Stain*. And that these may be sure to sink deep enough, their business is to discharge the Heart of all its pure and *native Impressions*, that it may be the better disposed to receive what *Tincture* they please.

Men must here begin to *unlearn* what their *Parents* and grave *Instructors* have told them in the very tenderest part of their care; and learn to suspect some of their first and plainest Notions of things. They are now to be taught how they might *Be*, without a Creator; and how, now they are, they may live best without any Dependance on his Providence. They are call'd to doubt of the *Existence* of *God*, or if that be allow'd them, 'tis only to question what *Notice* he takes: His *Wise Providence* at every turn is charged with *Neglect*, and often not for, that which has something of Precedent, supporting the Wicked, but which is *dreadfully New* disappointing their *Lusts*. Things they are no longer ashamed of, but publickly own, without so much as pretending to hide them from *God*, whom they are not afraid to treat as blind, or as giving *Consent*.



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Thus is His *Holiness* turn'd to the vilest *Reproach*, his perfect *Knowledge* mention'd with scoffing, and his infinite *Power* despised.

Had we nothing to oppose to this; but that sense of things which is natural to Us, and which even with all these Arts is not quickly defaced, we could not but stand amazed at such *Presumptions* as these, in so poor, and ignorant, and short lived a Creature as *Man*; who came naked but lately out of the Earth, and must soon return to that condition again; who finds his sight bounded in every thought, and meets with a thousand stops in all his *Designs*; who every step that he takes, wants some one to help him, and can scarce avoid being conscious of that Hand to which he owes his *Support*. And yet as if it was honour to rave, this impotent Wretch must still be daring at something above him, as if he reckon'd it weakness to own of what he was made, and thought any submission too great a price to pay for being preserv'd.

This cou'd not be accounted less than a *Monstrous Extravagance*, had we no other *Rule* than that of *Reason* to measure it by; and a Man with only his senses about him, would have a horror to be thus *Entertain'd*. How then shall he that professes the *Christian Religion*, be able to bear so licentious a *Treatment* of all that is Good? a little degree of *temperate Zeal* wou'd turn him against such *Abuses* as these, and a middle proportion of *Faith* spread over the World, wou'd keep these Places from being so throng'd in their present State as they shamefully are.

They whose *Dependence* is on them, are so apprehensive of this; that they are very industrious to weaken the force of that *Revelation* which darts it's rays so strongly against them, and discovers the vileness of that, they wou'd have Men admire. *Redeemer* and *Saviour* are Titles bestow'd upon infamous persons, which shews what sense they have of the want of him to whom they belong: And for what they are pleas'd to mention as *Sins*, they are sure to find as slight an *Attonement*. They make very bold with the *Grace* of God, and crave *Inspiration* to serve the ends of *Lust* and *Revenge*: In which that they may have nothing to check them, all *Flames* but their own are meer *Fancies* and *Dreams*; the sickly Thoughts of a future Account must be banish'd away, and *Conscience* dismissed as a weak and *Cowardly* thing.

That nothing may bind it, the Holy *Scripture* is used as a *Fable*, and at every turn brought out in disguise to be the better exposed: They will allow it to be but one of these two, either *Imposture* or *Madness*. And they who profess to make it their *Rule*, and to lead others by it, are scorn'd and traduc'd as running into *Frenzy* or *Cheat*, that no body else may have any regard to them or their way.



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And when the *Fences* are thus broken down, what hopes can we have any *Virtue* shou'd stand without being impair'd at the least? Nor do they stick to pursue their design, but go on overturning the natures of things as fast as they can, and they have met but with too much success.

