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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

London, 1721

N° 446. Friday, August 1.

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-53621](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-53621)

N^o 446. *Friday, August 1.*

Quid deceat, quid non ; quò virtus, quò ferat error. Hor.

SINCE two or three writers of Comedy who are now living have taken their farewell of the Stage, those who succeed them finding themselves incapable of rising up to their wit, humour and good sense, have only imitated them in some of those loose unguarded strokes, in which they complied with the corrupt taste of the more vicious part of their audience. When persons of a low genius attempt this kind of writing, they know no difference between being merry and being lewd. It is with an eye to some of these degenerate compositions that I have written the following discourse.

Were our *English* Stage but half so virtuous as that of the *Greeks* or *Romans*, we should quickly see the influence of it in the behaviour of all the politer part of mankind. It would not be fashionable to ridicule religion, or its professors ; the man of pleasure would not be the compleat Gentleman ; vanity would be out of countenance, and every quality which is ornamental to human nature, would meet with that esteem which is due to it.

If the *English* Stage were under the same regulations the *Athenian* was formerly, it would have the same effect that had, in recommending the religion, the government, and publick worship of its country. Were our Plays subject to proper inspections and limitations, we might not only pass away several of our vacant hours in the highest entertainments ; but should always rise from them wiser and better than we sat down to them.

It is one of the most unaccountable things in our Age, that the lewdness of our Theatre should be so much complained of, and so little redressed. It is to be hoped, that some time or other we may be at leisure to restrain the licentiousness of the Theatre, and make it contribute its assistance to the advancement of morality, and to the reformation of the Age. As matters stand at present, multitudes are shut out from this noble

noble diversion, by reason of those abuses and corruptions that accompany it. A father is often afraid that his daughter should be ruined by those entertainments, which were invented for the accomplishment and refining of human nature. The *Athenian* and *Roman* Plays were written with such a regard to morality, that *Socrates* used to frequent the one, and *Cicero* the other.

It happened once indeed, that *Cato* dropped into the *Roman* Theatre, when the *Floralia* were to be represented; and as in that performance, which was a kind of religious ceremony, there were several indecent parts to be acted, the people refused to see them whilst *Cato* was present. *Martial* on this hint made the following Epigram, which we must suppose was applied to some grave friend of his, that had been accidentally present at some such entertainment.

*Nosse jocose dulce cum sacrum Floræ,
Festosque lusus, et licentiam vulgi,
Cur in Theatrum Cato severe venisti?
An ideo tantum veneras, ut exires?*

*Why dost thou come, great Censor of thy Age,
To see the loose diversions of the Stage?
With awful countenance and brow severe,
What in the name of Goodness dost thou here?
See the mixt crowd! how giddy, lewd and vain!
Didst thou come in but to go out again?*

An accident of this nature might happen once in an Age among the *Greeks* or *Romans*; but they were too wise and good to let the constant nightly entertainment be of such a nature, that people of the most sense and virtue could not be at it. Whatever vices are represented upon the Stage, they ought to be so marked and branded by the Poet, as not to appear either laudable or amiable in the person who is tainted with them. But if we look into the *English* Comedies above-mentioned, we would think they were formed upon a quite contrary maxim, and that this rule, though it held good upon the heathen Stage, was not to be regarded in christian Theatres. There is another rule likewise, which was observed by Authors of antiquity, and which these modern Genius's have no regard to, and that was, never to chuse an improper subject for ridicule. Now a subject is improper for ridicule, if it is apt to stir up horror and commiseration rather than laughter. For this reason, we do not find any
Comedy

Comedy in so polite an Author as *Terence*, raised upon the violations of the Marriage-bed. The falshood of the wife or husband has given occasion to noble Tragedies, but a *Scipio* or a *Lelius* would have looked upon incest or murder to have been improper subjects for Comedy. On the contrary, Cuckoldom is the basis of most of our modern Plays. If an Alderman appears upon the Stage, you may be sure it is in order to be cuckolded. An husband that is a little grave or elderly, generally meets with the same fate. Knights and Baronets, Country Squires, and Justices of the *Quorum*, come up to town for no other purpose. I have seen poor *Dogget* cuckolded in all these capacities. In short, our *English* writers are as frequently severe upon this innocent unhappy creature, commonly known by the name of a Cuckold, as the ancient Comic writers were upon an eating parasite, or a vain-glorious soldier.

At the same time the Poet so contrives matters, that the two criminals are the favourites of the audience. We sit still, and wish well to them through the whole Play, are pleased when they meet with proper opportunities, and out of humour when they are disappointed. The truth of it is, the accomplished Gentleman upon the *English* Stage, is the person that is familiar with other men's wives, and indifferent to his own; as the fine woman is generally a composition of sprightliness and falshood. I do not know whether it proceeds from barrenness of invention, depravation of manners, or ignorance of mankind; but I have often wondered that our ordinary Poets cannot frame to themselves the idea of a fine man who is not a whore-master, or of a fine woman that is not a jilt.

I have sometimes thought of compiling a System of Ethics out of the writings of these corrupt Poets, under the title of *Stage Morality*. But I have been diverted from this thought, by a project which has been executed by an ingenious Gentleman of my acquaintance. He has composed, it seems, the history of a young fellow, who has taken all his notions of the world from the Stage, and who has directed himself in every circumstance of his life, and conversation, by the maxims and examples of the fine Gentleman in *English* Comedies. If I can prevail upon him to give me a copy of this new-fashioned Novel, I will bestow on it a place in my works, and question not but it may have as good an effect upon the Drama, as *Don Quixote* had upon Romance.

Saturday,