

Representation of the Impiety and Immorality of the English Stage (1704); Some Thoughts Concerning the Stage in a Letter to a Lady (1704) eBook

Representation of the Impiety and Immorality of the English Stage (1704); Some Thoughts Concerning the Stage in a Letter to a Lady (1704)

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INTRODUCTION

Within two or three years after the appearance in 1698 of Jeremy Collier's 'A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage', the bitter exchanges of reply and counter-reply to the charges of gross licentiousness in the London theaters had subsided. The controversy, however, was by no means ended, and around 1704 it flared again in a resurgence of attacks upon the stage. Among the tracts opposing the theaters was an anonymous pamphlet entitled 'A Representation of the Impiety and Immorality of the English Stage', a piece which was published early in 1704 and which appeared in three editions before the end of that year.



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The author reveals within his tract some of the reasons for its appearance at that time. He remarks upon the obvious failure of the opponents of the theater to end “the outrageous and insufferable Disorders of the *stage*.” He stresses the brazenness of the players in presenting, soon after the devastating storm of the night of November 26-27, 1703, two plays, ‘Macbeth’ and ‘The Tempest’, “as if they design’d to Mock the Almighty Power of God, *who alone commands the Winds and the Seas*.” (‘Macbeth’ was acted at Drury Lane on Saturday, November 27, as the storm was subsiding, but, because it was advertised in the ‘Daily Courant’ on Friday, November 26, for the following evening, it would appear that, unless the players possessed the even more formidable power of foreseeing the storm, their presentation of ‘Macbeth’ at that time was pure coincidence. No performance of ‘The Tempest’ in late November appears in the extant records, but there was probably one at Lincoln’s Inn Fields, which was not regularly advertising its offerings.) The author also emphasizes the propriety, before the approaching Fast Day of January 19, 1704, of noting once more the Impiety of the stage and the desirability of either suppressing it wholly or suspending its operations for a considerable period. Apparently the author hoped to arouse in religious persons a renewed zeal for closing the theaters, for the tract was distributed at the churches as a means of giving it wider circulation among the populace. (‘The Critical Works of John Dennis’ [Baltimore, 1939], I, 501, refers to a copy listed in Magga catalogue. No. 563, Item 102, with a note: “19th Janry, Fast Day. This Book was given me at ye Church dore, and was distributed at most Churches.”)

Except for the author’s ingenuity in seizing upon the fortuitous circumstances of the storm, the acting of ‘Macbeth’ and ‘The Tempest’, and the proclamation of the Fast Day (which was ordered partly because of the ravages of the storm), there is nothing greatly original in the work. The author was engaged, in fact, in bringing up to date some of the accusations which earlier controversialists had made. For example, he reviews the indictments of the players in 1699 and 1701 for uttering profane remarks upon the stage, and he culls from several plays and prints the licentious expressions which had resulted in the indictments. Like Jeremy Collier before him and Arthur Bedford in ‘The Evil and Danger of Stage-Plays’ later (1706), he adds similar expressions from plays recently acted, as proof, presumably, of the failure of the theaters to reform themselves in spite of the publicity previously given to their shortcomings. In so doing, he damns the stage and plays by excerpts, usually brief ones, containing objectionable phrases. To this material he adds a section consisting of seventeen questions, a not uncommon device, addressed to those who might frequent the playhouses. The questions again stress the great difficulty involved in attending plays and remaining truly good Christians.

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The pamphlet must have been completed late in 1703 or very early in 1704. The references to the storm and the performances of 'Macbeth' and 'The Tempest' would place its final composition after late November, 1703, and it was in print in time to be distributed at the churches on January 19 and also to be advertised in the 'Daily Courant' for January 20 under the heading "This present day is publish'd." The fact that it quickly attained three editions during 1704 may be partially accounted for by its being given to churchgoers, for it seems unlikely that the pamphlet would have a tremendous sale, even if one allows for the strong opposition to the stage which persisted in the minds of many people at the turn of the century. The author of the tract is unknown, although Sister Rose Anthony in 'The Jeremy Collier Stage Controversy, 1698-1726' (Milwaukee, 1937), pages 194-209, ascribed it to Jeremy Collier, an attribution which E. N. Hooker, in a review of the book in 'Modern Language Notes', LIV (1939), 388, and also in 'The Critical Works of John Dennis', I, 501, has deemed unlikely.

Advertised also in the 'Daily Courant' for January 20, 1704, under the heading "This present day is publish'd" and in the same paragraph with the advertisement of 'A Representation', was another short pamphlet, 'Some Thoughts Concerning the Stage in a Letter to a Lady'. (Immediately below this notice of publication was a re-advertisement of Jeremy Collier's 'Dissuasive from the Play-House', with the result that, on the day following the Fast Day, three of the pamphlets attacking the stage and referring to the performances of plays representing tempests soon after the destructive storm of November 26-27, 1703, were brought simultaneously to the attention of the public.)

