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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

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Spectatum admissi risum teneatis?-----

Hor.

AN Opera may be allowed to be extravagantly lavish in its decorations, as its only design is to gratifie the senses, and keep up an indolent attention in the audience. Common sense however requires, that there should be nothing in the Scenes and Machines which may appear childish and absurd. How would the Wits of King *Charles's* time have laughed to have seen *Nicolini* exposed to a tempest in robes of *Ermin*, and sailing in an open boat upon a sea of *Paste-board*? What a field of raillery would they have been let into, had they been entertained with painted dragons spitting wild-fire, enchanted chariots drawn by *Flanders* mares, and real Cascades in artificial land-skips? A little skill in criticism would inform us, that shadows and realities ought not to be mixed together in the same piece; and that the scenes which are designed as the representations of nature, should be filled with resemblances, and not with the things themselves. If one would represent a wide champian country filled with herds and flocks, it would be ridiculous to draw the country only upon the scenes, and to crowd several parts of the stage with sheep and oxen. This is joining together inconsistencies, and making the decoration partly real and partly imaginary. I would recommend what I have here said, to the Directors, as well as to the Admirers of our modern Opera.

As I was walking in the streets about a fortnight ago, I saw an ordinary Fellow carrying a Cage full of little birds upon his shoulder; and, as I was wondering with my self what use he would put them to, he was met very luckily by an acquaintance, who had the same curiosity. Upon his asking him what he had upon his shoulder, he told him, that he had been buying Sparrows for the Opera. Sparrows for the Opera, says his friend, licking his lips, what are they to be roasted? No, no, says the

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other,

other, they are to enter towards the end of the first Act, and to fly about the stage.

This strange dialogue awakened my curiosity so far, that I immediately bought the Opera, by which means I perceived the Sparrows were to act the part of singing birds in a delightful grove; though upon a nearer enquiry I found the Sparrows put the same trick upon the audience, that Sir *Martin Mar-all* practised upon his Mistress; for though they flew in sight, the musick proceeded from a consort of Flageolets and Bird-calls which were planted behind the scenes. At the same time I made this discovery, I found by the discourse of the Actors, that there were great designs on foot for the improvement of the Opera; that it had been proposed to break down a part of the wall, and to surprize the audience with a party of an hundred horse, and that there was actually a project of bringing the *New-River* into the house, to be employed in jetteaus and water-works. This project, as I have since heard, is post-poned till the summer-season; when it is thought the coolness that proceeds from fountains and cascades will be more acceptable and refreshing to people of Quality. In the mean time, to find out a more agreeable entertainment for the winter-season, the Opera of *Rinaldo* is filled with thunder and lightning, illuminations and fireworks; which the audience may look upon without catching cold, and indeed without much danger of being burnt; for there are several Engines filled with water, and ready to play at a minute's warning, in case any such accident should happen. However, as I have a very great friendship for the owner of this Theatre, I hope that he has been wise enough to insure his house before he would let this Opera be acted in it.

It is no wonder, that those scenes should be very surprizing, which were contrived by two Poets of different nations, and raised by two Magicians of different sexes. *Armida* (as we are told in the argument) was an *Amazonian* Enchantress, and poor Signior *Cassani* (as we learn from the *Persons represented*) a Christian Conjuror (*Mago Cristiano*.) I must confess I am very much puzzled to find how an *Amazon* should be versed in the Black art, or how a good Christian, for such is the part of the Magician, should deal with the Devil.

To consider the Poets after the Conjurers, I shall give you a taste of the *Italian*, from the first lines of his preface. *Eccoti, benigno Lettore, un Parto di poche Sere, che se ben nato di Notte, non è però abarto di Tenebre, mà si farà conoscere Figliolo d'Apollò con qualche Raggio di Parnasse.* Behold, gentle reader, the birth of a few evenings, which though

though it be the offspring of the night, is not the abortive of darkness, but will make it self known to be the Son of Apollo, with a certain ray of Parnassus. He afterwards proceeds to call Minheer Hendel the Orpheus of our age, and to acquaint us, in the same sublimity of stile, that he compos'd this Opera in a fortnight. Such are the Wits, to whose tastes we so ambitiously conform our selves. The truth of it is, the finest writers among the modern *Italians* express themselves in such a florid form of words, and such tedious circumlocutions, as are used by none but Pedants in our own country; and at the same time fill their writings with such poor imaginations and conceits, as our youths are ashamed of before they have been two years at the University. Some may be apt to think that it is the difference of genius which produces this difference in the works of the two nations; but to shew there is nothing in this, if we look into the writings of the old *Italians*, such as *Cicero* and *Virgil*, we shall find that the *English* writers, in their way of thinking and expressing themselves, resemble those Authors much more than the modern *Italians* pretend to do. And as for the Poet himself, from whom the dreams of this Opera are taken, I must entirely agree with Monsieur *Boileau*, that one verse in *Virgil* is worth all the *Clinquant* or *Tinsel* of *Tasso*.

But to return to the Sparrows; there have been so many flights of them let loose in this Opera, that it is feared the house will never get rid of them; and that in other Plays they may make their entrance in very wrong and improper Scenes, so as to be seen flying in a Lady's bed-chamber, or perching upon a King's throne; besides the inconveniences which the heads of the audience may sometimes suffer from them. I am credibly informed, that there was once a design of calling into an Opera the story of *Whittington* and his Cat, and that in order to it, there had been got together a great quantity of Mice; but Mr. *Rich*, the Proprietor of the Play-house, very prudently considered that it would be impossible for the Cat to kill them all, and that consequently the Princes of the stage might be as much infested with Mice, as the Prince of the Island was before the Cat's arrival upon it; for which reason he would not permit it to be acted in his house. And indeed I cannot blame him: for, as he said very well upon that occasion, I do not hear that any of the performers in our Opera pretend to equal the famous *Pied Piper*, who made all the Mice of a great town in *Germany* follow his musick, and by that means cleared the place of those little noxious animals.

Before

Before I dismiss this paper, I must inform my reader, that I hear there is a treaty on foot with *London* and *Wife* (who will be appointed gardeners of the Play-house) to furnish the Opera of *Rinaldo* and *Armida* with an orange-grove; and that the next time it is acted, the singing birds will be personated by Tom-tits: The Undertakers being resolved to spare neither pains nor money for the gratification of the audience.

N^o 7. Thursday, March 8.

*Somnia, terrores magicos, miracula, Sagas,
Nocturnos lemures, portentaque Thessala rides?* Hor.

GOING yesterday to dine with an old acquaintance, I had the misfortune to find his whole family very much dejected. Upon asking him the occasion of it, he told me that his wife had dreamt a strange dream the night before, which they were afraid portended some misfortune to themselves or to their children. At her coming into the room I observed a settled melancholy in her countenance, which I should have been troubled for, had I not heard from whence it proceeded. We were no sooner set down but, after having looked upon me a little while, *My dear*, (says she, turning to her husband) *you may now see the stranger that was in the candle last night.* Soon after this, as they began to talk of family affairs, a little boy at the lower end of the table told her, that he was to go into join-hand on *Thursday*. *Thursday?* (says she) *no child if it please God, you shall not begin upon Childermas-day: tell your writing-master that Friday will be soon enough.* I was reflecting with my self on the oddness of her fancy, and wondering that any body would establish it as a rule to lose a day in every week. In the midst of these my musings, she desired me to reach her a little salt upon the point of my Knife, which I did in such a trepidation and hurry of obedience, that I let it drop by the way; at which she immediately startled,