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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

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N^o 40. *Monday, April 16.*

*Ac ne forte putes me, quæ facere ipse recusem,
Cum recte tractant alii, laudare maligne;
Ille per extentum funem mihi posse videtur
Ire Poeta, meum qui pectus inaniter angit,
Irritat, mulcet, falsis terroribus implet,
Ut magus; et modo me Thebis, modo ponit Athenis.* Hor.

THE *English* writers of Tragedy are possessed with a notion, that when they represent a virtuous or innocent person in distress, they ought not to leave him till they have delivered him out of his troubles, or made him triumph over his enemies. This error they have been led into by a ridiculous doctrine in modern criticism, that they are obliged to an equal distribution of rewards and punishments, and an impartial execution of poetical justice. Who were the first that established this rule I know not; but I am sure it has no foundation in nature, in reason, or in the practice of the Ancients. We find that good and evil happen alike to all men on this side the grave; and as the principal design of Tragedy is to raise commiseration and terror in the minds of the audience, we shall defeat this great end, if we always make virtue and innocence happy and successful. Whatever crosses and disappointments a good man suffers in the body of the Tragedy, they will make but small impression on our minds, when we know that in the last act he is to arrive at the end of his wishes and desires. When we see him engaged in the depth of his afflictions, we are apt to comfort our selves, because we are sure he will find his way out of them; and that his grief, how great soever it may be at present, will soon terminate in gladness. For this reason the ancient writers of Tragedy treated men in their Plays, as they are dealt with in the world, by making virtue sometimes happy, and sometimes miserable, as they found it in the fable which they made

made choice of, or as it might affect their audience in the most agreeable manner. *Aristotle* considers the Tragedies that were written in either of these kinds, and observes, that those which ended unhappily, had always pleased the people, and carried away the prize in the publick disputes of the stage, from those that ended happily. — Terror and commiseration leave a pleasing anguish in the mind; and fix the audience in such a serious composition of thought, as is much more lasting and delightful than any little transient starts of joy and satisfaction. Accordingly, we find, that more of our *English* Tragedies have succeeded, in which the favourites of the audience sink under their calamities, than those in which they recover themselves out of them. The best Plays of this kind are the *Orphan*, *Venice preserved*, *Alexander the Great*, *Theodosius*, *All for Love*, *Oedipus*, *Oroonoko*, *Othello*, &c. *King Lear* is an admirable Tragedy of the same kind, as *Shakespear* wrote it; but as it is reformed according to the chimerical notion of poetical justice, in my humble opinion it has lost half its beauty. At the same time I must allow, that there are very noble Tragedies, which have been framed upon the other plan, and have ended happily; as indeed most of the good Tragedies, which have been written since the starting of the above-mentioned criticism, have taken this turn: as the *Mourning Bride*, *Tamerlane*, *Ulysses*, *Phædra* and *Hippolytus*, with most of Mr. *Dryden's*. I must also allow, that many of *Shakespear's*, and several of the celebrated Tragedies of antiquity, are cast in the same form. I do not therefore dispute against this way of writing Tragedies, but against the criticism that would establish this as the only method; and by that means would very much cramp the *English* Tragedy, and perhaps give a wrong bent to the genius of our writers.

The Tragi-comedy, which is the product of the *English* Theatre, is one of the most monstrous inventions that ever entered into a Poet's thoughts. An Author might as well think of weaving the adventures of *Aeneas* and *Hudibras* into one Poem, as of writing such a motly piece of mirth and sorrow. But the absurdity of these performances is so very visible, that I shall not insist upon it.

The same objections which are made to Tragi-comedy, may in some measure be applied to all Tragedies that have a double Plot in them; which are likewise more frequent upon the *English* Stage, than upon any other: For though the grief of the audience, in such performances, be not changed into another passion, as in Tragi-comedies; it is diverted upon another object, which weakens their concern for the principal action,

action, and breaks the tide of sorrow, by throwing it into different channels. This inconvenience, however, may in a great measure be cured, if not wholly removed, by the skilful choice of an Under-plot, which may bear such a near relation to the principal design, as to contribute towards the completion of it, and be concluded by the same Catastrophe.

There is also another particular, which may be reckoned among the blemishes, or rather the false beauties of our *English* Tragedy: I mean those particular Speeches which are commonly known by the name of *Rants*. The warm and passionate parts of a Tragedy, are always the most taking with the audience; for which reason we often see the Players pronouncing, in all the violence of action, several parts of the Tragedy which the Author writ with great temper, and designed that they should have been so acted. I have seen *Powell* very often raise himself a loud clap by this artifice. The Poets that were acquainted with this secret, have given frequent occasion for such emotions in the Actor, by adding vehemence to words where there was no passion, or inflaming a real passion into fustian. This hath filled the mouths of our Heroes with bombast; and given them such sentiments, as proceed rather from a swelling than a greatness of mind. Unnatural exclamations, curses, vows, blasphemies, a defiance of mankind, and an outraging of the Gods, frequently pass upon the audience for tow'ring thoughts, and have accordingly met with infinite applause.

I shall here add a remark, which I am afraid our Tragick writers may make an ill use of. As our Heroes are generally Lovers, their swelling and blustering upon the Stage very much recommends them to the fair part of their audience. The Ladies are wonderfully pleased to see a man insulting Kings or affronting the Gods, in one Scene, and throwing himself at the feet of his Mistress in another. Let him behave himself insolently towards the men, and abjectly towards the Fair one, and it is ten to one but he proves a favourite of the boxes. *Dryden* and *Lee*, in several of their Tragedies, have practised this secret with good success.

But to shew how a *Rant* pleases beyond the most just and natural thought that is not pronounced with vehemence, I would desire the Reader, when he sees the Tragedy of *Oedipus*, to observe how quietly the Hero is dismissed at the end of the third Act, after having pronounced the following lines, in which the thought is very natural, and apt to move compassion.

To

*To you, good Gods, I make my last appeal,
Or clear my virtues, or my crimes reveal.
If in the maze of Fate I blindly run,
And backward trod those paths I sought to shun;
Impute my errors to your own decree:
My hands are guilty, but my heart is free.*

Let us then observe with what thunder-claps of applause he leaves the Stage, after the impieties and execrations at the end of the fourth Act; and you will wonder to see an audience so cursed and so pleased at the same time.

O that as oft I have at Athens seen

[Where, by the way, there was no Stage till many years after Oedipus.]

*The Stage arise, and the big clouds descend;
So now in very deed, I might behold
This pond'rous Globe, and all you marble roof,
Meet like the hands of Jove, and crush mankind,
For all the Elements, &c.*

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Having spoken of Mr. Powell, as sometimes raising himself applause from the ill taste of an audience; I must do him the justice to own, that he is excellently formed for a Tragedian, and, when he pleases, deserves the admiration of the best judges; as I doubt not but he will in the Conquest of Mexico, which is acted for his own benefit to-morrow night.



Wednesday,