It seems clear that the publication and distribution of these books was a feature in the activities of the Societies for Reformation of Manners. The anonymous 'Account of the Progress of the Reformation of Manners' (13th ed., 1705) boasted that the Societies had enlarged their design by causing books to be written which aimed at "laying open to the World the outrageous Disorders and execrable Impieties of our most Scandalous Play-Houses, with the fatal Effects of them to the Nation in general, and the manifest Sin and Danger of particular Persons frequenting of them" (p. 2). Defoe's 'Review' (III, no. 93, for August 3, 1706) pointed out that thousands of Collier's books had been distributed at the church doors by the Societies for Reformation of Manners and the founders of the Charity Schools. Obviously the Societies did not restrict themselves to the works of Collier. Incidentally, the habit of Collier and his followers of giving excerpts to illustrate the profaneness and immorality of the stage produced an unexpected effect in at least one quarter. The same issue of the 'Review' tells us that the Rev. Dr. William Lancaster, archdeacon of Middlesex, objected strongly to the dispersal of anti-stage tracts at the door of *his* church, on the grounds that they tended "to teach the ignorant People to swear and curse."



of the
English Stage.

The various Methods that have been used for Preventing the outrageous and insufferable Disorders of the *stage*, having been in a great measure defeated: It is thought proper, under our present Calamity, and before the approaching *Fast*, to collect some of the *Prophane and Immoral Expressions* out of several late *plays*, and to put them together in a little Compass, that the Nation may thereby be more convinced of the *Impiety of the Stage*, the Guilt of such as frequent it, and the Necessity of putting a Stop thereto, either by a total Suppression of the *Play-Houses*, as was done in the Reign of Queen *Elizabeth*, or by a Suspension for some considerable time, after the Example of other Nations; where, we are informed, the Stages were very chaste, in respect of ours of this Nation, who are of a Reformed Religion, and do with so much Reason glory in being of the best constituted Church in the World; nay, 'tis out of doubt but the *Theatres* even of *Greece* and *Rome* under *Heathenism* were less obnoxious and offensive, which yet by the Primitive Fathers and General Councils stood condemned.



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And is not the dangerous and expensive War we are engaged in, together with the present Posture of Affairs, a sufficient Reason for this, tho' the Play-Houses were less mischievous to the Nation than they are?

Are we not also loudly called upon to lay aside this prophane Diversion, by the late dreadful Storm, terrible beyond that which we are told was felt in the Year 1636? which, as a Right Reverend Prelate has observ'd, some good Men then thought presag'd further Calamity to this Nation, and was accordingly followed by the Commotions in *Scotland* the very next Year, and not long after by the Civil War in *England*.

And if we go on to countenance such open and flagrant Defiances of Almighty God, have we not great Reason to fear his heavy Judgments will consume us?

But further, Her Majesty having now, upon Occasion of the late great Calamity, appointed a Day of Solemn Fasting and Humiliation throughout the Kingdom, for the deprecating of God's Wrath, surely the Players have little Reason to expect that they shall still go on in their abominable Outrages; who, 'tis to be observed with Indignation, did, as we are assured, within a few Days after we felt the late dreadful Storm, entertain their Audience with the ridiculous Representation of what had fill'd us with so great Horror in their Plays call'd 'Mackbeth' and the 'Tempest' as if they design'd to Mock the Almighty Power of God, *who alone commands the Winds and the Seas, and they obey him*. No surely, it cannot but be hoped, that a Suspension at least of the Players acting for some considerable time will follow, when the *Prophaneness and Immorality of the Stage* comes to Her Majesty's Knowledge, who, 'tis to be remembred, has never once given any Countenance to the Play-House by Her Royal Presence, since Her happy Accession to the Throne.

The abominable obscene Expressions which so frequently occur in our Plays, as if the principal Design of them was to gratifie the lewd and vicious part of the Audience, and to corrupt the virtuously dispos'd, are in this black Collection wholly omitted; lest thereby fresh Poison should be administred instead of an Antidote.

After the Endeavours used by Sir Richard Blackmore, Mr. Collier, and others, to Correct and Reform the Scandalous Disorders and Abuses of the Stage_ were found too unsuccessful; in the Year 1699, several of the Players were prosecuted in the Court of Common-Pleas, upon the Statute of 3 Jac. 1. for prophanely using the Name of GOD upon the Stage, and Verdicts were obtained against them._

And in Easter-Term, 1701_, the Players of one House were Indicted at the King's-Bench-Bar, before the Right Honourable the Lord Chief Justice Holt, for using these following Expressions, and were thereof Convicted._

In the Play call'd, The Provok'd Wife. __

'But more than all that, you must know I was afraid of being damn'd in those Days; for I kept sneaking, cowardly Company, Fellows that went to Church, and said Grace to their Meat, and had not the least Tincture of Quality about em.



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'Damn 'em both, with all my Heart, and every thing else that daggles a Petticoat; except four generous Whores, with Betty Sands at the Head of 'em, who were drunk with my Lord Rake and I, ten times in a Fortnight.

'Sure, if Woman had been ready created, the Devil, instead of being kick'd down into Hell, had been married.

'Pox of my Family.

'Pox of her Virtue.

'He has married me, and be damn'd to him

'Pox of the Parson.

'Damn Morality, and damn the Watch.

'Let me speak and be damn'd.

[Note: *This is spoken by one in a Minister's Habit.*]

'And you and your Wife may be damn'd.

'Stand off and be damn'd.

'Damn me, if you han't.

'Lord! What Notions have we silly Women from these old Philosophers of Virtue, for Virtue is this, and Virtue is that, and Virtue has its own Reward; Virtue, Virtue is an Ass, and a Gallant is worth forty on't.

