



W. W. W.
Wiltshire's Enquiry
into the nature & effects
of the Stage
1757

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SERIOUS ENQUIRY

INTO THE
NATURE AND EFFECTS

OF THE

S T A G E.

Being an Attempt to show,

That contributing to the Support of a PUBLIC THEATRE, is inconsistent with the Character of a Christian.

By JOHN WITHERSPOON, M.A.

Minister of the Gospel in *Beth.*

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TO

THE MOST HONOURABLE

JOHN Marquis of TWEEDALE,

Earl of GIFFORD,

Viscount of WALDEN,

Lord HAY of YESTER,

The following TREATISE is humbly inscribed by

His LORDSHIP'S

most obedient, and

most humble Servant,

JOHN WITHERSPOON.

A
S E R I O U S E N Q U I R Y
I N T O T H E
N A T U R E . a n d E F F E C T S o f t h e S T A G E .

THE Reader will probably conjecture, and therefore, I do readily acknowledge, that what gave occasion both to the writing, and publishing the ensuing treatise, was the new Tragedy of Douglass lately acted in the threatre at Edinburgh. This, universal uncontradicted fame says, is the work of a minister of the church of Scotland. One of that character and office employing his time in writing for the stage, every body will allow, is a very new and extraordinary event. In one respect neither author nor actors have suffered any thing from this circumstance; for doubtless, it contributed its share in procuring that run upon the representation, which continued for several days. Natural curiosity prompted many to make trial, whether there was any difference between a play wrote by a clergyman, and one of another author. And a concern for the fate of such a person excited the zeal and diligence of friends, to do all in their power to procure a full house, that the bold adventurer might be treated with respect and honour.

Some resolutions of the presbytery of Edinburgh seem to threaten, that public notice will be taken of this author and his associates by their superiors in the church. Whether this will be carried on, and, if it be, whether they will be approved or censured; and, if the last, to what degree, I pretend not to foretell. But one thing is certain, that it hath been and will be the subject of much thought and conversation among the laity of all ranks, and that it must have a very great influence upon the state of religion among us in this part of the nation. That

this influence will be for the better, tho' I resolve to examine the subject with all impartiality, I confess, I see little ground to hope. There is no doubt that it will be condemned by the great plurality of those who go by the appellation of the stricter sort. With them, it will bring a great reproach upon the church of Scotland, as containing one minister who writes for the stage, and many who think it no crime to attend the representation. It is true no other consequences are to be apprehended from their displeasure, than the weakest of them being provoked to unchristian resentment, or tempted to draw rash and general conclusions from the conduct of a few to the character of the whole, or perhaps some of them separating from the established church, none of which effects of late have been much either feared or shunned. However, even upon this account, it were to be wished, either that it had never happened, or that it could be shewn, to the conviction of unprejudiced minds, that it was a just and commendable action.

But, to be sure, the chief danger is, that, in case it be really a bad thing, it must give very great offence, in the Scripture sense of that word, to those who are most apt to take it, *viz.* such as have least religion or none at all. An offence is a stumbling block over which the weak and unstedfast are in danger of falling; that is to say, It emboldens them to commit, and hardens them in the practice of sin. Now, if the stage is unlawful or dangerous to a Christian, those who are by inclination so addicted to it that it is already difficult to convince them of their error, must be greatly confirmed in this error, by the example and countenance of such as call themselves ministers of Christ. It has accordingly already occasioned more discourse among the gay part of the world in defence or commendation of the stage than past, perhaps, for some years preceeding this event.

Nothing therefore can be more seasonable at this time, or necessary for the publick good, than a careful and accurate discussion of this question, Whether supporting and encouraging stage-plays

plays by writing, acting or attending them, is consistent or inconsistent with the character of a Christian. It is to no purpose to confine the enquiry to this, Whether a minister is not appearing in an improper light, and misapplying his time and talents when he dedicates them to the service of the stage. That point would probably be given up by most, and those who would deny it, do not merit a confutation. But if the matter is rested here, it will be considered only as a smaller misdemeanour, and though treated or even condemned as such, it will still have the bad effect, (upon supposition of theatrical amusements being wrong and sinful), of greatly promoting them, tho' we seem to be already as much given to them as even worldly considerations will allow.

The self-denying Apologies common with authors, of their being sensible of their unfitness for the task they undertake, their doing it to stir up a better hand, and so on, I wholly pass, having never read any of them with approbation. Prudence is good, and I would not willingly lose sight of it, but zeal and concern for the glory of God, and faithfulness to the souls of others, are duties equally necessary in their place, but much more rare. How far I am sensible of my own unfitness, for treating this subject, and of the reputation that is risked by attempting it, the world is not obliged to believe upon my own testimony; but in whatever degree it be, it is greatly overballanced at present by a view of the declining state of religion among us, the prevalence of national sins, and the danger of desolating judgments.

It is some discouragement in this attempt that it is very uncertain, whether many of those, for whose sakes it is chiefly intended, and who stand most in need of information upon the subject, will take the pains to look into it. Such a levity of spirit prevails in this age, that very few persons of fashion will read or consider any thing that is written in a grave or serious stile. Whoever will look into the monthly catalogues of books published in Britain for some years past, may be convinced of

this at one glance. What an immense proportion do Romances under the titles of Lives, Adventures, Memoirs, Histories, &c. bear to any other sort of production in this age? Perhaps, therefore, it may be thought that it would have been more proper to have gratified the public taste, by raising up some allegorical structure, and handling this subject in the way of wit and humour; especially, as it seems to be a modern principle, that ridicule is the test of truth, and as there seems to be so large a fund for mirth in the character of a stage-playing priest. But tho' I deny not the lawfulness of using ridicule in some cases, or even its propriety here, yet I am far from thinking it is the test of truth. It seems to be more proper for correction than for instruction, and, tho' it be fit enough to whip an offender, it is not unusual, nor unfuitable, first to expostulate a little with him, and shew him that he deserves it. Besides, every man's talent is not equally fit for it, and indeed, now the matter seems to have been carried beyond a jest, and to require a very serious consideration.

There is also, besides some discouragement, a real difficulty in entering upon this disquisition. It will be hard to know in what manner to reason, or upon what principles to build. It were easy to shew the unlawfulness of stage-plays, by such arguments as would appear conclusive to those who already hate both them and their supporters: But it is not so easy to make it appear to those who chiefly frequent them, because they will both applaud and justify some of the very things that others look upon as the worst effects of the practice, and will deny the very principles upon which they are condemned. The truth is, it is our having different views of the nature of religion, that causes different opinions upon this subject. For many ages there was no debate upon it at all. There were players, but they did not pretend to be Christians themselves, and they had neither countenance nor support from any who did. Whereas now, there are abundance of advocates for the lawfulness, some for the usefulness

fulness of plays; not that the stage is become more pure, but that Christians are become less so, and have lowered the standard or measure requisite to attain and preserve that character.

But there is still another difficulty, that, whoever undertakes to write against plays, though the provocation is given by what they are, is yet always called upon to attack them, not as they are, but as they might be. A writer on this subject is actually reduced to the necessity of fighting with a shadow, of maintaining a combat with an ideal or imaginary sort of Drama, which never yet existed, but which the defenders of the cause form by way of supposition, and which shall appear in fact in that happy future age, which shall see, what these gentlemen are pleased to stile, a well regulated stage. However little support may seem to be given by this to a vitious and corrupted stage, there is no attender of plays, but, when he hears this chimæra defended, imagines it is his own cause that is espoused, and, with great composure and self-satisfaction, continues his practice. A conduct not less absurd, than if one who was expressly assured a certain dish of meat before him was poisoned, should answer thus, All meat is not poisoned, and therefore I may eat this with safety.

It is very plain, that were men but seriously disposed, and without prejudice desiring the knowledge of their duty, it would not be necessary, in order to shew the unlawfulness of the stage as it now is, to combat it in its imaginary reformed state. Such a reformation, were not men by the prevalence of vitious and corrupt affections, in love with it, even in its present condition, would have been long ago given up as a hopeless and visionary project, and the whole trade or employment detested; on account of the abuses that had always adhered to it. But since all advocates for the stage have, and do still defend it in this manner, by forming an idea of it separate from its evil qualities; since they defend it so far with success, that many who would otherwise abstain, do, upon this very account, allow themselves in attending the theatre sometimes, to their own hurt and that

of others; and, as I am convinced upon the most mature deliberation, that the reason why there never was a well regulated stage in fact is because it cannot be, the nature of the thing not admitting of it, I will endeavour to shew, that PUBLIC THEATRICAL REPRESENTATIONS either tragedy or comedy are, in their general nature, or in their best possible state, unlawful, contrary to the purity of our religion; and that writing, acting or attending them, is inconsistent with the character of a Christian. If this be done with success, it will give great weight to the reflections which shall be added upon the aggravation of the crime, considering the circumstances that at present attend the practice.

But, though I have thus far complied with the unreasonable terms imposed by the advocates for this amusement, they must not proceed to any higher demand, nor expect, because they have prevailed to have plays considered in the way that they themselves desire, that therefore the same thing must be done by religion, and that it must be lowered down to the descriptions they are sometimes pleased to give of it. I will by no means attack plays upon the principles of modern relaxed morality. In that case, to be sure, it would be a lost cause. If some late writers on the subject of morals be permitted to determine what are the ingredients that must enter into the composition of a good man; that good man, it is agreed, may much more probably be found in the play-house than in any other place. But what belongs to the character of a Christian must be taken from the holy Scriptures, the word of the living God. Notwithstanding therefore, that through the great degeneracy of the age, and very culpable relaxation of discipline, not a few continue to be called Christians, who are a reproach to the name, and support and countenance one another in many practices contrary to the purity of the Christian profession, I shall beg leave still to recur to the unerring standard, and to consider, not what many nominal Christians are, but what every real Christian ought to be.

