



UNIVERSITÄTS-
BIBLIOTHEK
PADERBORN

Universitätsbibliothek Paderborn

The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

London, 1721

No 44. Friday, April 20.

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-53633](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-53633)

N^o 44. Friday, April 20.

Tu, quid ego et populus mecum desideret, audi.

Hor.

AMONG the several artifices which are put in practice by the Poets to fill the minds of an audience with Terror, the first place is due to Thunder and Lightning, which are often made use of at the descending of a God, or the rising of a Ghost, at the vanishing of a Devil, or at the death of a Tyrant. I have known a Bell introduced into several Tragedies with good effect; and have seen the whole assembly in a very great alarm all the while it has been ringing. But there is nothing which delights and terrifies our *English* Theatre so much as a Ghost, especially when he appears in a bloody shirt. A Spectre has very often saved a Play, though he has done nothing but stalked across the stage, or rose through a cleft of it, and sunk again without speaking one word. There may be a proper season for these several terrors; and when they only come in as aids and assistances to the Poet, they are not only to be excused, but to be applauded. Thus the founding of the clock in *Venice Preserved*, makes the hearts of the whole audience quake; and conveys a stronger terror to the mind, than it is possible for words to do. The appearance of the Ghost in *Hamlet* is a master-piece in its kind, and wrought up with all the circumstances that can create either attention or horror. The mind of the reader is wonderfully prepared for his reception by the discourses that precede it: his dumb behaviour at his first entrance, strikes the imagination very strongly; but every time he enters, he is still more terrifying. Who can read the speech with which young *Hamlet* accosts him, without trembling?

Hor. *Look, my Lord, it comes!*

Ham. *Angels and Ministers of grace defend us!*
Be thou a Spirit of health, or Goblin damn'd;

Bring

*Bring with thee airs from Heav'n, or blasts from Hell;
Be thy event wicked or charitable;
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape,
That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet,
King, Father, Royal Dane: Oh! oh! answer me,
Let me not burst in ignorance; but tell
Why thy canoniz'd bones, hearsed in death,
Have burst their cearments? why the sepulchre,
Wherein we saw thee quietly inurn'd,
Hath op'd his ponderous and marble jaws
To cast thee up again? what may this mean?
That thou dead coarfe again in compleat steel
Revisit'st thus the glimpses of the moon,
Making night hideous?*

I do not therefore find fault with the Artifices above-mentioned, when they are introduced with skill, and accompanied by proportionable sentiments and expressions in the writing.

For the moving of Pity, our principal machine is the handkerchief; and indeed in our common Tragedies, we should not know very often that the persons are in distress by any thing they say, if they did not from time to time apply their handkerchiefs to their eyes. Far be it from me to think of banishing this instrument of sorrow from the stage; I know a Tragedy could not subsist without it: all that I would contend for, is, to keep it from being misapplied. In a word, I would have the Actor's tongue sympathize with his eyes.

A disconsolate Mother, with a Child in her hand, has frequently drawn compassion from the audience, and has therefore gained a place in several Tragedies. A modern writer, that observed how this had took in other Plays, being resolved to double the distress, and melt his audience twice as much as those before him had done, brought a Princess upon the stage with a little Boy in one hand and a Girl in the other. This too had a very good effect. A third Poet being resolved to out-write all his predecessors, a few years ago introduced three children, with great success: and, as I am informed, a young Gentleman, who is fully determined to break the most obdurate hearts, has a Tragedy by him, where the first person that appears upon the stage is an afflicted Widow in her mourning-weeds, with half a dozen fatherless Children attending her, like those that usually hang about the figure of Charity. Thus several incidents

cidents that are beautiful in a good writer, become ridiculous by falling into the hands of a bad one.

But among all our methods of moving Pity or Terror, there is none so absurd and barbarous, and what more exposes us to the contempt and ridicule of our neighbours, than that dreadful butchering of one another, which is so very frequent upon the *English* Stage. To delight in seeing men stabbed, poisoned, racked, or impaled, is certainly the sign of a cruel temper: and as this is often practised before the *British* Audience, several *French* Criticks, who think these are grateful spectacles to us, take occasion from them to represent us a people that delight in blood. It is indeed very odd, to see our stage strowed with carcases in the last scene of a Tragedy; and to observe in the ward-robe of the play-house several daggers, poniards, wheels, bowls for poison, and many other instruments of death. Murders and executions are always transacted behind the scenes in the *French* Theatre; which in general is very agreeable to the manners of a polite and civilized people: but as there are no exceptions to this rule on the *French* Stage, it leads them into absurdities almost as ridiculous as that which falls under our present censure. I remember in the famous Play of *Corneille*, written upon the subject of the *Horatii* and *Curiatii*; the fierce young Heroe who had overcome the *Curiatii* one after another, (instead of being congratulated by his Sister for his victory, being upbraided by her for having slain her lover) in the height of his passion and resentment kills her. If any thing could extenuate so brutal an action, it would be the doing of it on a sudden, before the sentiments of nature, reason, or manhood could take place in him. However, to avoid *publick bloodshed*, as soon as his passion is wrought to its height, he follows his Sister the whole length of the stage, and forbears killing her till they are both withdrawn behind the scenes. I must confess, had he murdered her before the audience, the indecency might have been greater; but as it is, it appears very unnatural, and looks like killing in cold blood. To give my opinion upon this case; the fact ought not to have been represented, but to have been told, if there was any occasion for it.