'If I should play the Wife and Cuckold him.

'That would be playing the down-right Wife indeed.

'I know according to the strict Statute Law of Religion, I shou'd do wrong; but if there were a Court of *Chancery* in Heaven, I'm sure I shou'd cast him.

'If there were a House of Lords you might.

'If you should see your Mistress at a Coronation, dragging her Peacocks Train, with all her State and Insolence about her, it would strike you with all the awful Thoughts that Heaven it self could pretend to, from you.

'Madam, to oblige your Ladyship, he shall speak Blasphemy.



'In hopes thou'lt give me up thy Body, I resign thee up my Soul.

'A Villain, but a repenting Villain; Stuff which Saints in all Ages have been made of.

'Satan and his Equipage; Woman tempted me, Lust weakened me, and so the Devil overcame me; as fell *Adam*, so fell I.

A Bill was likewise found against the Players_ of the other House, in the Term abovementioned, for the following Expressions; but the Indictment being wrong laid, they were acquitted: but they were Indicted the Term following for the same, which Indictment is not yet tried._

In the Humour of the Age.

'Marriage, that was only contriv'd for the meaner Rank; tell me of Marriage, commend me to a Whore.

'Every serious Thought, was so much Time lost.

'We address you with the same awful Reverence we petition Heaven.

In Sir 'Courtly Nice'.

'Nay, his Salvation is a Looking-Glass, for there he finds his eternal Happiness, Surly's Heaven, at least his Priest is his Claret-Glass, for to that he confesses all his Sins, and from it receives Absolution and Comfort. But his Damnation is a Looking-Glass, for there he finds an eternal Fire in his Nose.

'That same thing, the Word *Love*, is a Fig-Leaf to cover the naked Sense, a Fashion brought up by *Eve*, the Mother of Jilts, she Cuckold her Husband with the Serpent, then pretended to Modesty, and fell a making of Plackets.



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'Let him be in Misery and be damn'd.

'And a Pox on thee for't.

'Prithee Dress and be damn'd.

'Pox on 'em: Pox on you all Whores.

'Pox take him.

'Rot me.

'Let him Plague you, Pox you, and damn you; I don't care and be damn'd.

The following Expressions are transcribed out of the Plays that have been Acted and Printed since they were Indicted for the horrid Passages above-recited.

In the Comedy call'd, 'The False Friend. 1702'.

Pag. 7. 'Pox take ye. Pag. 12 'The Devil fetch me, &c.

Pag. 22. 'Heaven's Blessing must needs fall upon so dutiful a Son; but I don't know how its Judgments may deal with so indifferent a Lover.

Pag. 28. 'Say that 'tis true, you are married to another, and that a—— Twou'd be a Sin to think of any Body but your Husband, and that —— You are of a timorous Nature, and afraid of being damn'd.

'How have I lov'd, to Heaven I appeal; but Heaven does now permit that Love no more.

'Why does it then permit us Life and Thought? Are we deceiv'd in its Omnipotence? Is it reduc'd to find its Pleasure in its Creature's Pain?

Pag. 33. '*Leonora's* Charms turn Vice to Virtue, Treason into Truth; Nature, who has made her the Supream Object of our Desires must needs have design'd her the Regulator of our Morals.

'There he goes I'faith; he seem'd as if he had a Qualm just now; but he never goes without a Dram of Conscience-water about him to set Matters right again.

Pag. 43. 'Speak, or by all the Flame and Fire of Hell eternal; speak, or thou art dead.

In the 'Inconstant', or the 'Way to Win him. 1702'.

Pag. 10. 'My Blessing! Damn ye, you young Rogue.



Pag. 20. 'What do you pray for? Why, for a Husband; that is, you implore Providence to assist you in the just and pious Design of making the wisest of his Creatures a Fool, and the Head of the Creation a Slave.

Pag. 43. 'But don't you think there is a great deal of Merit in dedicating a beautiful Face to the Service of Religion?

'Not half so much as devoting them to a pretty Fellow. If our Femality had no Business in this World, why was it sent hither? Let's dedicate our beautiful Minds to the Service of Heaven: And for our handsom Persons, they become a Box at the Play, as well as a Pew in the Church.

In the 'Modish Husband'.

Pag. 12. 'She's mad with the Whimsies of Virtue and the Devil.

Pag. 28. 'I think Wit the most impertinent thing that belongs to a Woman, except Virtue.

Pag. 47. 'The Devil fetch him.

Pag. 50. 'I'm going towards Heaven, Sirrah; it must be the Way to my Mistress.

In the Play call'd, 'Vice Reclaim'd', &c.

Pag. 15. 'Now the Devil take that dear false agreeable; what shall I call him, *Wilding*. But I'll go home and pray heartily we may meet again to morrow.



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'By Heaven, &c.

Pag. 24. 'By Heaven it becomes you.

Pag. 27. 'The Devil take me.

Pag. 31. 'Lightning blast him! Thunder rivet him to the Earth! That Vulture, Conscience, prey upon his Heart, and rack him to Despair!

Pag. 32. 'Grant me, ye Powers, one lucky Hint for Mischief.

Pag. 43. 'Then damn me, if I don't, &c.