In so doing I think I shall reason justly; and at the same time

it is my resolution, not only to speak the sense, but as often as possible the very language and phrases of the Scripture, and of our pious fathers. These are either become venerable to me for their antiquity or they are much fitter for expressing the truths of the gospel and delineating the character and duty of a disciple of Christ, than any that have been invented in latter times. As the growth or decay of vegetable nature is often so gradual as to be insensible; so in the moral world, verbal alterations, which are counted as nothing, do often introduce real changes, which are firmly established before their approach is so much as suspected. Were the stile; not only of some modern essays, but of some modern sermons to be introduced upon this subject, it would greatly weaken the argument, though no other alteration should be made. Should we every where put virtue for holiness, honour, or even moral sense for conscience, improvement of the heart for sanctification, the opposition between such things and theatrical entertainments would not appear half so sensible.

By taking up the argument in the light now proposed, I am saved, in a great measure, from the repetition of what has been written by other authors upon the subject. But let it be remembered, that they have clearly and copiously shown the corruption and impurity of the stage, and its adherents, since its first institution, and that, both in the Heathen and Christian world. They have made it undeniably appear, that it was opposed and condemned by the best and wisest men both Heathens and Christians in every age *. Its very defenders do all pretend

* Particularly at Athens, where it first had its birth, both Tragedy and Comedy were soon abolished by public authority; and among the Romans, tho' this and other public shews were permitted in a certain degree, yet so cautious were that wise people of suffering them to be frequent, that they did not permit any public Theatre, when occasionally erected, to continue above a certain number of days. Even that erected by M. Scourus, which is said to have cost so immense a sum as a million Sterling, was speedily taken down. Pompey the Great was the first who had power and credit enough to get a Theatre continued.

pretend to blame the abuse of it. They do indeed alledge that this abuse is not essential to it, but may be separated from it; however all of them, so far as I have seen, represent this separation as only possible or future; they never attempt to assign any *Æta* in which it could be defended as it then was, or could be affirmed to be more profitable than hurtful. Some writers do mention a few particular plays of which they give their approbation. But these have never yet, in any age or place, amounted to such a number, as to keep one society of players in constant employment, without a mixture of many more that are confessedly pernicious. The only reason of bringing this in view at present when it is not to be insisted on, is, that it ought to procure a fair and candid hearing to this attempt to prove, That the stage, after the greatest improvement of which it is capable, is still inconsistent with the purity of the Christian profession. It is a strong presumptive evidence in favour of this assertion; that, after so many years trial, such improvement has never actually taken place.

It is, perhaps, also proper here to obviate a pretence in which the advocates of the stage greatly glory, that there is no express prohibition of it to be found in scripture. I think a country-

man

The opinion of Seneca may be seen in the following passage, *Nihil est tam damnosum bonis moribus, quam in aliquo spectaculo desidere. Tunc enim per voluptatem facilius vitia surrepunt.*

As to the primitive Christians, see *Constit. Apost. lib. 8. cap. 32.* where actors and stage-players are enumerated among those who were not to be admitted to Baptism. Many different councils appoint that they shall renounce their arts before they be admitted, and if they return to them shall be excommunicated. *Tertullian de Spectaculis, cap. 21.* observes, That the Heathens themselves marked them with infamy, and excluded them from all honours or dignity. To the same purpose see *Aug. de Civ. Dei, lib. 20 cap. 14. Actores poeticarum fabularum remouent a societate ciuitatis—ab honoribus omnibus repellunt homines sequicos.*

The opinion of Moderns is well known, few Christian writers of any eminence having failed to pronounce sentence against the stage.

man of our own † has given good reasons to believe, that the apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Ephesians, 5th chap. 4th ver. by *filthiness, foolish talking and jesting*, intended to prohibit the plays that were then in use. He also thinks it probable that the word *Κωμους*, used in more places than one, and translated *revelling*, points at the same thing. Whether his conjectures are just or not, it is very certain that these, and many other passages, forbid the abuses of the stage, and if these abuses be inseparable from it, as there is reason to believe, there needed no other prohibition of them to every Christian. Nay, if they never had been separated from it till that time it was sufficient, and it would be idle to expect that the scripture should determine this problematical point, Whether they would ever be so in any after age. To ask that there should be produced a prohibition of the stage, as a stage, universally, is to prescribe to the holy Ghost, and to require that the Scripture should not only forbid sin, but every form in which the restless and changeable dispositions of men shall think fit to be guilty of it, and every name by which they shall think proper to call it. I do not find in Scripture any express prohibition of masquerades, routs and drums, and yet I have not the least doubt, that the assemblies called by these names are contrary to the will of God, and as bad, if not worse than the common and ordinary entertainments of the stage.

In order to make this enquiry as exact and accurate as possible, and that the strength or weakness of the arguments on either side may be clearly perceived, it will be proper to state distinctly, what we understand by the stage or stage-plays, when it is affirmed, that in their most improved and best regulated state they are unlawful to Christians. This is the more necessary, that there is a great indistinctness and ambiguity in the language used by those who, in writing, or conversation, undertake to defend it. They analyze and divide it into parts, and take sometimes one part, sometimes another, as will best suit their purpose. They ask, What there can be unlawful in

the stage abstractly considered? Comedy is exposing the folly of vice, and pointing out the ridiculous part of every character. And is not this commendable? Is not ridicule a noble mean of discountenancing vice? And is not the use of it warranted by the satire and irony that is to be found in the holy scriptures? Tragedy they say is promoting the same end in a way more grave and solemn. It is a moral lecture, or a moral picture, in which virtue appears to great advantage. What is history itself but representing the characters of men as they actually were, and plays represent them as they may be. In their perfection, plays are as like history and nature, as the poet's art and actor's skill can make them. Is it then the circumstance of their being written in dialogue that renders them criminal? Who will pretend that? Is it that they are publicly repeated or acted over? Will any one pretend, that it is a crime to personate a character in any case, even where no deceit is intended? Then farewell parables, figures of speech, and the whole oratorical art. Is it a sin to look upon the representation? Then it must be a sin to look upon the world which is the original, of which plays are the copy.

This is the way which those who appear in defence of the stage ordinarily take, and it is little better than if one should say, What is a stage-play? It is nothing else abstractly considered but a company of men and women talking together; Where is the harm in that? What hinders them from talking piously and profitably, as well as wickedly or hurtfully? But, rejecting this method of reasoning as unjust and inconclusive, let it be observed, that those who plead for the lawfulness of the stage, in any country, however well regulated, plead for what implies, not by accident, but essentially and of necessity the following things. (1.) Such a number of plays as will furnish a habitual course of representations, with such changes as the love of variety in human nature necessarily requires. (2.) These plays of such a kind, as to procure an audience of voluntary spectators, who are able and willing to pay for being so

entertained. (3.) A company of hired players, who have this as their only business and occupation, that they may give themselves wholly to it, and be expert in the performance. (4.) The representation must be so frequent as the profits may defray the expence of the apparatus, and maintain those who follow this business. They must also be maintained in that measure of luxury, or elegance, if you please, which their way of life, and the thoughts to which they are accustomed must make them desire and require. It is a thing impracticable to maintain a player at the same expence as you may maintain a peasant.

Now all these things do, and must enter into the idea of a well regulated stage, and, if any defend it without supposing this, he hath no adversary that I know of. Without these there may be poets, or there may be plays, but there cannot be a play-house. It is in vain then to go about to show, that there have been an instance or two, or may be, of treatises wrote in the form of plays that are unexceptionable. It were easy to shew very great faults in some of these most universally applauded, but this is unnecessary. I believe it is very possible to write a treatise in the form of a Dialogue, in which the general rules of the Drama are observed, which shall be as holy and serious, as any sermon that ever was preached or printed. Neither is there any apparent impossibility in getting different persons to assume the different characters, and rehearse it in society. But it may be safely affirmed, that if all plays were of that kind, and human nature continue in its present state, the doors of the play-house would shut of their own accord, because no body would demand access*; unless there were an act of parliament to force attendance,

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dance,

* This furnishes an easy answer to what is remarked by some in favour of plays, that several eminent Christians have endeavoured to supplant bad plays by writing good ones; as Gregory Nazianzen a father of the Church, and a person of great piety, and our countryman Buchanan. But did ever these plays come to repute? Were they formerly, or are they now acted upon the stage? The fate of their works proves that these good men judged wrong in attempting to reform the stage, and that the great majority of Christians acted more wisely who were for leaving it wholly aside.

dance, and even in that case, as much pains would probably be taken to evade the law obliging to attend, as are now taken to evade those that command us to abstain. The fair and plain state of this question then is, Whether it is possible or practicable, in the present state of human nature, to have the above system of things under so good a regulation, as to make the erecting, and countenancing the stage agreeable to the will of God, and consistent with the purity of the Christian profession.

And here let us consider a little, what is the primary, and immediate intention of the stage, Whether it be for amusement and recreation, or for instruction, to make men wise and good. Perhaps, indeed, the greatest part will choose to compound these two purposes together, and say it is for both: For amusement immediately, and for improvement ultimately, that it instructs by pleasing, and reforms by stealth. The patrons of a well regulated stage have it no doubt in their power to profess any of these ends in it they please, if it is equally capable of them all; and therefore, in one part or other of this discourse, it must be considered in every one of these lights. But as it is of moment, because of some of the arguments to be afterwards adduced, let the reader be pleased to consider, how far recreation and amusement enter into the nature of the stage, and are, not only immediately and primarily, but chiefly and ultimately intended by it.