The *Sense of God* being pretty well laid, the next thing to be sunk is all Respect to Superiours here; A *Prince* seldom appears to advantage, and 'tis easie to guess what use of this the Subjects will make. Imposing on *Parents*, and despising their Age is made a Mark of Spirit and Wit, and few are brought in *dull* enough to *Obeys*. False Notions of *Honour* are here proposed as the ground of Esteem, and something of *Wildness* must go to the gaining *Applause*. To set up for themselves is the first thing young People must learn, and to think it brave to trample on all that stands in their Way: No *Greatness* like a thorough *Revenge*, nor any Spirit so *Mean* as that which *forgives*; *Abusing* those that honestly help them with their *Labour*, or *Goods*, has briskness and *Reach*, and a lively *Cheat* go's off with more *Reputation* than paying ones *Debts*.

Their *Friendships* are built upon serving their Pleasures, and so cannot but be as loose as that which holds them together: They who are Constant in breaking their *Vows*, shall here be caress'd as *Faithful* and *True*; but to shew *Fidelity* where it is ow'd, is too *formal* a business for those who have the *sense* to be *free*, and can relish nothing but what is forbid.

This makes them treat all *Regular Love* with that Stile of contempt, as if keeping of Measures was unbecoming our nature; and it was a shame to have the *Bed undefiled*. They mix with *Marriage* all the disagreeable things they can find to turn the *single* against it, and make those that are in weary and sick of so flouted a *State*: To increase their uneasiness under which Holy and Prudent Restraint, wandring Images are dressed up with all possible skill to affect them, and their heads are filled with the ways, of bringing these strange Desires to pass.

If this be the Case in the Main, as it plainly appears from the *Account* above mention'd, and might further be shewn by a very great addition of proof; then whether all this can be found at any one time, or whether some Days may not possibly be pretty clear of it all but what is brought thither, is not very material, more than to determin, what particular *Plays* should always be chosen by those that will go to Any. For the fitness of allowing this Custom, or giving it any Encouragement, will not depend upon it's not being faulty alike in every Part; but 'tis enough to condemn it, if what has been said is the general Scope, tho' I doubt a Tryal wou'd shew that All offend in one thing or other.



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Matters, then, being so, you will readily grant that they who go to be pleased, with any of those things which are hardly fit to be named; are wickedly bent, and live to the *Scandal* of that *Religion* they still make some shew to profess: Tho' not enough to give any hopes of their being reclaim'd, until we can find them perswaded indeed, that there is such a thing as *Sin* in the World, which will certainly have its *Wages* at last.

But for those who are satisfied of this, and wou'd be loath to savour so much as the *Appearance of Evil*, they must be beg'd to consider, what *Vows* they are under, and *whereof they are made*, and How much Weaker still many *Others* may be, and What *Mankind* must come to in time if this *Humour* prevails, and How much the *next Life* must be at this rate more wretched than this!

Who that reflected what it was to *Renounce* the *World*, the *Flesh*, and the *Devil*, wou'd play with the sharpest Weapons of these, and offer themselves to such apparent *Danger in Sport*? there's not one of these *Enemies* but know how to take the utmost advantage, and will be sure to hit all the Blots that they give, they cannot without receiving some hurt, be so much as a Minute off from their *Guard*; and sure they do not come hither to *Watch*.

Who that had engaged to believe the *Christian Faith*, cou'd be content to see it exposed in every branch? To have their *Lord* and *Master* affronted for pretending to *Save*, and his *Ministers* scorn'd for the work he gave them to do! to hear a *Moment* prefer'd to the hopes of *Eternity*, and the *Judgment to come* thrown off with a *Jest*!

Who that had promised *Obedience* to God in all his *Wise* and *Holy Commands*, would bear the seeing them not only broken with ease, as often as Mens Inclinations rose up against them, but charged as unconcernedly too with harshness and folly! Their *Souls* one wou'd think shou'd be *vex'd* at such daring *Impieties*, and their *Spirits stirr'd* in them to see such *Vices Adored*; to find *Lewdness* vaunting it over *Religion* and *Virtue*, and usurping their place in a bold recommending itself to the affections of Men, with all those *Advantages* God design'd for the *Adorning* of Things that were really *Good*.