Pag. 47. 'Rot me and be damn'd.

Pag. 52. 'By Heaven, &c.

Pag. 60. 'Well, the Devil take me.

In the 'Different Widows'.

Pag. 1. 'Damn'd Lies, by *Jupiter* and *Juno*, and the rest of the Heathen Gods and Goddesses; for I remember I paid two Guinea's for swearing Christian Oaths last Night.

Pag. 2. 'Pox take him. Pag. 24. 'Ye immortal Gods, who the Devil am I?

Pag. 61. 'May the Devil, Curses, Plagues and Disappointments light upon you.

In the 'Fickle Shepherdess'.

Pag. 17. 'Bid *Charon* instantly prepare his Boat, I'd row to Hell.

Ibid. 'O *Ceres*, can thy all-seeing Eye *behold* this Object, and yet restrain thy Pity?

Pag. 32. 'Fly hence to Hell; there hide thy Head lower than Darkness. Wou'd thou hadst been acting Incest, Murder, Witchcraft, when thou cam'st to pray: Thou hadst in any thing sinn'd less than in this Devotion.

Pag. 36. 'Where Love's blind, God sends forth continual Arrows.

Pag. 42. '*Ceres*, to whom we all things owe.

Pag. 46. 'Almighty *Ceres*.

In the Play called, 'Marry or do Worse, 1704'.



Pag. 4. 'Pox on me. Rot the World.

Pag. 6. 'Pox on him.

Pag. 8. 'A Plague on her.

'The Devil take you for a Witch. The Devil take you for a Fool.

Pag. 12. 'No Matrimony; the Devil danced at the first Wedding there was, and Cuckoldom has been in Fashion ever since.

'The Devil take you for me.

Pag. 12 & 13. 'The Devil's in't if he been't fit for Heaven, when my Master has writ Cuckoldom there.

'The Devil take me &c.

Pag. 18. 'A Plague choak you,

Pag. 21. 'A smart Jade by Heaven.

Pag. 33. 'Now the Devil take him &c.

Pag. 37. 'A Plague on my Master.

Pag. 44. 'The Devil take me, &c.

Pag. 47. 'I pity him, and yet a Pox on him too.

Pag. 51. 'That dear damn'd Virtue of hers tempts me strangely.

Pag. 54. 'The Devil take me, &c.

Pag. 64. 'By Heaven.

It must be again remembred, that the detestable lewd Expressions contained in the abovementioned Plays, which seem to be the most pernicious part of our Comedies, are not here recited, least they should debauch the Minds and corrupt the Manners of the Reader, and do the same Mischief, in some degree, as they do in the greatest when used upon the Stage, tho' mentioned with never so great Indignation. And it must be likewise taken notice of, that these Instances of the prophane Language of Plays, which the good Christian will read with Horror, would not have been put together, and laid before the World, had not the Incorrigibleness of the Players made it necessary for the Ends abovementioned.



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And now may not these plain Questions be proposed, without Offence, to the Persons who frequent our Play-Houses_; and especially to such of them as appear at any times in our Churches, and at the Holy Sacrament, and be submitted to the Judgment of all Mankind._

I. Can Persons who frequent the *Play-Houses*, and are not displeas'd to hear Almighty God blasphemed, his Providence questioned and denied, his Name prophaned, his Attributes ascribed to sinful Creatures, and even to Heathen Gods, his Holy Word burlesqued, and treated as a Fable, his Grace made a Jest of, his Ministers despis'd, Conscience laugh'd at, and Religion ridicul'd; in short, the Christian Faith and Doctrine expos'd, and the sincere Practice of Religion represented as the Effect of Vapours and Melancholy, Virtue discountenanced, and Vice encouraged. Evil treated as Good, and Good as Evil, and all this highly aggravated by being done in cool Blood, upon Choice and Deliberation? Can those, I say, that frequent the *Play-Houses*, and are not displeas'd with any of these things, be thought to have any due Sense of Religion?

II. Can Persons who often spend their Time and Money to see Plays, be suppos'd to be displeas'd with, and to have a due Indignation at, the Hearing the Outrages beforementioned, which so often occur in them, and of which there is a dismal Specimen laid before the World in this Paper?

III. Can sincere Christians encourage and assist, by their Presence and Purses, Men in committing such Practices, and in their living by a Profession, which, as it is managed, is so inconsistent with Christianity?

IV. Can any who have a true Concern for the Honour of Almighty God, give Countenance and Support to such Entertainments whereby he is so dishonour'd and affronted, though they could suppose themselves above the Danger of being the worse for them, which they can never be?

V. Can Persons who know 'tis generally allow'd, that the Infidelity and Looseness of the Age is very much owing to the *Play-Houses*; who have observ'd, that the Zeal of particular Persons have decreased, and their Strictness of Life abated, by their going to Plays; and do think that the Gospel obliges them to discourage, by their Reproof and Example, Sin in their Neighbours, to endeavour, according to their Advantages and Opportunities, to further their spiritual Welfare, and to be *Lights* to lead others in their Duty and Way to Heaven? Can such, tho' they could think themselves wholly secure from taking Infection in going to the *Play-House*, encourage others, even weak and feeble Christians, by their Example, to run to the same dangerous Place likewise? Can this be thought an Expression of their Charity to their Neighbour, or to be acceptable to Almighty God? or rather, Should not Compassion to the Souls of their Neighbours keep such as have a due Concern for them from going to such Places?