If the general nature of it, or the end proposed from it when well regulated, can be any way determined from its first institution, and the subsequent practice, it seems plainly to point at amusement. The earliest productions of that kind that are now extant are evidently incapable of any other use, and hardly even of that to a person of any taste or judgment*. They usually

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* This is confessed by a defender of the stage who says, 'Such of the comedies before his (that is Menander's) time, as have been preserved to us, are generally very poor pieces, not so much ludicrous as ridiculous, even a mountebank's Merry Andrew would be hissed, now a days, for such Puerilities as we see abounding in Aristophanes.' *Rem. on Anderson's Position concerning the unlawfulness of stage-plays*, page 8th.

accompanied the feasts of the ancients in the houses of the rich and opulent *, and were particularly used in times of publick rejoicing. They have, indeed, generally been considered, in all ages, as intended for entertainment. A modern author of high rank and reputation †, who would not willingly hurt the cause, considers them in this light, and this alone, and represents their improvement, not as lying in their having a greater moral tendency, but in the perfection of the poet's art, and the refinement of the taste of the audience. It is only of late that men have begun to dignify them with a higher title. Formerly they were ever considered as an indulgence of pleasure, and an article of luxury, but now they are exalted into schools of virtue, and represented as bulwarks against vice. It is probable, most readers will be apt to smile when they hear them so called, and to say to their defenders, This is but overdoing, preserve them to us as innocent amusements, and we shall not much contend for their usefulness. It is, indeed, but an evidence of the distress of the cause, for their advocates only take up this plea when they are unable to answer the arguments against them upon any other footing. It may also appear that they are designed for amusement, if we consider who have been the persons in all ages who have attended them, *viz.* The rich, the young, and the gay, those who live in pleasure, and the very business of whose lives is amusement.

But not to insist upon these circumstances, I think it is plain from the nature of the thing, that the immediate intention of plays is to please, whatever effects may be pretended to flow afterwards, or by accident, from this pleasure. They consist in an exact imitation of nature, and the conformity of the personated

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* *Plut. de Glor. Athen. & Sympos. lib. 7. quest. 8.* 'As for the new comedy, it is so necessary an ingredient of all publick entertainments, that so to speak, one may as well make a feast without wine, as without Menander.'

to real characters. This is the great aim, and the great perfection, both of the poet and actors. Now this imitation, of itself, gives great pleasure to the spectator, whether the actions represented are good or bad. And, in itself considered, it gives only pleasure; for the beauty of the imitation, as such, hath no moral influence, nor any connection with morality, but what it may derive in a distant way from the nature of the actions which the poet or actors choose to represent, or the spectators are willing to see. Every person who thinks impartially, may be from this convinced, that to please, or attempt to do so, is essential to the stage, and its first, or rather its main design; how far it polutes or purifies is accidental, and must depend upon the skill and honesty of its regulators and managers.

Having thus prepared the way, the following arguments are humbly offered to the consideration of every serious person, to shew, that a public theatre is inconsistent with the purity of the Christian profession: which if they do not, to all, appear to be each of them singly conclusive, will, I hope, when taken together, sufficiently evince the truth of the proposition.

In the first place, If it be considered as an amusement, it is improper, and not such as any Christian may lawfully use. Here we must begin by laying it down as a fundamental principle, that all men are bound supremely to love, and habitually to serve God; that is to say, to take his law as the rule, and his glory as the end, not of one, but of all their actions. No man, at any time or place is, or can be, absolved from this obligation. Every real Christian lives under a habitual sense of it. I know this expression, aiming at the glory of God, is called a cant phrase and is despised and derided by worldly men. It were easy, however, to vindicate it from reason; but it will suffice, to all those for whose use that discourse is intended, to say, It is a truth taught and repeated in the sacred oracles, that all things were made for, that all things shall finally tend to, and therefore, that

all intelligent creatures should supremely and uniformly aim at the glory of God.

Now we glorify God by cultivating holy dispositions, and doing pious and useful actions. Recreation is an intermission of duty, and is only necessary because of our weakness; it must be some action indifferent in its nature, which becomes lawful and usefull from its tendency to refresh the mind, and invigorate it for duties of more importance. The use of recreation is precisely the same as the use of sleep; though they differ in this, that there is but one way in which sleep becomes sinful, *viz.* by excess, whereas there are ten thousand ways in which recreations become sinful. It is needless to adduce passages of Scripture to verify the above assertion concerning our obligation to glorify God. It is the language of the whole, and is particularly applied to indifferent actions by the apostle Paul, *Whether therefore ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God**.

If there were upon the minds of men, in general, a just sense of this their obligation, stage-plays, nay, and a thousand other amusements now in use, would never have been heard of. The truth is, the need of amusement is much less than people commonly apprehend, and, where it is not necessary, it must be sinful. Those who stand in need of recreation may be divided into two sorts, such as are employed in bodily labour, and such as have their spirits often exhausted by study and application of mind. As to the first of these, a mere cessation from labour is sufficient for refreshment, and indeed of itself gives great pleasure, unless when the appetites are inflamed and irritated by frequent sensual gratifications; and then they are importunately craved, and become necessary to fill the intervals of work. Of this sort very few are able to afford so expensive a recreation as the stage. And even as to the other, *viz.* those whose spirits are exhausted by application of mind, only a very small number of them will chuse the diversion of the stage, for this very good reason, that social converse, and bodily exercise will

will answer the purpose much better. Indeed, if we consider the just and legitimate end of recreations, and compare it with the persons who most frequently engage in them, we shall find, that, ninety nine of every hundred, are such as do not need recreation at all. Perhaps their time lies heavy upon their hands, and they feel an uneasiness and impatience under their present state; but this is not from work, but from idleness, and from the emptiness and unsatisfying nature of the enjoyments, which they chase with so much eagerness, one after another, vainly seeking from them that good which they do not contain, and that satisfaction which they cannot impart.

From this I think it undeniably appears, that, if no body were to attend the stage, but such as really needed recreation or amusement upon Christian principles, and of these such only as were able to pay for it, and of these only such as did themselves choose it, there is not a place this day, in the world, so large as to afford a daily audience. It will be immediately objected, This argument, make as much of it as you please, is not compleat, for it hinders not but that some, however few, may attend in a proper manner, and with warrantable views. But let it be remembered, that I attack not a play singly as a play, nor one person for being witness to a thing of that nature, but the stage as a system containing all the branches I have enumerated above. This cannot subsist without a full audience, and frequent attendance, and therefore is, by its constitution, a constant and powerful invitation to sin, and cannot be maintained but by the commission of it. Perhaps, some will still object, that the argument is too finely spun, that it seems to demand perfection, and to find fault with every practice, in which there is a probability that sin will be committed. That, if this holds, we should no more contribute to the establishment of churches than play-houses, because we have a moral certainty, that no congregation ever will meet together on earth, but much sin will be committed, both by minister and people.

people. But there is a great difference between a commanded duty which is attended with sin by defect, and what is no where commanded, which necessarily invites to sin by its nature, and is in substance sinful to the great majority of those who attend it.

But further, the stage is an improper, that is to say, an unlawful recreation to all without exception, because it consumes too much time. This is a circumstance which, however little impression it may make upon those who find their time often a burden, will appear of the greatest moment to every serious Christian. In proportion as any man improves in holiness of heart, he increases in usefulness of life, and acquires a deeper and stronger sense of the worth and value of time. To spend an hour unprofitably appears to such a person a greater crime, than to many the commission of gross sin. And, indeed, it ought to appear very heinous in the eyes of those who believe the representation given by our Lord Jesus Christ of his own procedure at the day of judgment, *Cast ye the UNPROFITABLE servant into utter darkness; where there shall be weeping and wailing, and gnashing of teeth* *. Mark this, ye lovers of pleasures, ye sons of gaiety and mirth; who imagine you are sent into the world for no higher end than your own entertainment; and who, if you are free from, or able any how to palliate your grosser sins, never once reflect on the heavy account against you of wasted time.

Though there were no other objection against the stage as a recreation but this one, it is surely faulty. If recreations are only lawful because necessary, they must cease to be lawful when they are no longer necessary. The length and duration of regular comedy and tragedy is already fixed and settled by rules of long standing; and, I suppose, whatever other circumstance may be confessed to need reformation, all men of taste will agree, that these shall continue as they are. Now I leave to all who know how much time the preparation for such a public appearance,

* Matth. xxv. 30.

pearance, and the necessary attendance, must take up, to judge, whether it is not too much to be given to meer recreation.

This holds particularly in the case of recreation of mind, between which and bodily exercise there is a very great difference. For bodily exercise, in some cases, for example, when the health requires it, may be continued for a long time, only for this reason, that it may have effects lasting in proportion to the time spent in it. But giving the mind to pleasure by way of recreation must be short, or it is certainly hurtful; it gives men a habit of idleness and trifling, and makes them averse from returning to any thing that requires serious application. So true is this, and so applicable to the present case, that I could almost rest the whole argument upon it, that no man, who has made the trial, can deliberately and with a good conscience affirm, that attending plays has added strength to his mind, and warmth to his affections, in the duties of devotion; that it has made him more able and willing to exert his intellectual powers in the graver and more important offices of the Christian life; nay, or even made him more diligent and active in the business of civil life. On the contrary, it is commonly to such length as to produce a satiety and weariness of itself, and to require rest and refreshment to recruit the exhausted spirits, a thing quite absurd and self-contradictory in what is called a recreation.

But the stage is not merely an unprofitable consumption of time, it is further improper as a recreation, because it agitates the passions too violently, and interests too deeply, so as, in some cases, to bring people into a real, while they behold an imaginary distress. Keeping in view the end of recreations, will enable us to judge rightly of this. It is to refresh and invigorate the mind. Therefore when, instead of rest, which is properly called relaxation of mind, recreations are used, their excellence consists in their being, not only a pleasant, but an easy exercise of the intellectual powers. Whatever is difficult, and either requires or causes a strong application of mind, is

contrary to their intention. Now it is plain, that dramattick representations fix the attention so very deeply, and interest the affections so very strongly, that, in a little time, they fatigue the mind themselves, and however eagerly they are desired and followed, there are many serious and useful occupations, in which men will continue longer, without exhausting the spirits, than in attending the theatre.