And who wou'd lightly endure all this, that from their *Vows* went on to reflect of what they were made? I suppose they wou'd find as they often complain, that they are *Weak* and *Infirm*, that while this *Flesh and Blood* is about them, their *Souls* are heavy, apt to decline, and seldom continue long in one posture and stay; that the *World* is upon them where ever they go, and the *Devil* busily marking their steps in every *Path*. That their *Faith* wavers upon many *Surprises*, their *Hopes* languish, and their *Fervour* decays; that in



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such cold seasons as these, their Spirits move but stiffly about, and seldom rise into any earnest petitions for Grace, but sink under the burden of *Prayer*, or steal away to some Trifle, or other for a little Relief. That in such cases they have no *Heart* to go on with the rest of their Duties, all the Commandments of God growing grievous upon them, and *Repentance* beginning to have a discouraging face: That they know not how to follow their Master, wheresoever he goeth with all this Oppression, the *Cross* being now too much for them to take up, and they feeling now no *Ease* in his *Yoke*.

And when they often find it thus to their grief, even where they think they take care to prevent it, wou'd one ever believe they shou'd act, as if they desir'd these Gloomy Returns, or thought the present Light they enjoy'd cou'd never be obscured again? How shall we do to think them sincere in their daily bewailings of *Human Infirmities*, while they continue to lay new weights on their Nature, as if the common Occasions of Life afforded not tryal enough for their faith, unless they call'd in *Temptations* to prove how much they coul'd bear?

Wou'd they that desired to be *fervent in Prayer*, and *attend* on the Lord with as little *Distraction* as their State would admit, fill their Heads with a crowd of extravagant thoughts, and run to see *Devotion* it self ridiculed, as if nothing was in it but Solemn *Pretences*? Or wou'd they that proposed to have their *Affections* in order, and their Appetites calm, chuse to thrust in themselves, where *Moving the Passions* is the business in hand, and such things are rendred inviting, to which the Heart is but too much inclined?

It cannot sure be safe for any to let *Errours* come often before them in such shapes, as may make them wish they were true. It must needs enfeeble their Minds, to have those Spirits divided that want to be fixed; and to converse with *loose Manners* brought down into fashion, and dress'd up with intent to deceive, is much too great a hazard to run in that little ground that is left to hope for the grace and assistance of God, where his *Spirit* is *griev'd*, and his *Being* deny'd.

And it is to be feared that they who come freest from any of that Pollution, which is in such quantities scattered there, have at least some dust to wipe off before they get home: 'Tis hard staying so long in such a Cloud of black vapours and smoak, without having so much as a soiling remain; great odds it is, but something will stick for a sober reflection to banish, and a Prayer to correct. And who is there that wants more work of that nature than He has already.



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But tho' these shou'd be well enough armed to go away as clear as they came, yet Methinks they shou'd have some concern for the *Weakness of Others*, and the heat of their blood, as not to lead them into so *Contagious a Place*. All that go thither as yet uncorrupted, are not however so fully prepar'd, as to be above taking any Infection: Their Experience is little, and their Aversions to Evil but imperfectly settled; that it can't be expected they shou'd be proof against all the Assaults that are made in a pleasing Disguise. That *Root of Vanity* that secretly twists it self with their natures, is drawn out by degrees, and they are carried on to the hopes of their *Liberty* and of being *Admired*.

Now were they to find no Company here, but such as were lost to good manners and shame, they wou'd suspect some deceit in the whole, and look well to themselves: But going under the shelter of many that have names for Religion, and I trust have it indeed; they are emboldned to think they are very secure, and that there is no need of being so Nice. Thus while those, by whose Example these are encouraged, preserve it may be themselves from the *Danger* they run; these unwary beholders take all that glisters for Gold, and are sadly betray'd.

[Sidenote: 1 Cor. 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.]

