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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

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A Critic may have the same consolation in the ill success of his Play, as Dr. South tells us a Physician has at the death of a patient, That he was killed *secundum artem*. Our inimitable *Shakespeare* is a stumbling-block to the whole tribe of these rigid Critics. Who would not rather read one of his Plays, where there is not a single rule of the Stage observed, than any production of a modern Critic, where there is not one of them violated? *Shakespeare* was indeed born with all the seeds of poetry, and may be compared to the stone in *Pyrrhus's* ring, which, as *Pliny* tells us, had the figure of *Apollo* and the nine Muses in the veins of it, produced by the spontaneous hand of nature, without any help from art.

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*Jamne igitur laudas, quod de sapientibus alter
Ridebat, quoties a limine moverat unum
Protuleratque pedem: flebat contrarius alter?*

Juv.

MANKIND may be divided into the merry and the serious, who, both of them, make a very good figure in the species, so long as they keep their respective humours from degenerating into the neighbouring extreme; there being a natural tendency in the one to a melancholy moroseness, and in the other to a fantastic levity.

The merry part of the world are very amiable, whilst they diffuse a cheerfulness through conversation at proper seasons and on proper occasions; but, on the contrary, a great grievance to society, when they infect every discourse with insipid mirth, and turn into ridicule such subjects as are not suited to it. For though laughter is looked upon by the Philosophers as the property of Reason, the excess of it has been always considered as the mark of folly.

On the other side, seriousness has its beauty whilst it is attended with cheerfulness and humanity, and does not come in unseasonably to pall the good humour of those with whom we converse.

These two sets of men, notwithstanding they each of them shine in their respective characters, are apt to bear a natural aversion and antipathy to one another.

What

What is more usual, than to hear men of serious tempers and austere morals, enlarging upon the vanities and follies of the young and gay part of the species; whilst they look with a kind of horror upon such pomps and diversions as are innocent in themselves, and only culpable when they draw the mind too much?

I could not but smile upon reading a passage in the account which Mr. *Baxter* gives of his own life, wherein he represents it as a great blessing, that in his youth he very narrowly escaped getting a place at court.

It must indeed be confessed that levity of temper takes a man off his guard, and opens a pass to his soul for any temptation that assaults it. It favours all the approaches of vice, and weakens all the resistance of virtue. For which reason a renowned Statesman in Queen *Elizabeth's* days, after having retired from court and publick business, in order to give himself up to the duties of religion; when any of his old friends used to visit him, had still this word of advice in his mouth, *Be serious.*

An eminent *Italian* Author of this cast of mind, speaking of the great advantage of a serious and composed temper, wishes very gravely, that for the benefit of mankind he had *Trophonius's* cave in his possession; which, says he, would contribute more to the reformation of manners than all the *Work-houses* and *Bridewells* in *Europe.*

We have a very particular description of this cave in *Pausanias*, who tells us, that it was made in the form of a huge oven, and had many particular circumstances, which disposed the person who was in it to be more pensive and thoughtful than ordinary; infomuch that no man was ever observed to laugh all his life after, who had once made his entry into this cave. It was usual in those times, when any one carried a more than ordinary gloominess in his features, to tell him that he looked like one just come out of *Trophonius's* cave.

On the other hand, writers of a more merry complexion have been no less severe on the opposite party; and have had one advantage above them, that they have attacked them with more turns of wit and humour.

After all, if a man's temper were at his own disposal, I think he would not chuse to be of either of these parties; since the most perfect character is that which is formed out of both of them. A man would neither chuse to be a Hermit nor a Buffoon: human nature is not so miserable, as that we should be always melancholy; nor so happy, as that we should be always merry. In a word, a man should not live as if there was no God in the world; nor, at the same time, as if there were no men in it.