Indeed, in this respect, they are wholly contrary to what should be the view of every Christian. He ought to set bounds to, and endeavour to moderate his passions, as much as possible, instead of voluntarily and unnecessarily exciting them. The human passions, since the fall, are all of them but too strong; and are not sinful on account of their weakness, but their excess and misapplication. This is so generally true, that it hardly admits of an exception; unless it might be counted an exception, that some vitious passions, when they gain an ascendancy, extinguish others which oppose their gratification. For, though religion is consistent throughout, there are many vices, which are mutually repugnant to, and destructive of each other. But this exception has little or no effect upon the present argument.

Now, the great care of every Christian is to keep his passions and affections within due bounds, and to direct them to their proper objects. With respect to the first of these, the chief influence of theatrical representations upon the spectator, is to strengthen the passions by indulgence, for there they are all exhibited in a lively manner, and such as is most fit to communicate the impression. As to directing them to their proper objects, it will be afterwards shown, that the stage has rather the contrary effect, in the mean time, it is sufficient to observe, that it may be done much more effectually, and much more safely, another way.

This tendency of plays to interest the affections, shows their impropriety as a recreation on another account. It shows that they

they must be exceeding liable to abuse by excess, even supposing them in a certain degree, to be innocent. It is certain there is no life more unworthy of a man, hardly any more criminal in a Christian, than a life of perpetual amusement, a life where no valuable purpose is pursued, but the intellectual faculties wholly employed in purchasing and indulging sensual gratifications. It is also certain, that all of us are by nature, too much inclined thus to live to ourselves, and not to God. Therefore, where recreations are necessary, a watchful Christian will particularly beware of those that are ensnaring, and, by being too grateful and delicious, ready to lead to excess. This discriminating care and caution, is just as much the duty of a Christian, as any that can be named. Tho' it is immediately conversant only about the temptations and incitements to sin, and not the actual commission of it, it becomes a duty directly binding, both from the command of God, and the necessity of the thing itself. *Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation**, says our Saviour to his disciples; and elsewhere, *What I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch†*. And the apostle Paul to the same purpose, *See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time because the days are evil†*.

And if we consider the light in which the scripture sets our present situation, and the account there given of the weakness of human resolution, the same thing will evidently appear to be our duty. It is impossible that we can resist the slightest temptation, but by the assistance of divine grace. Now, how can this be expected if we put our constancy to unnecessary trials, not only contrary to reason, and a prudent regard to our own safety, but in the face of an express command of God to be watchful. *Lord, lead us not into temptation*, is a petition, which we are taught to offer up, by him who knew what was in man. But how much do those act in opposition to this, and even in contempt of it, who make temptations to themselves. And are

* Matth. xxvi. 41.

† Mark xiii. 37.

† Eph. v. 15.

not stage-plays temptations of the strongest kind, in which the mind is softened with pleasure, and the affections powerfully excited? How little reason is there to hope that men in the use of them will keep within the bounds of moderation? If any expect, in such circumstances, to be preserved by divine power, they are guilty of the sin, which is in scripture called *tempting God*.

It is this very circumstance, a liability to abuse by excess, that renders many other amusements also ordinarily unlawful to Christians, tho' perhaps, in their general nature, they cannot be shown to be criminal. Thus, it is not easy to refute the reasonings, by which ingenious men endeavour to show that games of hazard are not in themselves sinful; but by their enticing, ensnaring nature, and the excess which almost inseparably accompanies them, there can be no difficulty in pronouncing them highly dangerous, lawful to very few persons, and in very few cases. And, if they were as publick in their nature as plays, if they required the concurrence of as many operators, and as great a number of persons to join in them, I could have little scruple in affirming, that, in every possible case, they would be sinful.

The preceding considerations are greatly confirmed by the following, That when plays are chosen as a recreation, for which they are so exceedingly improper, it is always in opposition to other methods of recreation, which are perfectly fit for the purpose, and not liable to any of these objections. Where recreations are necessary, if there were only one sort to be had, some inconveniences could not be so strong an argument against the use of them. But where there are different kinds, to prefer those which are less, to those which are more fit, must needs be sinful. Such a tenderness and circumspection is, indeed, in this age, so rare and unusual, that, I am afraid, it will be almost impossible to fix a sense of its importance upon the mind of the reader; or, if it be done in any measure for a time, the example of a corrupt world, who are altogether

gether void of it, will immediately efface the impression. But, however few may *have ears to hear it*, the thing is certain, that, as the progress of his sanctification is the supreme desire and care of every Christian, so he is continually liable to be seduced by temptation, and infected by example; and, therefore, from a distrust of his own resolution, will not voluntarily and unnecessarily prefer a dangerous to a safe amusement. To prefer a very difficult and doubtful mean of attaining any worldly end, to one sure and easy; to prefer a clumsy improper instrument, to one perfectly fit for any piece of work, would be reckoned no small evidence of folly in the affairs of civil life. If one in sickness should choose a medicine of a very questionable nature, of very dangerous and uncertain operation, when he had equal access to one entirely safe, of approved reputation, and superior efficacy, it would be esteemed next to madness. Is there not then a real conformity between the cases? Is not a like care to be taken of our souls as of our bodies? Nay, is not the obligation so much the stronger, by how much the one is of greater value than the other? The different conduct of men and their different fate, in this respect, is well described by the wise man, *Happy is the man that feareth alway, but he that hardeneth his heart shall fall into mischief* *.

It ought not to be omitted in shewing the impropriety of the stage as a recreation and amusement for Christians, that it is costly and expensive, and that this cost is altogether unnecessary, since the end might be obtained, not only as well, but much better, at a far cheaper rate, perhaps, in most cases, at no expence at all. I know this argument will be treated with great contempt by those who live in affluence, and know no other use of riches but to feed their appetites, and make all the rest of mankind subservient to the gratification of their violent and ungovernable desires. But tho' none in this world have any title to hinder them from disposing of their wealth as they please, they must be called

called to consider, that they have a master in heaven. To him they must render an account at the last day, and, in this account, the use that they make of their riches is not to be excepted. The great have, no doubt, the distinguished honour, if they please to embrace it, of contributing to the happiness of multitudes under them, and dispensing, under God, a great variety of the comforts of this life. But it would abate the envy and impatience of the lower part of the world, and moderate their appetite after riches, if they would consider, that the more that is committed to them, the more they have to account for. The greatest and richest man on earth hath not any licence, in the word of God, for an unnecessary waste of his substance, or consuming it in unprofitable and hurtful pleasures; and, under the one or both of these characters, that must fall, that is laid out upon the stage.

Let not any reader, who cannot find a satisfying answer to these objections against the stage as an unchristian amusement, from the word of God, take the practice of the world as a refuge or sanctuary, and say, This is carrying matters to an extreme, if these maxims are rigidly adhered to, you will exclude from the number of Christians, not only the far greatest part of mankind, but many otherwise of excellent and amiable characters. Tho' this is the weakest of all arguments, it is, perhaps, that which hath of all others the strongest effect, and most powerfully contributes to set peoples mind at ease in a doubtful or dangerous practice. How hard is it to make men sensible of the evil of such sins, as custom authorizes and fashion justifies? There is no making them ashamed of them, because they are common and reputable, and there is no making them afraid of what they see done without suspicion by numbers on every hand. But is there any reason to believe, that the example of others will prove a just and valid excuse for any practice at the judgment-seat of Christ? Will the greatness or the number of offenders screen them from his power? Or can that man expect a

gracious acceptance with him, who has suffered his commands to be qualified by prevailing opinion, and would not follow him farther than the bulk of mankind would bear him company.

I shall close the reflections upon this part of the subject by observing, that there are two general characters of the disciples of Christ, which will appear, if we consult the scriptures, to be essential to them, and which seem altogether inconsistent with theatrical amusements. The first is self-denial and mortification. Tho' we should not insist upon the particular objections against the stage, there is something of pomp and gaiety in it, upon the best possible supposition, that is inconsistent with the character of a Christian. The gospel is the religion of sinners, who are saved from wrath by the rich mercy and free grace of God. The life of such, then, must be a life of penitence, humility, and mortification. The followers of a crucified Saviour must bear the cross, and tread in the same path of suffering and self-denial, in which he hath gone before them. In their baptismal covenant they renounce the world, by which is not meant such gross crimes as are a violation of natural light, as well as a transgression of the law of God, but that excessive attachment to present indulgence, which is more properly expressed by the pomp and vanity of the world*. It is true there are many precepts in
Scripture

* It is not improper here to consider the ancient form of baptism, and what was supposed by the fathers to be implied in it, *Apost. Constitut.* lib. 7. cap. 41. *Ἐκπαύσομαι τὸ σατὰν, &c.* 'I renounce Satan and his works, and his pomp, and his service, and his angels, and his inventions, and all things that belong to him, or are subject to him.' *Ambros. de Initiatis. Ingressus in regenerationis sacrarium, &c.* 'Thou hast entered into the holy place of regeneration; repeat what you were there asked, and recollect what you answered? You renounced the devil, and his works, and his world, and his luxury and pleasures. *Hieron. Com. in Matth. xv. 26. Renuntio tibi diabolo, &c.* 'I renounce thee Satan, and thy pomp, and thy vices, and thy world, which lieth in wickedness.' And that we may know what they had particularly in view by the pomps of the world which they renounced, they are sometimes expressly said to be the public shows. Thus *Salvian. de*

Scripture which require us to maintain a habitual gratitude and thankful frame of spirit, nay, to rejoice in the Lord alway. But there is a great difference between this joy, and that of worldly men; as they do not rise from the same source, so they cannot possibly express themselves in the same way.