VI. Can it be denied, but that the going of a few sober Persons, tho' but once a Year, to see a Play, that they think less offensive and dangerous, does encourage many others to go frequently to Plays, and to those that are more abominably loose and profane; who might never go at all to them, if none frequented them but such as were entirely abandoned to Shame as well as Vice?



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VII. Can Persons who have good Dispositions to Religion, who go but once or twice in a Year to the *Play-House*, say, upon their Experience, that they think the seeing of Plays is proper to encrease the Love of God in Men, to fit them for holy Exercises, and to promote their spiritual Welfare? or rather, Must they not own, that by the seeing of Plays they are more indisposed for Religious Performances; that the Awe and Reverence which they had for God and Religion, and the Horrour which they had at the Sins which they there see Men divert themselves with, and make a Jest of, does thereby wear off; that their sensual Desires are more heightened and enflamed; that they are more alienated from God, and more enamoured with the World?

VIII. Can Persons who are sensible of, and do heartily lament their want of the Love and Fear of God, their too great a Love of the World, the frequent Distractions of their Mind in Prayer, and the Unruliness of their Lusts and Passions, delight to frequent a Place where they are surrounded with Temptations to the Love of the World; where what can excite to unlawful Desires and Actions is promoted; and the Arts of an easie Defilement are studied? Can they think this consistent with the Rules of keeping from all Appearance of Evil, of avoiding the Occasions and Temptations to Sin, and that Watchfulness over their Thoughts, and that Diligence in making their Calling and Election sure, as the Gospel requires? Do they in any wise herein adorn their Profession, resemble the Christians who lived in the first Ages of Christianity; or those who in any Age since have been celebrated for their Virtue?

IX. Can Persons in good earnest pray, as they are directed in the Lord's-Prayer, *Not to be led into Temptation*, and yet frequent the Play-House, where they are assaulted with more and greater Temptations than incounter them perhaps in any other Place?

X. Can such Persons as go to the *Play-Houses* on Week-days, and appear in our Churches on the Lord's-day, and even at the Holy Sacrament, where they declare, that they *present themselves, their Souls and Bodies, as a reasonable, holy and lively Sacrifice to God*, be suppos'd to attend upon these Holy Ordinances with a suitable Frame of Mind; since the Language and Design of Sermons, and of our Liturgy, and of Plays, are so different and even directly contrary to each other?

XI. Can Ladies really dislike Lewd Discourse in Conversation, and yet like to see Lewdness represented in all the Dresses that can vitiate the Imagination, and fasten upon the Memory?

XII. Can Parents, or any other Persons who have the Conduct of Youth, and have any serious Concern for the Souls of their Children, or of those that are committed to their Care, satisfie their Consciences, without Restraining them from going to a place of such Impiety and Infection; where they would be in the way to unlearn the best Instructions of their Parents and Governours; where Pride and Falshood, Malice and Revenge, Injustice and Immodesty, Contempt of Marriage, and false Notions of Honour, are

recommended; where Men are taught to call in question the first Principles of their Religion, and are led to a contempt of Sacred things?



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XIII. Can sincere and judicious Christians think that the Players exposing (as they pretend to do) Formality, Humour, and Pedantry, is an Equivalent for their insulting sacred things, and their promoting to so high a degree the Prophaneness and Debauchery of the Nation?

XIV. Can modest and prudent Christians think, that the Opinion of the General Councils, Primitive Fathers, and so many wise and good Men in the several Ages of the Church, who have condemned the going to Plays as unlawful, and as a renouncing the Baptismal Engagements, doth not deserve great regard?

XV. Can sincerely religious Persons hear of the most horrid, licentious Treatment of sacred things as is in our Plays, and this not among *Mahometans* and *Infidels*, not at *Rome* and *Venice*, but in a Protestant Countrey, without a Fear that the Judgments of God will fall upon us?

XVI. Can less be expected from good Christians, who are sensible of the intolerable Disorders of the Play-Houses, and the Mischiefs that are brought upon Mankind by them, than that they would use all proper Methods for the Discouraging and Restraining their Relations and Friends from going to them, as they have any Concern for the Honour of God, the Good of Mankind, and the Welfare of their own Immortal Souls; that so by Persons, who have any virtuous Principles, keeping from a Place which they will never be able to frequent with Safety to themselves, under any partial Regulation; the *Players*, the unhappy, the miserable *Players*, may be necessitated to quit their Profession, and take upon them some honest and useful Employment (wherein good Men ought to encourage and assist them) and thereby the execrable Impieties of the *Play-Houses*, and the ruinous consequences of them, be prevented?

XVII. Lastly, Can Persons frequent the Play-Houses, after the outrageous Impieties of them, and the fatal Effects of their going to them, are in so full and advantageous a manner laid open to the World, without a greater Aggravation of their Guilt?

FINIS.