St. *Pauls* advice to those that were strong, in another case is so fitted to this, that I cannot forbear the letting you have it at large. *Take heed (says he) least by any means this Liberty of yours become a Stumbling-block to them that are weak. For if any Man see thee which hast knowledge, sit at Meat in the Idols Temple, shall not the Conscience of him that is weak, be emboldned to eat those things that are offered to Idols: And through thy knowledge shall the weak Brother perish, for whom Christ dyed? But when ye sin so against the Brethren, and wound their weak Consciences, ye sin against Christ.*

And as forreign as this Instance may seem, was there any comfort in drawing the *Parallel*, we shou'd find but too great a Similitude between the *Places* in question, and the *Idolatrous Temples*; while the other difference that is in the case seems to lie on the side I am writing, that if Christians might sin in the use of their *Liberty* to the offence of their Brethren, much more wou'd they do so in such a Point as we have before us, where their own Consciences can hardly be clear, as we shall think it more difficult for them to be, if we consider yet further what *Mankind* will come to at last if this *Humour* prevails.

It is confess'd on all hands, that we live in a sad degenerate Age, and though some have suggested other causes of our horrid Declension, yet most considering People have the fairness to own, that the *Stage* has gon furthest in running us down to this low and almost Brutal condition; nor will there remain much question of this, if we can but agree what *Corruption* is.



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If Exposing Religion with the Persons and things design'd for the keeping it up in the World, will pass for disorder; or if the Increase of Pride and Injustice, Blood and Revenge, are any signs of our being *Depraved*; or if want of Modesty, Obedience, and Love, contempt of Marriage, and neglect of it's Bonds may serve to shew the *foundations* of things to be at all *out of Course*. I think we have sufficient warrant to lay the confusion at that *Door*, which opens to these.

That these things are taught there, and found in the World, can be no way deny'd, and then it is not of any great use to enquire, whether strictly speaking they were at first brought from thence, or carry'd thither. For when our Bodies and Minds are much out of order at once, 'tis hard saying where the Distemper began; and the less material to know, when both must have their Cures apply'd, and it is to the advantage of neither, that they go on to hurt one another. If the ill humour does not begin in the place we suppose, it is there at least increased to a head, and thrown out again into all parts of the body, many of which to be sure first have it from thence, tho' they afterwards help to keep up the Spring: And if this pestilent Matter, be not only thus suffered to circulate, but assisted to spread, the *Sickness* will quickly be *unto Death*.

For whatever some fancy, a Nation can never live long without any Religion, nor Religion subsist without some to attend it as their principal Care: So that shou'd it indeed come to pass, that no body minded what Men of this Character said, as these *Teachers* would have it, Darkness with all it's hideous works wou'd soon cover the face of the Land, and make it fit for the Stroke.

We are already almost advanced to the brink of the Pit, by People's unlearning only what once they were taught, of the Honour and Advantage of *Marriage*, and the mutual Duties of Husbands and Wives, which are indeed so grosly forgot, that the Offenders have well nigh made their own Doctrine against it, appear to be true: But then it cannot confuse it self better, then by bidding so fair to destroy all the Comfort and Use of a *Social Life*: For if Mankind cannot indeed be happy in Wedlock, they are in a very deplorable State.

It was deservedly thought a Monstrous Error in those that declaimed against Marriage of old, as bringing more Creatures into the World to Sin, and be punished for it; tho' Salvation and Purity were their design: How much then above these are they to be blamed, who wou'd fain bring it into discredit, without any intent to keep Souls from Miscarrying, or set an unspotted life in it's place; but on purpose to spread their *Abominations* the wider, in defiance of all the Threatnings of God denounced against them, and those they defile.



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And who then that had any serious concern for the Glory of God, or the welfare of Men in this life or the next, wou'd not stop and consider a while with themselves, how far they shou'd give any countenance to such *Recreations*, as tend to disturb even the best of their present Enjoyments and Peace, and lead to extreme *Despair* in the *End*? For however Men may with vain words be sadly deceived, *the Wrath of God cometh upon the Children of Disobedience, because of these things*, and when they have mock'd all they can, they will find that He is a *Consuming fire*.