Another branch of the Christian temper, between which, and theatrical amusements, there appears a very great opposition, is spirituality and heavenliness of mind. All real Christians are, and account themselves pilgrims and strangers on the earth, set their affections on things above, and have their conversation in heaven. Whatever tends to weaken these dispositions they will carefully avoid as contrary to their duty and their interest. Is not this the case with theatrical amusements? Are they not very delicious to a sensual and carnal mind. Do they not excite, gratify and strengthen these affections, which it is most the business of a Christian to restrain? Are not the indulgence of worldly pleasure, and heavenliness of mind, mutually destructive of each other? This is so plain, that anciently those who gave themselves up to a life of eminent holiness and piety, used to retire wholly from the commerce of the world and the society of men. Tho' this was wrong in itself, and soon found to be very liable to superstitious abuse, it plainly shows how much they err upon the opposite side, who being called to wean their affections from
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provident. lib. 6. page 197. Quæ est enim in baptismo, &c. 'For what is the first profession of a Christian in baptism? What, but that they profess to renounce the devil, and his pomps, his shows, and his works. Therefore shows and pomps, by our own confession, are the works of the devil. How, O Christian, wilt thou follow the public shows after baptism, which thou confessest to be the works of the devil?'

There are some that pretend, that Christians were only kept from the shows, because they were mixed with idolatrous rites: But it is to be noted, that in the time of Salvian idolatry was abolished, and the shows were no longer exhibited in honour of idol Gods. Cyril of Jerusalem also, after idolatry was destroyed, continues the charge against the shows.

the world, do yet voluntarily and unnecessarily indulge themselves in the most delicious and intoxicating pleasures.

What is offered above, I hope, will suffice to show that the stage, considered simply as an entertainment, cannot be lawfully used by a Christian. But we must now proceed in the second place, To consider the modern pretence, that it is useful and instructive, or to speak in the language of one of its defenders, 'A warm incentive to virtue, and powerful preservative against vice*.' The same author gives us this account of tragedy, 'True tragedy is a serious lecture upon our duty, shorter than an epick poem, and longer than a fable, otherwise differing from both only in the method, which is dialogue instead of narration; its province is to bring us in love with the more exalted virtues, and to create a detestation of the blacker and (humanly speaking) more enormous crimes,' On comedy he says, 'an insinuating mirth laughs us out of our frailties by making us ashamed of them. Thus, when they are well intended, tragedy and comedy work to one purpose, the one manages us as children, the other convinces us as men.' In order to treat this part of the subject with precision, I must beg the reader to recal to mind the account formerly given of what is implied in the stage, even under the best possible regulation; because unless this be allowed me, I confess the argument to be defective. It is not denied, that there may be, and are to be found, in some dramattick performances, noble and excellent sentiments. These, indeed, are much fewer than is commonly supposed, as might be shown by an examination of some of the most celebrated plays. There is a great difference between the shining thoughts that are applauded in the world by men of taste, and the solid and profitable truths of religion. However it is allowed, that there are some things to be found in plays, against which no just objection can be made; and it is easy to form an
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* Remarks on Anderson's Positions concerning the unlawfulness of stage-plays.

idea of them still more pure than any that do yet exist; but the question is, Whether it is possible now to find, or reasonable to hope to find, such a number of pieces, in their prevailing tendency, agreeable to the holiness and purity of the Christian character, as are necessary to support a publick theatre. Till this is accomplished, all that is done to support the theatre in the mean time, is done to support the interest of vice and wickedness; whatever it may be in itself and singly considered. And if such an entire reformation be impossible, a partial reformation, or mixing a few good things with it, is not only ineffectual but hurtful. It makes a bad cause a little more plausible, and therefore the temptation so much the more formidable,

There is a discourse of a foreigner of some note, in which he exerts all his eloquence in commendation of plays, when used in the public schools, for the improvement of youth in action and elocution, under the direction of their masters. As this gentleman was a clergyman, his authority is often used on this subject. But it ought to be observed, that as he was a young man when he employed his eloquence in this cause, so, what he says, strongly supports the propriety of the distinction I have laid down. He expressly confines the argument to such plays as were represented by youth in the schools, and rejects with great abhorrence the public stage, and such as were acted by mercenary players. Of the last sort he hath the following strong words. *At hic vereor A. ne qui sint inter vos qui ex me quaerant: Quid agis adolescens? Tunc comoedos, Histriones, mimos, ex eloquentiae studiosis facere paras? Egone? Histriones? Quos? An viles illos qui in scenam prodeunt mercede conducti? Qui quaestus causa quamlibet personam induant? qui passim per urbes vagantes artem suam venalem habent? Qui, merito, Romano jure, infamia notantur? — Absit a me absit, ut in hac impietatis schola teneros adolescentium animos eloquentiae imbui velim. Quanticunque eam facio, tanti tamen non est. Satius esset balbutire, imo satius mutum esse, quam non sine summo animi periculo*

culo eloquentiam discere *. Which passage may be translated thus, 'But here I am afraid some of you will be ready to challenge me, and to say, what is this you aim at young man? Do you intend to make all who study eloquence comedians, players, buffoons? Do I indeed? What sort of players? Those contemptible wretches, who are hired to come upon the stage, and who for gain will personate any character whatever? Who go about through different cities making merchandise of their art? Who are justly marked with infamy in the Roman law? — Far, far be it from me to propose, that the tender minds of youth should be taught eloquence in this school of impiety. However much I value it, I value it not at this rate. Better it were they should stammer in speech, nay, better that they were dumb and incapable of speech, than that they should learn the art of eloquence, by putting their souls in the most imminent danger.' Now, whether this author's scheme was right or not, I have no occasion at present to debate with him as an adversary, for he rejects with abhorrence the imputation of favouring the cause against which I plead.

When a public theatre is defended as a mean of instruction, I cannot help thinking it is of importance to observe, that it is a method altogether uncommanded and unauthorized in the word of God. This will probably appear a very weak argument to many, but it will not appear so to those who have a firm belief of, and a just esteem for that book of life. Such will not expect, that any method will prove effectual to make men *wise unto salvation* without the blessing of God, and they will hardly be induced to look for his blessing upon the stage. And let it be remembered, that it is now pled for in a higher light, and on a more important account than merely as an amusement, *viz.* as proper to support the interest of religion; it should therefore have a positive warrant before it be employed in this cause, lest it should meet with the same reception that all other human devices

devices will meet with, *Who hath required these things at your hands?*

And that none may use a delusory sort of reasoning, and shift from one pretence to another, saying, it becomes a lawful amusement by its tendency to instruct, and an effectual instruction by its power to please at the same time; it must be observed, that a sinful amusement is not to be indulged on any pretence whatsoever, for we must not *do evil that good may come*. Nay, call it only a dangerous amusement, even in that case, no pretence of possible or probable instruction, (tho' such a thing were not contrary to the supposition) is sufficient to warrant it. Nothing less than its being necessary could authorise the practice, and that I hope none will be so hardy as to affirm.

It can never be affirmed to be necessary, without a blasphemous impeachment of the divine wisdom. If the holy scriptures, and the methods there authorised and appointed, are full and sufficient for our spiritual improvement, all others must be wholly unnecessary. And if they are the most powerful and the most effectual means, no others must be suffered to come into rivalship and competition with them; on the contrary, they must be condemned as wrong, or laid aside as comparatively weak. The truth is, the stage can never be defended on a more untenable footing, than when it is represented as having a moral or virtuous, that is to say, a pious or religious tendency. What Christian can hear such a plea with patience? Is the *law of the Lord perfect, converting the soul?* Is it able to *make the man of God perfect, thoroughly furnished to every good work?* What then are its defects which must be supplied by the theatre? Have the saints of God, for so many ages, been carried safely through all the dark and difficult steps of their earthly pilgrimage, with his law as a *light to their feet, and a lamp to their path*, and yet is it now necessary, that they should have additional illumination from a well-regulated stage? Have there

there been for so long a time pastors employed bearing a divine commission? ordinances administered according to divine institution? Have these been hitherto effectual for *perfecting the saints, for the work of the ministry, and for edifying the body of Christ*? And shall we not count them among the scoffers that were to come in the last days, who pretend to open up a new commission for the players to assist. If any shall say there needs no divine institution, all men are called to instruct one another, *the lips of the righteous should feed many*, and this way of the drama is but a mode of the instruction we all owe to one another. I answer, it is as a mode I attack it. This very mode has been shown to be dangerous, nay sinful, as an amusement; who then can shew its necessity, in the same mode, for instruction or improvement.

If the stage be a proper method of promoting the interests of religion, then is Satan's kingdom divided against itself, which he is more cunning than to suffer it to be. For, whatever debate there be, whether good men *may* attend the theatre, there can be no question at all, that no openly vicious man is an enemy to it, and that the far greatest part of them do passionately love it. I say no *openly* vitious man, for, doubtless, there may be some hypocrites wearing the habit of the Christian pilgrim, who are the very worst of men, and yet may shew a bundance of zeal against the stage. But nothing is more certain, than that, taking the world according to its appearance, it is the worst part of it that shews most passion for this entertainment, and the best that avoids and fears it, than which there can hardly be a worse sign of it, as a mean of doing good. Whoever believes the following words of our blessed Redeemer, will never be persuaded that poets and actors for the stage have received any commission to speak in his name. *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me**.—*A stranger will*

* John x. 27.

will they not follow, but will flee from him, for they know not the voice of strangers †. ‡

This leads us to observe, that the stage is not only an improper method of instruction, but that all, or the far greatest number of pieces there represented, must have, upon the whole, a pernicious tendency. This is evident, because they must be to the taste and relish of the bulk of those who attend it. The difficulty of getting good authors for the theatre, I shall not insist upon, but whatever the authors are able or willing to do, it is certain, that their productions in fact, can rise no higher in point of purity, than the audience shall be willing to receive. Their attendance is not constrained, but voluntary; nay, they pay dearly for their entertainment; and therefore they must, and will have it to their taste. This is a part of the subject that merits the particular attention of all who are inclined to judge impartially, and it proves, in the strongest manner, the absurdity of forming chimerical suppositions of a stage so regulated, as, instead of being hurtful, to promote the interests of piety and virtue.