Some
THOUGHTS
Concerning the
STAGE
IN A
LETTER
TO A
LADY

London, Printed Anno Dom. 1704



Madam,

It is with no little Pleasure I behold you treading in the Paths of *Virtue*, and practising the Duties of a Holy and Religious life. This, as it has deservedly gain'd you the Love and Admiration of all that know you: so, I doubt not, but you will always find it a *Fund* of solid Peace and Satisfaction to your own Mind. I heartily wish there were many more such bright Examples in the World, that the Ladies might be at last convinc'd, *That there is something worthy their Imitation beyond the Modes of Dress and Equipage; something which will render them much more agreeable to the best and wisest of their Admirers, and, in time, no less pleasing to themselves.* I make no doubt but the Age



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(as corrupt as it is) can furnish us with many Instances of those of your Sex, who think the Beauty of the Mind does far surpass the gay Appearances of the most splendid Outside: But yet, it must be confessed, that there are others, (and those not a few) whose Lives are almost one continued Circle of Vanity and Folly. Such as divide the best and most precious part of their Time between their *Toilet*, the *Exchange*, and the *Play-House*. This, I believe, upon Enquiry, will appear to be no unjust Censure; tho' at the same time, *Madam*, I must freely own to you, that I think it a most amazing thing, that the *Ladies* (at least those who make any Pretensions to Virtue and Goodness) should ever be seen at the last of these Places; where they find themselves so scandalously treated. I am apt to think, that very few of 'em have read Mr. Collier's 'View of the Stage'; if they had, they would there see the *Corruptions* of the Plays set in so clear a Light, that one would believe, they should never after be Tempted to appear in a Place where *Lewdness* and *Obscenity* (not to mention other Immoralities) are so great a part of the Entertainment; a Place that is now become the *Common Rendezvouz* of the most Lewd and Dissolute Persons; the *Exchange*, (if I may so call it) where they meet to carry on the *vilest* and *worst* of Practices. 'Tis the Nursery of all manner of *Wickedness*, where the Seeds of *Atheism* and *Irreligion* are sown, which Weak and Tender Minds too readily cultivate, and from thence are easily led into a *Contempt* of all that's Serious. It is impossible to say, how many, and how great the *Mischiefs* are that spring from thence; which if a Man should take a View of, it would perhaps, be one of the most Melancholy Prospects that ever he beheld. To look into our *Modern Plays*, and there to see the Differences of Good and Evil confounded, Prophaneness, Irreligion, and Unlawful Love, made the masterly Stroaks of the *fine Gentleman*; Swearing, Cursing, and Blaspheming, the Graces of his Conversation; and Unchristian Revenge, to consummate the Character of the *Hero*; Sharpness and Poignancy of Wit exerted with the greatest Vigor against the *Holy Order*; in short, Religion and all that is Sacred, Burlesqu'd and Ridicul'd; To see this, I say, and withall, to reflect upon the fatal Effects which these things have already had, and how much worse are likely to follow, if not timely prevented, cannot but fill the Minds of all good Men with very dismal Apprehensions.

And are these then the Entertainments for a Christian to be pleas'd with; for one whose *Salvation* is to be wrought out with Fear and Trembling? Will the Strictnesses of Virtue and Religion be ever relished by a Mind tinctur'd with such Licentious Representations? Must not such Diversions (to say no worse of 'em) insensibly steal upon the *Affections*, especially of the *Younger sort*;



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give their Minds quite a wrong Biass, and disarm them of that *Severity* which is their greatest Guard, and which, when once lost, leaves 'em an easie Prey to every Temptation? Will not those *Lewd Scenes* of Love, wherewith almost every Play is fraught, inflame the Fancy, heighten the Imagination, and render a Person thus prepar'd, a fit Subject for ill designing People to work on? But suppose it were possible to be so armed as to be Proof against all these Dangers; yet let any that have the least Regard to what is *Serious*, tell me how they can answer it to *God*, or their own *Consciencs*, to be any ways Instrumental towards the *Support* of so much Wickedness? Do they think it a Sin to give the least Encouragement to Vice, and at the same time believe themselves *Innocent*, when by their *Persons*, and their *Purses*, they contribute to the cherishing the very *Seed-Plot* of Irreligion? 'Tis to no purpose for such to say, That they are cautious what Plays they see, and always go to the best and that the *Play-Houses* would thrive whether they frequented them or no. This may be true, but what then, Will this excuse them? Suppose a powerful *Rebellion* is begun in a Nation, and carried on *successfully*, for some time; and a Man should not only appear sometimes among the Rebels, but should, now and then, send them a *Supply* (tho' never so little) of Money and Arms: Could such a one pretend that he was no ways *Instrumental* in this Rebellion, nor Accessary to the Mischiefs that attended it, and that because it was not only *begun*, but would have *prosper'd* too, without him; and altho' he did sometimes appear among the Authors of it, yet it was with the Party which did the least Mischief? Do you think, *Madam*, this a just way of Reasoning? I dare say you do not. Is not this then the very Case I am speaking of? Is the *Stage*, as 'tis now manag'd, any thing else but a downright Rebellion against God and his Holy Religion? Are not the Plays, (if not by Design) yet by a natural and necessary Consequence, an *undermining* of his Laws, and an *Attempt* upon his Government? And must it not then follow, that *every one* that frequents them, is a *Party* in the *Cause*, and *encourages* the Undertaking? And tho' he should be so Happy as never to smile at a *Prophane Jest*, nor join in Applauding a *Vituous* Play; yet, will that exempt him from a Share of that *Guilt* which his Presence and Purse has help'd to support? No, *Madam*, 'tis *Numbers* strengthen the Enemy, and give fresh Courage to his Attempts! A *Full House* is the very *Life* of the Stage, and keeps it in Countenance, whereas *thin Audiences* would, in time, make it dwindle to nothing.



