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Miscellaneous works Of The Late Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl Of Chesterfield

Consisting Of Letters to his Friends, never before printed, And Various
Other Articles

**Chesterfield, Philip Dormer Stanhope of
Dublin, 1777**

IX. Common Sense. Saturday, June 4, 1737. N° 19. To the Author of
Common Sense.

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and his country. I do not doubt, indeed, but the minister would, during the operation, cry out, like Koan Tchong; you attack the king, you deface the king, you wound the king through my sides, and would plead the king, as women do their bellies to respite execution: but, surely, upon examination, a degree of sagacity, much inferior to that of matrons, would be sufficient to bring him in not quick with king, but a distinct and separate body, easily removed, without the least danger to the sovereign.

Having fully discussed this allegory, I shall conclude with adopting one part of it, which is, that nothing is so much to be dreaded in a government, as a minister without virtue or merit, who gains the favour of his prince; but with entirely rejecting the latter part, that one fees and laments it, but, out of regard to the prince, one does not know how to remedy it: since that very regard for the prince should excite one to endeavour it, and common sense points out the means of doing it, if there be but common honesty enough to put them in practice.

IX *.

COMMON SENSE.

SATURDAY, June 4, 1737.

N^o 19.

To the Author of COMMON SENSE.

—*Vocem Comœdia tollit.*

HOR.

Comedy lifts her voice.

S I R,

AS the cause of common sense and the stage are jointly concerned, some observations on the bill depending at present for the regulation of the latter cannot be thought improper for your paper; especially since I believe

* The act for licensing the theatres was attacked with great strength of reasoning by our nobleman in his famous speech on that subject, and with great humour and delicacy in this essay. But notwithstanding his efforts, the bill was carried through both houses with an amazing rapidity, and received the royal assent the 21st of June 1737.

lieve it will appear by them to be ineffectual to the end proposed, and injurious to the poet, the player, and the public.

The end, proposed by this bill, is the regulation of theatrical entertainments, which, from their excess, fill both town and country with idleness and debauchery; and, from being under no restraint, exhibit to the public, encomiums on vice, and laugh away the sober principles of modesty and virtue.

A design of this kind is certainly worthy the care of the legislature; since every one, who thinks in the just mean between libertinism and severity, must be convinced that a well-governed stage is an ornament to the society, an encouragement to wit and learning, and a school of virtue and good manners; while a licentious one is the parent of loose desires, a nursery of vice, effeminacy, and irreligion.

But let us examine the present bill by the end proposed—

Will it tend to a regulation by decreasing the number?

I think it is plain, that it will have the contrary effect; since, while a discretionary power of licensing them remains in any one person whatsoever, a way is left open for APPLICATION, which, it cannot be thought, will be always unsuccessful. And I see no reason why it is not as well worth the charge of a ministry to send companies of strollers round to the corporations, to entertain them *gratis* with political plays before an election, as it has been to circulate political news-papers upon the like occasion. For it may very well be presumed, that Caleb* changed in effigy, and dropping limb from limb like Harlequin, will conduce as much to render him unpopular in a country audience, as the wit and satire of a Gazetteer †. And no one can doubt, but that common sense will be exposed upon such stages, and ridiculed, for the diversion of a mayor and aldermen, with great success. Nor can this conjecture of mine be thought improbable, from any difficulty to supply such a number of inferior play-houses

* The Craftsman.

† The Daily Gazetteer was a title given very properly to certain papers, each of which lasted but a day. Into this, as a common sink, was received all the trash, which had been before dispersed in several journals, and circulated at the public expence of the nation. The authors were the same obscure men: though sometimes relieved by occasional essays from statesmen, courtiers, bishops, deans, and doctors. The meaner sort were rewarded with money; others with places or benefices, from an hundred to a thousand pounds a year. See the Dunciad, Book II.

houses with actors and poetry, since, in the present state of trade, the excise-officers may, at their leisure hours, supply the first, and the several ingenious authors of the *Gazetteer's club**, for the other. The miraculous fir A. B. must have an excellent head for a political pantomime, and Mrs. Osborne herself can condescend to be waggish for the service of the government.

This scheme, in time, must affect the freedom of election, since a purse-proud court candidate might easily draw into his interest the governing part of most corporations, I mean, the women, by this terrible menace, "D—mn me, madam, if you do not make Mr. mayor return me, you shall have no more plays, by G—d."

As it is plain therefore that this scheme must increase the number, will it produce any good effect by any restraint, that will probably be laid on the pieces performed?

The answer that will be given to this question is, that they must all undergo my lord chamberlain's inspection? Is then every lord chamberlain a wit and a critic, just as every merry Andrew is a physician, by his office? or is it reasonable to suppose that one man can peruse all the dramatic poetry that is produced in this scribbling kingdom of Great Britain; or even in that small retreat of the Muses, where most of these pieces are generated, and from whence, for the future, we must expect a supply? As this is in its nature impossible, my lord will probably delegate this authority to some of his domestics, the chaplain for tragedy; the cook, or the porter, may execute the office of comedy-inspector. And when that is the case, besides the abuse of justice, which is always seen in inferior jurisdictions, nobody can suppose these delegates can have equal taste in the politer studies, or be as good judges of wit and morality, as my lord himself; nor will they be inclined to men of merit in the profession of poetry, who are so little versed in the proper methods of making court to their superiors.