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† John x. 5.

‡ It is to be observed here, to prevent mistakes, that the argument is founded on the general and prevailing inclination of the greatest part of each character, and not upon particular instances, in many of which, it is confessed, it will not hold. For, as it is difficult to know the real character of some persons, in whom there are some marks and signs of true religion, and at the same time, some symptoms of unsoundness, so, it is still more difficult to determine the quality of single actions. Therefore, it is little or no argument that any practice is safe or good, because one good man, or one supposed to be good, has been known to do it; or on the contrary, ill, because one bad man has been known to do it. But as, when we retire further from the limit that divides them, the characters are more clearly and sensibly distinguished, so, whatever practice is passionately desired by wicked men in general, and shunned by the good, certainly is of bad tendency. If it were otherwise, as said above, Satan's kingdom would be divided against itself, and the God who keepeth covenant and truth for ever, would fail in his promise, of giving his people counsel, and teaching them the way in which they ought to walk.

Here let some truths be called to mind which are frequently mentioned in the holy scriptures, but seldom recollected, and their consequences very little attended to. There is a distinction often stated, both in the Old and New Testament, between the children of God and the men of the world. These are mixed together in the present state, and cannot, in many cases, be certainly distinguished by their outward appearance; yet is there at bottom, not only a real distinction of character, but a perfect opposition between them, as to the commanding principle of all their actions. And as there is an opposition of character between them, so there must be an opposition of interests and views. Our blessed Redeemer when he came into the world, was *despised and rejected of men*; and he every where tells his disciples, that they must expect no better treatment. *Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the prophets that were before you* *. And on the other hand, *Wo unto you when all men shall speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets* †. Again, *If ye were of the world, the world would love his own; but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you* ‡. His apostles speak always the same language: Thus the apostle Paul, *And be not conformed to this world* §. Nay, he lays it down as an universal position, *Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution* ||. Now I ask, Whether those who have a strong and rooted aversion at true holiness, which is the character of the sincere Christian, will voluntarily croud to the theatre, to hear and see such performances as breathe nothing but what is agreeable to the pure uncorrupted word of God? Will those who revile, injure, and persecute the saints themselves,

* Mat. v. 11, 12. † Luke vi. 26. ‡ John xv. 19. § Rom. xii. 2.
|| 2 Tim. 3. 12.

selves, delight in the stage, if honour is there put upon true religion, and be pleased with that character in the representation which they hate in the original? This would be to expect impossibilities. And therefore, while the great majority of those who attend the stage are unholy, it is certain, that the plays which they behold with pleasure cannot, upon the whole, but have a criminal tendency.

If any allege, that the poets art may be a mean to make religion amiable to them, I answer, that he cannot make it amiable, but by adulteration, by mixing it with something agreeable to their own taste, and then it is not religion that they admire, but the erroneous, debased and false resemblance of it. Or even supposing, that, in a single instance or two, nothing in substance should be set before them but true religion, and this dressed to the very highest advantage by the poet's genius and actor's skill, there would be little gained; because these human arts only, would be the object of their admiration, and they would always prefer, and speedily procure, a display of the same arts, upon a subject more agreeable to their corrupt minds. This, indeed, we are not left to gather by way of inference and deduction from other truths, but are expressly taught it in the word of God. *For the natural man receiveth not the things of the spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned**. Experience is a strong proof of this; for if any man will take the pains of making up a system of the morality of the stage, I do not mean the horrid prophanity and scandalous obscenity that is to be found in the worst, but of that which is called virtue in the best of the pieces wrote for the theatre, he will find it exceeding different from Christian morals; and, that an adherence to it would be, in most instances, a wilful departure from the rules of a holy life.

However plainly this is founded upon the word of God and

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Sound reason, there are some very unwilling to think, that ever their duty as Christians should constrain them to be at odds with the delicacies of life, or the polite and fashionable pleasures of the age. And, as the mind of man is very ingenious in the defence of that pollution which it loves, they sometimes bring in criticism to their aid. They alledge that by the *world* is understood, generally thro' the New Testament, those who were Heathens by profession; and that the same opposition to true religion, in judgment and heart, is not to be ascribed to those who are members of the visible church. It is answered, the word did indeed signify as they say, for this plain reason, that in the early days of Christianity, when it was under persecution, few or none would make profession of it unless they did really believe it. But is not the meaning still the same? Can we suppose that the hatred of the then world was at the name of religion only, and not at the substance? Was the devil *the prince of this world*, then? And has he not now equal dominion over, and is he not equally served by those who are profane in their lives, though they were once baptised? Was he the spirit that *then worked*, and is he not the spirit that *now works* in the children of disobedience? The truth therefore remains still the same, those who are in a natural and unregenerate state, who hate true religion in their hearts, must have something very different before they can be pleased with seeing it on the stage*.

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* There is an excellent passage to this purpose in an essay against plays, to be found in one of the volumes published about a hundred years ago by the gentlemen of the Portroyal in France, a society of Jansenists, of great parts and eminent piety. This essay in particular, is by some said to have been written by the prince of Conti. Section. 15th of that essay, he says, 'It is so true that plays are almost always a representation of vicious passions, that the most part of Christian virtues are incapable of appearing upon the stage. Silence, patience, moderation, wisdom, poverty, repentance, are no virtues the representation of which can divert the spectators; and above all, we never hear humility spoken of, and the bearing of injuries.'

That this argument may have its proper force, we ought to consider, how great a proportion of persons under the dominion of vice and wickedness there must always be among those who attend the theatre. The far greatest number of the world in general are ungodly. This is a fact which could hardly be denied, even tho' the following passage had not stood in the oracles of truth. *Enter ye in at the strait gate; for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that* And it †. And as none can attend the stage, but those in higher life, and more affluent circumstances than the bulk of mankind, there is still a greater proportion of them who are enemies to pure and undefiled religion. Thus, says our Saviour to his disciples, *Verily I say unto you, that a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God* ‡. To the same purpose the apostle Paul says, *Ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called* ||. This does not at all suppose, that those in high life are originally more corrupt in their nature than others, but it arises from their being exposed to much greater and stronger temptations. Now if, from the small number of real Christians in the upper ranks of life, we again subtract such as

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† It would be strange to see a modest and silent religious person represented.
 ‡ There must be something of great and renowned according to men, or at least something lively and animated, which is not met withal in Christian gravity and wisdom, and therefore, those who have been desirous to introduce holy men and women upon the stage, have been forced to make them appear proud, and to make them utter discourses more proper for the ancient Roman heroes than for saints and martyrs. Their devotion upon the stage ought also to be always a little extraordinary.

† Mat. vii. 13, 14.

‡ Mat. xix. 23, 24.

|| 1 Cor. i. 26.

count the stage unlawful or dangerous, or have no inclination to it, there will very few remain of those who are *the salt of the earth*, to season the unhallowed assembly. What sort of productions then must they be, which shall have the approbation of such judges? How much more proper to pollute than to reform, to poison than to cure? If such in fact the great bulk of plays have always hitherto been, from what has been said it ought not to be wondered at, because it cannot be otherwise.

It is very possible, that some may be all this while holding the argument very cheap, and saying with lord Shaftsbury, 'The true genius is of a nobler nature than servilely to submit to the corrupt or vitiated taste of any age or place;—he works not for gain, but despises it;—he knows, and will not swerve from the truth of art;—he will produce what is noble and excellent in its kind;—he will refine the public ear, and teach them to admire in the right place. These, tho' I do not cite any particular passage, are all of them sentiments, and most of them expressions, of that author so much admired among modern philosophers. But the objection is easily solved. The observation is allowed to be just, and to hold with respect to the poetic, oratorical, or any human art, because we know of no higher standard in any of these, than what human nature, in its present state, will most admire when it is exhibited to view. Accordingly the great poet and the great orator, tho', through the prevalence of a bad taste, they may find it difficult at first to procure attention, yet they will procure it at last: And when they are heard, they carry the prize from all inferior pretenders; and indeed, their doing so is the very touchstone and trial of their art itself. In this case, there lies no appeal from the judgment of the public or the multitude, (as David Hume has said for once according to truth,) to the judgment of a wiser few.

But there cannot be any thing more absurd than to suppose,

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that the same thing will hold in morals and religion. The dramatic poets in Athens, where the stage was first established, improved upon one another, and refined their own taste, and that of their audience, as to the elegance of their compositions. Nay, they soon brought tragedy, as a great critic * observes, to as great perfection as the nature of the thing seems to admit of. But whoever will from this infer, that they improved in their morals in the same proportion, or by that means, will fall into a very gross mistake. This, indeed, seems to be the great error of modern infidels, to suppose, that there is no more in morals than a certain taste and sense of beauty and elegance. Natural talents in the human mind are quite distinct from moral dispositions, and the excellence of the one is no evidence at all of the prevalence of the other. On the contrary, the first are many times found in the highest perfection, where there is a total absence of the last. And therefore, that true genius is the object of universal approbation, hinders not but that true goodness is the object of general aversion. The scripture assures us, that all men are by nature under the power of sin, *that every imagination of the thoughts of man is only evil from his youth, and that continually †. That the carnal mind is enmity against God, and, till it be renewed by divine grace, is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be ‡.*

Now it is utterly impossible and self-contradictory, that men should approve and delight in that which is contrary to the habitual prevailing temper of their hearts; and to bring about a change in them is not in the power of any human art, but with the concurrence of the spirit and grace of God. In this he has given no authority to the players to act under him, nay, he has expressly told us, that he will not ordinarily, in any way whatever, make use of the perfection of human art, but of the plainest and weakest outward means. Thus the apostle Paul tells us his Master sent him, *To preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words,*

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* Aristotle.