It may not be unacceptable to the Reader, to see how *Sophocles* has conducted a Tragedy under the like delicate circumstances. *Orestes* was in the same condition with *Hamlet* in *Shakespeare*, his Mother having murdered his Father, and taken possession of his Kingdom in conspiracy with her Adulterer. That young Prince therefore, being determined to revenge his father's Death upon those who filled his Throne, conveys himself

self

self by a beautiful stratagem into his Mother's apartment, with a resolution to kill her. But because such a spectacle would have been too shocking to the audience, this dreadful resolution is executed behind the Scenes: The Mother is heard calling out to her Son for mercy; and the Son answering her, that she shewed no mercy to his Father: after which she shrieks out that she is wounded, and by what follows we find that she is slain. I do not remember that in any of our Plays there are speeches made behind the Scenes, though there are other instances of this nature to be met with in those of the ancients: and I believe my reader will agree with me, that there is something infinitely more affecting in this dreadful Dialogue between the Mother and her Son behind the Scenes, than could have been in any thing transacted before the audience. *Orestes* immediately after meets the Usurper at the entrance of his Palace; and by a very happy thought of the Poet avoids killing him before the Audience, by telling him that he should live some time in his present bitterness of Soul before he would dispatch him, and by ordering him to retire into that part of the Palace where he had slain his Father, whose murder he would revenge in the very same place where it was committed. By this means the Poet observes that decency, which *Horace* afterwards established by a rule, of forbearing to commit parricides or unnatural murders before the Audience.

Nec coram populo natos Medea trucidet.

*Let not Medea draw her murdering knife,
And spill her childrens blood upon the stage.*

The *French* have therefore refined too much upon *Horace's* Rule, who never designed to banish all kinds of Death from the Stage; but only such as had too much horror in them, and which would have a better effect upon the audience when transacted behind the Scenes. I would therefore recommend to my Countrymen the practice of the ancient Poets, who were very sparing of their publick executions, and rather chose to perform them behind the Scenes, if it could be done with as great an effect upon the Audience. At the same time I must observe, that though the devoted persons of the Tragedy were seldom slain before the Audience, which has generally something ridiculous in it, their bodies were often produced after their Death, which has always in it something melancholy or terrifying; so that the killing on the Stage does not seem to have been avoided only as an indecency, but also as an improbability.

Nec

*Nec pueros coram populo Medea trucidet;
Aut humana palam coquat exta nefarius Atreus;
Aut in avem Progne vertatur, Cadmus in anguem.
Quodcumque ostendis mihi sic, incredulus odi.*

Hor.

*Medea must not draw her murth'ring Knife,
Nor Atreus there his horrid feast prepare,
Cadmus and Progne's Metamorphosis,
(She to a Swallow turn'd, he to a Snake)
And whatsoever contradicts my sense,
I hate to see, and never can believe.*

Ld. RosCOMMON.

I have now gone through the several dramattick inventions which are made use of by the Ignorant Poets to supply the place of Tragedy, and by the Skilful to improve it; some of which I could wish entirely rejected, and the rest to be used with caution. It would be an endless task to consider Comedy in the same light, and to mention the innumerable shifts that small wits put in practice to raise a laugh. *Bullock* in a short coat, and *Norris* in a long one, seldom fail of this effect. In ordinary Comedies, a broad and a narrow brimmed hat are different characters. Sometimes the wit of the Scene lies in a shoulder-belt, and sometimes in a pair of Whiskers. A Lover running about the Stage, with his head peeping out of a barrel, was thought a very good jest in King *Charles* the Second's time; and invented by one of the first Wits of that Age. But because ridicule is not so delicate as compassion, and because the objects that make us laugh are infinitely more numerous than those that make us weep, there is a much greater latitude for Comick than Tragick artifices, and by consequence a much greater indulgence to be allowed them.



Saturday,