Compassion, then, one wou'd think, shou'd work upon those that are good, to discourage by all their Endeavours, such Customs as bring on the ruine of many, and do hurt to the whole, tho' they shou'd have strength to go in, without being tainted themselves: Not that they can pretend to be safe even from taking *Infection*, if once their *Preservatives* come to be frequently used, and to lose their Virtue, as they will by degrees. At least they will want a great deal of fulfilling the duty incumbent upon them to *Adorn their Holy Profession*, and can hardly assure themselves of their being redeemed from the vain Conversation they had in the World. Those allowances to this, at best, *careless spending of time*, which a little share in it, will bring them to make, cannot chuse but abate a great part of their *Zeal*, and slacken their pace in their spiritual Course; to which these *Entertainments* are so flat a Reverse, that *Dying daily*, and going to them, set out as they are, can scarce have their good Opinion together.

And who then that desired to perfect their natures, by a patient *striving for Mastery* over their Lusts, and following the *Captain* of their *common Salvation* thro' all the Paths of an humble Obedience, wou'd care to appear under so different a *Banner*, and encumber their Souls with more than they need, of what must again be thrown out of their way, or hinder their winning the *Prize*.

This being the case, good Christians certainly cannot have the much easier thoughts of such freedoms as these, for not finding them in so many words expresly forbid. Such as these will consider the end and design of the Gospel, and the frailty of Man, and think themselves obliged to be jealous of any fashion that tends to increase the weakness of one, and lessen the force of the other: When this plainly appears to be the Consequence of any Indulgence, they allow it to lay as full a Restraint, as cou'd be set by one or two particular Texts, which a corrupt understanding wou'd be at less pains to evade.

And yet if it blemishes any opinion to be Earthly and Sensual, or if *Evil Communications* are ever the worse for their effect upon *Manners*: If to cherish a *Mind that is at Enmity with God*, and declared to be *Death*, be opposing his Will, and endangering the Souls of them that support the Resistance; Accusations abound against the Custom that passes for so inoffensive a thing.



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If casting down *Imaginations*, and every high thing that exalteth it self against the knowledge of God, and bringing into Captivity every thought to the Obedience of Christ, be the Warfare of those that wou'd go by his Name; If arming themselves against the *Lust of the Flesh, the Lust of the Eye, and the pride of Life*, be that Task he has set them to do; If a chast Conversation coupled with fear, and letting their Light so shine before Men, that they may see 'em do all to the glory of God, be the duty of Christians; we have places enough to shew them of what importance it is, to withdraw from those that walk so very disorderly, as wou'd not have been in the times of a livelier Faith, allow'd the outward Communion of Saints.

Nor is the Case so mightily altered from what it was then, unless it be for the worse; as that we shou'd from thinking them wholly unworthy to come into our *Assemblies*, run flocking to theirs: For what vileness has ever offended the World, which is not exceeded if possible there? Can the Burlesquing an absurd Religion, or Mocking it upon the Stage be so bad as defying one that is reasonable and wise, or paying Honour to *Gods that were not*, be like the blaspheming him that is *True*? This cannot sure in reason be thought, whatever Excuses People may find to palliate that which they cannot find in their Hearts to condemn.

Nor is that primitive Spirit so wholly extinct, but that some in our days, and of *that Religion* which carries more marks of the World, then God be thanked are met with in ours, have dared to appear directly against that vain Practice, which notwithstanding sits easie on many of so much a *stricter Communion* than theirs. And this Instance is so far from being the worse for coming from *France*, that it is a great deal the more fit to be urged in the present debate. For if, in a Country disposed to a *lighter Temper and Air*, where the *Church* has greater Corruption, and the *Theater* fewer, there can yet be whole Bodies of *Casuists* found, disallowing the sight of their *Modester Plays*; Methinks it shou'd not be thought an Absurdity here, to go about to dissuade so *thoughtful a People* as we reckon our selves, from going to ours which shew so little of that Reformation to which we pretend.