Besides, if the scheme above-mentioned is put into execution, wit and satire will be postponed for party reflection and abuse. The comic glass, instead of exposing

* Of these, Osborne and Arnall, mentioned above, p. 2, and p. 5, appear to have been the most respectable personages.

sing the vice and folly, will be made a corrupt use of, to magnify the features of some honest country squire in the opposition, into a papist or a faracen, to the affright of himself and his neighbours; while the curiosity of the vulgar, and the opportunities of indulging it at these entertainments, will still continue, and have the same tendency to produce idleness and luxury as they have at present; though it may be presumed that the taste for these entertainments will, by this method, gradually decay.

I think I have, by these few observations above, demonstrated that this bill cannot have its desired effect. I shall now endeavour to prove that it will be injurious to the poet, the player, and the public in general.

It is very well known how difficult it is at present for merit, without interest, to bring any play upon the stage: and will the pride and self-conceit of the manager be abated by this regulation? or can a poet's temper be brought to submit to strike out whatever offends so many critics, as will have a judicial authority to blot, by virtue of this act? The necessitous indeed will, perhaps, with reluctance, comply: but what can be expected from that band, who prefer solid pudding to empty praise? Can it be thought that a man, who has sense and learning enough to write a play fit for the stage, and who has stood the judgment of a play-house monarch and his privy-council of critics, will be induced to cringe to a chaplain, a porter, a cook, or a secretary?

If I might presume to speak my judgment, formed on experience, I scarce believe he would submit to my lord himself.

Here then is a manifest discouragement to that species of learning which instructs youth, and delights in age; which is an ornament to the man of fortune, a comfort and support of necessity; which entertains in the closet, and diverts abroad; shortens the journey of the traveller, and is a chearful companion in solitude and exile*.

As this is a discouragement to poetry, so it lays such a restraint on the actor, and so subjects him to the arbitrary will of an insolent patentee, that few, I believe, will think it worth their while to leave the law, the counter, or Ireland itself, to get a poor tawdry subsistence on the stage.

VOL. II.

E

If

* Cicero, Orat. pro Arthia Poëta.

If dramatic poesy is, under proper regulations, a benefit, the discouragement of it in general, which, from what has been observed above, will be effected by this act, must be injurious to the public; and if this bill should pass into a law, a Wicherley or Congreve will never rise again on the English stage: for there will be always fools enough to fill the licensed play-houses, that delight in farce, noise, and show; and while that is the case, no manager will run the hazard of endeavouring to refine the taste of the vulgar, by complying with that of the learned.

Besides the loss of the little wit still remaining among us, I am afraid that the swarm of insignificant mortals, who are now employed in the study of this kind of poetry, will, upon the disadvantage this bill will lay them under, desert this only fertile spot of Parnassus, and join in an insurrection with the distillers*, or turn from robbing the dead to the plunder of the living.

I need not here mention the infringement attempted by this act on the liberty of the press.

But if, notwithstanding these few hasty objections, the wisdom of the legislature should think proper to pass this bill, I would beg leave to submit the two following amendments to their consideration.

First, that the strolling companies, licensed, be restrained to some particular number, and not be permitted to act in any borough or corporation.

Secondly, since wit and modesty, morality and religion, ought chiefly to be regarded in these entertainments, that every thing destructive of either may be sure to be expunged: and since the fair sex have lately shewn so laudable a zeal for wit, that they may have a share in the administration of it.

I propose that the lord chamberlain's power, given by this act, be transferred to a committee of the maids of honor

* The act, for restraining the sale of spirituous liquors in small quantities, had failed of its effect. The informers, who dared to give intelligence against offenders, were so roughly treated by the populace, and so ill protected by the ministry, that the abuse became intolerable. It was so manifestly the interest of the distillers to defeat the bill, that they were supposed to have had a hand in these insurrections; and the noble author of this essay humorously hints, that writers of plays, being now disappointed, for want of proper licences, in their retail of wit, would suffer themselves to be employed by the composers, retailers, or consumers of liquors, to join in these riots, and perhaps take to the road.

honor and bishops, who shall act in joint commission in this important affair; since the first are the best judges of wit and modesty, the latter of morality and religion, in this kingdom.

Yours,

A. Z.

X.

COMMON SENSE.

SATURDAY, July 16, 1737. N^o 25.

IT is the complaint of most men, who have lived any time in the world, that the present age is much degenerated in its morals within the memory of man. I am afraid this complaint is not altogether without foundation. That there has been a gradual decay of public spirit for some years, cannot be denied; and which owes its original, if I am not very much mistaken, to our party divisions.

There is a particular maxim among parties, which alone is sufficient to corrupt a whole nation; which is, to countenance and protect the most infamous fellows, who happen to herd amongst them. There is no man, let his private character be ever so scandalous, that can be of some use to serve a turn, but immediately grows to be a man of consequence with his party.

It is something shocking to common sense, to see the man of honor and the knave, the man of parts and the blockhead, put upon an equal foot; which is often the case amongst parties. In the struggles that happen about elections, when some candidate of a fair character has been set up on one side, how often have you seen the most abandoned knave of the other party put up to oppose him, and both supported with equal zeal! Parties will always find something or other, in the worst of men, to reconcile them to the obnoxious parts of their characters. He that has sense enough to distinguish right from wrong, can make a noise; nay, the less sense, the more obstinacy, especially in a bad cause, and the greater knave, the more obedient to his leaders, especially when they are playing the rogue. These are the best tools, and