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I know, *Madam*, this is strange Doctrine to some People. If a Man talks to them of leaving the Plays, they wonder what he means, and are ready to take him for a Madman. They have so long habituated themselves to the *Play-Houses*, that they begin to think a *Place* there, to be part of their *Birth-Right*: But I desire such would be perswaded to hear what the late A. B. Tillotson thought of these matters, (and I hope some Deference is due to his Judgment). If they look into the 11th Volume of his 'Sermons', they will find that in his Discourse against the *Evil of Corrupt Communication*, he tells them, *That Plays, as the Stage now is, are intolerable, and not fit to be permitted in a Civiliz'd, much less in a Christian Nation, They do most notoriously minister, says he, both to Infidelity and Vice. By the Prophaneness of them they are apt to instil bad Principles into the Minds of Men, and to lessen that Awe, and Reverence which all Men ought to have for God and Religion: and by their Lewdness they teach Vice, and art apt to infect the Minds of Men, and dispose them to Lewd and Dissolute Practices. And therefore, says he, I do not see how any Person pretending to Sobriety and Virtue, and especially to the pure and holy Religion of our Blessed Saviour; can, without great Guilt and open Contradiction to his Holy Profession, be present at such Lewd and Immodest Plays, much less frequent them, as too many do, who would yet take it very ill to be shut out of the Communion of Christians, as they would most certainly have been in the first and purest Ages of Christianity.*

This is the Opinion, *Madam*, of that Excellent Man: and, one would think, it should put those Persons who are the Encouragers of Plays, and the Frequenters of them, when they read it, upon an Enquiry, What it is they are doing? Whether they are not carrying on the Designs of the great Enemy of Mankind? But if that will not prevail upon them, let 'em reflect upon the late Instance of God's *severe Displeasure* against us, and tell me then, whether they think it consistent with that *Humiliation and Repentance* which this great Judgment ought to awaken in us, and which *Her Majesty*, by Her late *Gracious Proclamation*, calls upon us to Exercise, to be ever again present at a *Place*, where they must often hear the Name of *God* Prophaned, and every thing that is *Serious* made a Jest of? A *Place* which they cannot but know, and must own, (if put to the Question) has contributed so much to the *Corrupting* the present Age; and which, 'tis to be fear'd, is one of those *accursed things*, that has provok'd the Almighty to be so angry with us.



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These are things, *Madam*, of no trifling Importance; they are such as deserve the serious Reflections of all *good* Christians, whatever the *Pretenders to Gaiety* may think. And though some may, perhaps, misconstrue and ridicule such Considerations by the Names of *Preciseness* and *Fanaticism*; yet, 'tis to be hop'd, that all who have any regard for the *Honour* of God, the *Welfare* of their Country, and the *Interest* of our *Established Church*, will not be laugh'd out of their *Duty*, but be perswaded, not only to withdraw *themselves* from a Place of so much Danger, but advise *others* to do the like; that the Stage may no longer Triumph in the *Spoils* of Virtue and Religion. 'Tis now the time to begin such an *Undertaking*: We have a powerful Enemy *abroad*, and a more formidable one at *home*; I mean that *Looseness* and *Irreligion* which so abounds: and what will it avail us to *subdue* the one, while we *encourage* the other? The *Hand of God* has been lifted up against us, we have seen the *Terrors of the Lord*, and felt the *Arrows of the Almighty*; and what can all this mean, but to awaken us to a due Sense of our *Danger*? And, 'tis to be hop'd, the Nation has already taken the Alarm, and begin to think how to avert God's Displeasure. The *Stage* is called in Question, and Papers are dispers'd to warn us of its Mischiefs; and it is not improbable that the *Licentious* and *Unbounded Liberty* the Players have taken of late years, and particularly in their daring to Act THE TEMPEST within a very few Days after the late dreadful Storm, has rais'd in the Minds of Men such an Abhorrence and Indignation, that we may possibly be so happy as to see the Stage (if not *totally suppress'd*) yet brought under such a *Regulation*, both as to the *Plays* that are Acted, and the *Company* that Resort to them, that Foreigners may no longer *stand amaz'd* when brought into our *Theatres*, nor Good Men *tremble* at the Continuance of them: but that *Virtue* may appear there with all its Charms, and *Vice* be expos'd to the utmost *Contempt*. In short, that the Stage may become so *Chast*, that even those *Birds of Prey* who now hover about the *Play-Houses* and make the Avenues to 'em so dangerous, may fly away from a Place that will no longer *Encourage* nor *Protect* them.

But after all, *Madam*, Whether this is such a Scheme as can ever be reduc'd in Practice; whether so *noble a Structure* as I am speaking of, can be erected upon so *rotten a Foundation*; whether the *Wound* is not *Gangreen'd*, and must be cur'd by *Excision*; I say, whether such a *Regulation* of the *Stage* be possible, must be left to those who have *Skill* and *Authority* to try the Experiment. In

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the mean time, it will be every one's Duty to run from a Place of such *Infection*, least they contribute to the spreading a *Disease* which may, in time, prove *Fatal* to the whole Nation. But I forget, *Madam*, I am intrenching upon your Patience, while I detain you in a place you have so long abandon'd. I am fallen upon a Subject, which 'tis difficult not to say much of: but I shall no longer interrupt your better Thoughts, than while I beg Pardon for this Trouble, who am,

Madam,
Your very Humble Servant.
Jan. 10th.
1704.