† Gen. vi. 5.

‡ Rom. viii. 7.

lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect *.——And, after that in the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe †. He also professes that his practice had always been conformed to this rule, *And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God ‡. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power. That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men but in the power of God || §.*

It may be necessary here, to obviate an objection, that in the holy scriptures themselves we find several passages which seem to signify, that true religion, though it is not the choice of all men, is yet the object of universal approbation. Thus we are told, that *the righteous shall be in everlasting remembrance, but the memory of the wicked shall rot.* Nay, we are exhorted by the apostle Paul to the practice of our duty, in such terms as these, *Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are lovely,*
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* 1 Cor. i. 17. † Ibid ver. 21. ‡ 1 Cor. ii. 1. § Ibid ver. 4, 5.

§ Perhaps some will ask here, Is then human art, and are natural talents, which are the gifts of God, wholly excluded from his service? I answer, they are not. And yet the instances of their being eminently useful are exceeding rare. Such is the imperfection of the human mind, that it can hardly at the same time, give great attention and application to two distinct subjects; and therefore, when men give that intense application to human art, which is necessary to bring it to its perfection, they are apt to overlook the power and grace of God, without which all art is vain and ineffectual. Agreeably to this, when men of eminent talents have been of service in religion, it has been commonly by the exercise of self-denial, by making a very sparing and moderate use of them, and showing themselves so deeply penetrated with a sense of the important truths of the everlasting gospel, as to despise the beauties and embellishments of human skill, too great an attention to which is evidently inconsistent with the other. Well, say refined observers, this is the very perfection of art to use it with great reserve, and keep it out of view as much as possible. And it is, indeed, the perfection of art to have the appearance of this, but it is peculiar to a renewed heart to have it in reality.

whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, think on these things. But these must surely be explained in such a manner, as to be consistent with the clear and strong passages mentioned above; which is not difficult to do. The matter of many good actions, particularly social virtues, the duties of the second table of the law, wicked men do often approve, nay, they may not only see some beauty, but feel some pleasure in them, from natural tho' un sanctified affections leading to them. But truly good actions, instances of holy obedience to God, in their manner, and in the principles from which they ought to flow, they neither can approve nor perform.

Nothing can be done agreeable to the will of God, but what hath the following properties. It must be done from a sense, not only of the unalterable obligation, but the perfect excellence of the law of God*; renouncing all pretence of merit in the actor †; depending for assistance entirely on divine strength ‡; and with a single eye to the divine glory §. It is not the matter of an action that renders it truly holy, but the prevalence of these principles in the heart of the performer. And they are so far from being generally approved, that they are hated and despised, and the very profession of most of them at least, ridiculed by every worldly man. The truth is, it is not easy to discover these principles otherwise than by narration. They ly deep in the heart, they do not seek to discover themselves, and the shewing them on the stage would be a sort of contradiction to their nature. I believe it would exceed the art of most poets or actors, to exhibit by outward signs, true self-denial, without joining to it such ostentation as would destroy its effect. Or if it could be done, it would be so far from being delightful to those who through the pride of their heart will not seek after God, that it would fill them with disgust or disdain. So that all friends of the stage ought to join with David Hume, who hath excluded self-denial,

* Rom. vii. 12. † Gal. ii. 20. Phil. iii. 8. ‡ John xv. 5.

§ 1 Cor. x. 31. 1 Pet. iv. 11.

denial, humility, and mortification from the number of the virtues, and ranked them among the vices.

From this it appears, that worldly men will bear a form of godliness, but the spirit and power of it they cannot endure. When therefore, the scriptures represent religion, or any part of it, as amiable in the eyes of mankind in general, it is only giving one view of its excellence in itself or in its matter: But this can never be intended to make the judgment of bad men its standard or measure. Or, when the approbation of men is proposed as an argument to duty, it cannot be considered in any other light, than as an assistant subordinate motive to preserve us from its violation; for the scriptures will never warrant us to aim at the praise of men as the reward of our compliance.

If there be any more than what is said above in the testimony which wicked men give in favour of religion, it is but the voice of natural conscience, that is, the voice of God in them; and not their own; and as it is extorted from them against their will, they do all in their power to destroy the force of the evidence. This we may be sensible of, if we will recollect, that it is always general, and that many speak well of something which they call religion, in general, when yet there is hardly any of the servants of God, in whose character and conduct they will not endeavour either to find or make a flaw. The truth is, tho' some few heroes in profanity, vilify religion in itself directly, and in all its parts, the plurality of scoffers only tell you, this and the other thing is not religion, but superstition, preciseness, fancy or whim, and so on. But at the same time, if you take away all that by some or other is reflected on under these appellations, you will leave little behind. Which plainly teaches us this truth, that no man will cordially approve of such a scheme of religion as he does not believe and embrace, or inwardly and without dissimulation applaud a character that is better than his own: at least, than his own either is, or he secretly hopes it to be.

be *. For this reason, the apostle John gives it as a mark or evidence of regeneration, *We know that we have passed from death to life; because we love the brethren*, that is to say, a sincere and prevalent love to a saint as such, can dwell in no heart but that which is sanctified.

It will be proper here to take notice, because it has some relation to this subject, of what the advocates of the stage often make their boast, that before a polished audience things grossly criminal are not suffered to be acted; and that it is one of the rules of the drama, that, if such things be supposed, they must be kept behind the scenes. We are often put in mind of the pure taste of an Athenian audience; who, upon one of the actors

* For ascertaining the sense, and confirming the truth of this passage, it is proper to observe, That by the word [better] is not so much to be understood higher in degree, as different in kind. Tho' even in the first sense, it seems to hold pretty generally, in comparisons between man and man. Men commonly extend their charity to those who have less, and not to those who have more goodness than themselves. There are very few, who, when they see others more strict and regular in their conduct than they are willing to be, do not ascribe it either to weakness, or hypocrisy. Perhaps; indeed, the reason of this may be, that a gradual difference as to the actions done, is considered as constituting a specific difference in the moral character; and men condemn others not for being better than themselves, upon their own notion of goodness, but for placing religion in the extremes which they apprehend ought to be avoided. This confirms the remark made above, that every man's own character is the standard of his approbation, and shows at the same time its consistency with that humility which is essential to every Christian. Wherever there is a real approbation, and sincere confession, of superior worth, there is also an unfeigned imitation of it. The Christian, not only knows himself to be infinitely distant from God, whom yet he supremely loves, but thinks himself less than the least of all saints; but he could neither love the one nor the other, if he had not a real, however distant likeness; if he had not the seeds of every good disposition implanted in him, the growth of which is his supreme desire, and the improvement of which is the constant object of his care and diligence.

tors expressing a profane thought, all rose up and left the theatre. A famous French tragedian, Corneille, also takes notice of it as an evidence of the improvement of the stage in his time, that one of his best written pieces had not succeeded, 'Because it struck the spectators with the horrid idea of a prostitution to which a holy woman had been condemned.' As to the case of the Athenians, it were easy to show from the nature and circumstances of the fact, that this resentment at the profanity of the poet, tho' it was expressed in the theatre, was by no means learned there. But it is needless to enter into any nice disquisition upon this subject, for all that follows from any such instances, is, that there are some things so very gross and shocking, that, as but a few of the most abandoned will commit them, so, the rest of the world can have no delight in beholding them. There is, no doubt, a great variety of characters differing one from another in the degree of their degeneracy, and yet all of them essentially distinct from true piety.

To set this matter in a just light we must remember, that, as has been confessed above, the matter of many good actions, or a defective imperfect form of virtue is approved by the generality of the world; and, that they are very much swayed in their actions by a view to public praise. Therefore, they are mutually checks to one another, and vice is not seen on a theatre in a gross, but commonly in a more dangerous, because an engaging and insinuating form. The presence of so many witnesses does restrain and disguise sin, but cannot change its nature, or render it innocent. The purity of the theatre can never be carried farther by the taste of the audience, than what is required in conversation with the polite and fashionable world. There vice is in some measure restrained; men may be wicked, but they must not be rude. How much this amounts to, is but too well known; it is no more than that we must not disgust those with whom we converse, and varies with their character. This is so far
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from being agreeable to the rules of the gospel, that a serious Christian is often obliged, from a sense of duty, to be guilty of a breach of good manners, by administering unacceptable reproof.

Thus it appears, that, in the stage, the audience gives law to the poet, which is much the same thing as the scholar choosing his own lesson, and whether this be a safe or profitable method of instruction is easy to judge. Every one who knows human nature, especially who believes the representation given of it in Scripture, must conclude, that the young will be seduced into the commission, and the older confirmed and hardened in the practice of sin, because characters fundamentally wrong will be there painted out in an amiable light, and divested of what is most shameful and shocking. By this means conscience, instead of being alarmed and giving faithful testimony, is deceived and made a party in the cause. In short, vice in the theatre must wear the garb, assume the name, and claim the reward of virtue. How strong a confirmation of this have we from experience? Have not plays in fact commonly turned upon the characters most grateful, and the events most interesting to corrupt nature? Pride, under the name of greatness of mind, ambition and revenge, under those of valour and heroism, have been their constant subjects. But chiefly love: this, which is the strongest passion, and the most dangerous in the human frame, and from which the greatest number of crimes, and crimes the most atrocious, have sprung, was always encouraged upon the stage. There, women are swelled with vanity, by seeing their sex always deified and adored; there, men learn the language, as well as feel by sympathy, the transports of that passion; and there, the hearts of both are open and unguarded to receive the impression, because it is covered with a mask of honour. Hath this then been only the case at particular times of occasional corruption, or for want of a proper regulation of the stage? No, It is inseparable from its constitution. Such hath been the nature and tendency of plays in all former ages, and such, from the taste and disposition

of those who attend them, it is certain they will for ever continue to be *.