[Sidenote: P. of Conde. *Vid. traite de la Comedie.*]

And least this should seem to be only the sense of some retired *Divines*, I beg leave to observe that the same censure is also pass'd by a *Prince of the Blood*, as highly Esteem'd for his *Learning as Birth*. And I wish his Example were follow'd here, that the shameful *Indignities* put upon Persons of the *Highest Descent* by those of the *Meanest*, wou'd stir up some excellent Spirit of that Eminent Rank, to shew them how much beneath them it was, to stoop so low to be thus coarsly entertained: And that it betray'd a want of *Honour* as well as *Religion*, tamely to see themselves as well as their *Maker* abused, and to seem pleased with that in a Croud, which said or done before them any where else, they wou'd be obliged to resent as the highest Affront.



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At least I hope that one way or other, they will be convinced how much it concerns them to put a stop to this Insolent Course, and find out some other *Diversions*, till these at least are reform'd, more suitable to the Christian Religion, and less threatenng their Virtue and Fame. And such no doubt may be found, tho' some perhaps will be apt to reply, that, at this way of talking, all are condemn'd.

But this I conceive is not fair, nor rightly deduced from what has been said; good reasons I know are sometimes press'd with these kind of Extremities, when Men have not a mind to admit their natural force; and to hinder inferring any thing from them, they frowardly insist on their proving too much: And thus I think it wou'd be in those, who shou'd offer to urge that this sort of arguing puts an end to all kind of Mirth.

For are then all Diversions alike? And can there be none without such follies, as no Man in his sense wou'd endure? Must all easie Conversation be lost, unless Men have leave to be loose and profane? And can there be no coming together of Strangers or Friends, but some naked Vice must dance and be praised, or some Virtue made a Sacrifice of, to fill up the Feast?

There may very well be, and no doubt but there is, in most Conversation, a great deal of that which shou'd never be there; and this is what one cannot wholly avoid without leaving the World. But can this be reason why we must let People make to themselves new and needless Occasions of Vanity, and lay dangerous snares in the way of unwary People? I shou'd rather think the Argument lay; that since there were so many faults, in all parts of the World and diversion of life, Men shou'd not look out for more of this Trash to offend their Company with, and foment the Disease, but get clear away from all the Infection they cou'd, and lay in a Stock of such agreeable and wholsom provisions, as might enable them to treat others with Safety and Ease, and sometimes to correct the ill humours they found.

But then they must not go to such *Books* and prescriptions for these, as are full of the leaven they shou'd put out from amongst them, and can serve for nothing else but to poyson their Food: To converse with Impiety here, is to give it all the advantage they can, it is to surrender the Mind entirely up to whatever assaults it, without being able to save so much as a stragling thought. For they whose *Closets* are fill'd with nothing but these, do not even pretend to resist the force they call in, and a good Book standing idly by, will be little security, against the strong Delusions of those they read with concert: And therefore they who wou'd have their own virtue preserved, and see more in the World, must not only avoid ill commerce abroad, but reject it at home, and employ their Retirements in preparing themselves to appear in publick without danger, and to some kind of life.



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This care, I am sure, of our selves, and this Compassion one of another, God and Nature and the Gospel require; and how much or how little soever others may be affected at this, you Sir, I dare say, will think best of your self, when you tread most in the steps of your *Saviour*, and like him, *go about doing good*: When you relieve the Afflicted, assist your Neighbours, and comfort your Friends; when you please and benefit those that desire to hear you, and Reverence and Kindness and Truth, are the Law of your Tongue. When a meek and quiet Spirit adorns you, and Piety gives the grace to your looks, when your Religious Example shines so lovely and clear, as to draw those after you, to whom it shews the beautiful way, and Vanity has not the face to appear; then, and not much before then, will you think you have made some Advance to Peace and a Crown.

In hopes of that desired Success,

I am,

SIR,

Your, &c.

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