A / Representation / of the / Impiety & Immorality / of the / English Stage, / with / Reasons for putting a Stop thereto: / and some Questions Addressed to / those who frequent the Play- / Houses. / London, / Printed, and are to be Sold by J. Nutt / near Stationers-Hall, 1704 / [enclosed within double frame of rules]

Collation: A8 B4. Pp. [1-] 24. P. [1] title, as above; p. [2] blank; pp. 3-24 text.

Three editions were issued in 1704. If we take the author's words literally, the pamphlet was written between the "Great Storm" of November 26, 1703 and the day of fasting decreed by Queen Anne for January 19, 1704. According to Arthur Bedford ('The Evil and Danger of Stage Plays' ... London, 1706) the pamphlet was published "At the Time of the Fast ..."

Colton Storm

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Editors of the Augustan Reprint Society wish to thank the following people for assistance rendered during the first year of the society's publication:

Mr. Warner G. Rice, Director of the Library, University of Michigan.

Mr. Stanley Pargellis, Director of the Newberry Library, Chicago.

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Mr. R. B. Downs, Director of the Library, University of Illinois.

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The Augustan Reprint Society

announces its schedule of publications for the *SECOND YEAR*

May, 1947:

Series I, no. 3—John Gay's *THE PRESENT STATE OF WIT* and a section
on wit from *THE ENGLISH THEOPHRASTUS*. With an Introduction by
Donald Bond.

July, 1947:

Series II, no. 3—Rapin's *DE CARMINE PASTORALI*, translated by
Creech. With an Introduction by J. E. Congleton.

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Sept. 1947:

Series III, no. 3—T. Hanmer's (?) *SOME REMARKS ON THE TRAGEDY OF HAMLET*. With an Introduction by Clarence D. Thorpe.

Nov., 1947:

Series I, no. 4.—Corbyn Morris's *ESSAY TOWARDS FIXING THE TRUE STANDARDS OF WIT, etc.* With an Introduction by James L. Clifford.

Jan., 1948:

Series II, no. 4.—Thomas Purney's *DISCOURSE ON THE PASTORAL*. With an Introduction by Earl Wasserman.

Mar., 1948:

Series III, no. 4—*Essays on the Stage*, selected, with an Introduction by Joseph Wood Krutch.

Publications

The above schedule is subject to slight modification. On the whole the choices were made in response to requests by members of the Society. You are urged to write the editors, who are anxious to know, not only what you would like to see reprinted, but also what items already printed you have found most useful, and what sort of information you think is most profitable to include in the Introductions. At present we offer a minimum of six issues annually. As soon as the Society's membership increases sufficiently to warrant it, we shall bring out additional publications at no extra charge.

Future Plans

It has seemed desirable that for the Second Year we should continue the present series (on Wit, on Poetry and Language, and on the Stage). But next year we hope to run one or two new series: Rare Poems, Rare Plays, Swiftiana, Drydeniana, Popeana, Rare Periodicals, or some such unifying topic or theme. Send us your suggestions for items in these or in the present series. All suggestions are listed in our files; and our policy in publications will be determined by the requests of members.

Bibliographical Notes

From time to time we shall include Bibliographical Notes in our publications. If members find this addition valuable, it will become a regular feature of the Reprints.



Membership Fees

With this issue we conclude our publications for the First Year. If your membership expires, please send us your renewal before May 1, so that you will not miss the first issue of the Second Year. Membership rates remain fixed at \$2.50 per year in the United States and Canada, and \$2.75 in Great Britain and the continent.

Back Numbers

A limited supply of back numbers is still available. Publications of the first year may be secured by members for \$2.50, the annual membership rate. For your convenience we list them below:

May, 1946:

Richard Blackmore's *ESSAY UPON WIT* (1716) and Joseph Addison's *FREEHOLDER* no. 45 (1716).

July, 1946:

Samuel Cobb's *OF POETRY*, and *DISCOURSE ON CRITICISM* (1707).

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Sept. 1946:

Anon., LETTER TO A. H. ESQ; CONCERNING THE STAGE (1698) and Richard Willis's (?) THE OCCASIONAL PAPER, no. IX (1698).

Nov., 1946:

Anon., ESSAY ON WIT (1748), together with Characters by Flecknoe and Joseph Warton's ADVENTURER nos. 127 and 133.

Jan., 1947:

Samuel Wesley's EPISTLE TO A FRIEND CONCERNING POETRY (1700) and ESSAY ON HEROIC POETRY (1693).

Mar., 1947:

Anon., REPRESENTATION OF THE IMPIETY AND IMMORALITY OF THE STAGE (1704), and anon., SOME THOUGHTS CONCERNING THE STAGE (1704).

Libraries

Libraries as well as individuals are eligible for membership. Because the publications are issued without profit it will be impossible to allow discounts to libraries, agents, or booksellers.

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