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* Perhaps, it will be alledged, that the whole force of this reasoning may be evaded, by supposing a stage directed by the magistrate, and supported at the public charge. In this case the performers would be under no temptation, for gain, to gratify the taste of the audience, and the managers would have a quite different intention. It is confessed, that this supposition seems considerably to weaken the arguments above used, though, perhaps, more in theory than it would do in practice. But I would ask any who make such a supposition, Why this inviolable attachment to the stage? Why must so many efforts be made to preserve it in some shape or other? What are its mighty benefits, that it must be forced as it were out of its own natural course in order to make it lawful, rather than we will give it up as pernicious? --- It is also to be observed, that, however useful an ordinance of God magistracy be for public order, there is very little security in the direction of magistrates, for sound and wholesome instruction in religion or morals. We can never depend upon them for this, unless they are themselves persons of true piety, and not always even when that is the case, because they may be guilty of many errors in judgment. Now it is not reasonable to hope, that magistrates, in any country, will be always, or even generally, persons of true piety. Such, with the other qualifications necessary to magistrates, are not always to be found. Neither is there any necessity for it; because, tho' doubtless, those who fear God will be the most faithful magistrates, and the most dutiful subjects, yet the greatest part of the duties of both may be performed without this, in a manner, in which the public will see and feel very little difference. Magistracy has only the outward carriage, and not the heart for its object, and it is the sensible effect which the public looks for, and not the principle from which any thing is done. Therefore, as on the one hand, if a subject obeys the laws, and outwardly fulfills the duties of his station, the magistrate hath nothing farther to demand, tho' it be only for *wrath*, and not for *conscience sake*; so on the other, if a magistrate be diligent in preserving order and promoting the general good, though the motive of his actions be no better than vanity, ambition, or the fear of man well concealed, the public reaps the benefit, and has no ground of complaint, even whilst his character is detestable in the sight of God. But this magistrate can never be safely trusted with the direction of what regards our moral or spiritual improvement, and he would be going out of his own sphere should he attempt it. --- After all, it makes little difference whether the magistrate or any body else directs the stage, while the attendance is voluntary; for in that case, it must either be suited to the taste of the audience, or it will be wholly deserted,

Another argument which shews the stage to be an improper method of instruction, or rather that it is pernicious and hurtful, may be drawn from its own nature. In its most improved state it is a picture of human life, and must represent characters as they really are. An author for the stage is not permitted to feign, but to paint and copy. Tho' he should introduce things or persons ever so excellent, if there were not discerned a resemblance between them and real life, they would be so far from being applauded, that they would not be suffered, but would be condemned as a transgression of the fundamental rules of the art. Now, are not the great majority of characters in real life bad? Must not the greatest part of those represented on the stage be bad? And therefore, must not the strong impression which they make upon the spectators be hurtful in the same proportion?

It is a known truth, established by the experience of all ages, that bad example has a powerful and unhappy influence upon human characters. Sin is of a contagious and spreading nature, and the human heart is but too susceptible of the infection. This may be ascribed to several causes, and to one in particular which is applicable to the present case, That the seeing of sin frequently committed, must gradually abate that horror which we ought to have of it upon our minds, and which serves to keep us from yielding to its sollicitations. Frequently seeing the most terrible objects renders them familiar to our view, and makes us behold them with less emotion. And, from seeing sin without reluctance, the transition is easy, to a compliance with its repeated importunity, especially, as there are latent remaining dispositions to sinning in every heart that is but imperfectly sanctified. It will be difficult to assign any other reason, why wickedness is always carried to a far greater height in large and populous cities, than in the country. Do not multitudes, in places of great resort, come to perpetrate calmly and sedately, without any remorse, such crimes, as would surprize a less know-

ing sinner so much as to hear of? Can it then be safe, to be present at the exhibition of so many vitious characters as always must appear upon the stage? Must it not, like other examples, have a strong, tho' insensible influence, and, indeed, the more strong because unperceived.

Perhaps some will say, This argument draws very deep, it is a reproaching of providence, and finding fault with the order which God hath appointed, at least permitted, to take place in the world, where the very same proportion of wicked characters is to be seen. But is there not a wide difference between the permission of any thing by a wise, holy, and just God, or its making part of the plan of providence, and our presuming to do the same thing, without authority, and when we can neither restrain it within proper bounds, nor direct it to its proper end. There are many things which are proper and competent to God, which it would be the most atrocious wickedness in man to imitate. Because it is both good and just in God to visit us with sickness, or to take us away by death when he sees it proper, would it therefore be lawful in us, to bring any of them upon ourselves at our own pleasure? I should rather be inclined to think, that these sportive representations on the stage, instead of being warranted by their counterpart in the world, are a daring profanation, and, as it were, a mockery of divine providence, and so to be considered in a light yet more dreadful, than any in which they have been hitherto viewed. Besides, it ought to be remembered that, tho' evil actions, as permitted, make a part of the will of God, yet, hitherto, all who deserve the name of Christians have affirmed, that what is sinful in any action is to be ascribed to the will of the creature as its adequate cause; and therefore, exhibiting human actions and characters upon the stage, is, not only representing the works of God, but repeating the sins of men.

The criminal and dangerous nature of such a conduct, will farther appear from this, that it is, by just and necessary consequence,

quence, forbidden in the word of God. There we find, that tho', in his sovereign providence, he permits the commission of sin, suffers his own people to continue mixed with sinners in this state, and makes their connexion with them in some measure unavoidable, as a part of their trial, yet he hath expressly prohibited them from having any more communication with such, than he himself hath made necessary. We are warned in scripture, that *evil communications corrupt good manners*, and therefore, that we must fly the society of the ungodly. The Psalmist tells us, *Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful**. Agreeably to this the characters of good men in scripture are always represented. Thus the Psalmist David records his own resolution, *I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes, I hate the work of them that turn aside, it shall not cleave to me. A froward heart shall depart from me, I will not know a wicked person †* The same says elsewhere, *I am a companion of all them that fear thee, and of them that keep thy precepts ‡*. *Depart from me ye evil doers, for I will keep the commandments of my God ||*.

But there is no need of citing passages of scripture to this purpose; it is well known, that good men, tho' they will be very cautious of rashly determining characters that are doubtful, and will far less discover a proud and pharisaical contempt of any who may yet be vessels of mercy, will however, carefully avoid all unnecessary communication with sinners. They will neither follow their persons from inclination, nor view their conduct with pleasure. On the contrary, when they cannot wholly fly from their society, it becomes a heavy burden, and in some cases intolerable, and so as to require the interposition of the same kind providence that *delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked*. Is there any consistency between such a character, and attending the stage with delight?

Will

* Psal i. 1.

† Psal. cl. 3, 4.

‡ Psal. cxix. 63.

|| Ib. ver. 115.

Will those who behold transgressors, and are grieved, crowd with eagerness to the theatre, where the same persons and actions are brought under a review? Will what affected them with sorrow in the commission, be voluntarily chosen, and made subservient to their pleasure in the repetition?

I cannot help here calling to mind the anxious concern, which wise and pious parents usually shew for their children, on account of the snares to which they are unavoidably exposed in an evil world. How carefully do they point out, and how solemnly do they charge them to shun the paths in which destroyers go. They use this caution with respect to the world, even as under the government of God, and in so doing they follow the example of their Saviour, who, in the prospect of leaving his disciples, after many excellent advices, puts up for them this intercessory prayer; *And now I am no more in this world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep thro' thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are.*—*I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil**. Can any expect that this prayer will be heard in their behalf, who are not content with seeing the world as it is ordered by a wise and holy God, but must see it over again, in a vile imitation, by a sinful man.

It will probably be said, that this strikes as much against History, at least the writing and reading of human, commonly called profane history, as against the writing and seeing of dramatic representations. But the cases are by no means the same; the knowledge of history is, in many respects, necessary for the great purposes of religion. Were not this the case, there would be little difficulty in admitting the consequence. Perhaps, even as it is, it had been better for the world that several ancient facts and characters, which now stand upon record, had been buried

* John xvii. 11, 15.

in oblivion *. At any rate, it may be safely affirmed, that romances and fabulous narrations are a species of composition, from which the world hath received as little benefit, and as much hurt, as any that can be named, excepting plays themselves, to which they are so nearly allied. The first are only exceeded by the last, as to their capacity of doing mischief, by the circumstances of action, and the presence at once of so many persons, among whom, by mutual sympathy, the spiritual poison spreads faster and penetrates deeper.

Least it should be pretended, that such a turn is given to things in the representation, as that, tho' the greatest part of the actions represented are ill in themselves, yet vice is reproached;

* Perhaps, some will be surprized at what is here said on the subject of History, who have not usually viewed it in this light. And, indeed, this is the great difficulty in the whole of the present argument, to overcome strong prepossessions, and to shew men the sin and danger of a practice, which they know to be common, and have been long accustomed to look upon as lawful and safe. For this reason, it is probable, that the best way of proving that the above assertion on the subject of History, is agreeable to scripture and reason, will be, by a case perfectly similar, but more frequently handled. Do not all Christian writers, without exception, who treat of the government of the tongue, lay down this as a rule, that we are not to report the sins of others, tho' we know the truth of the facts, unless where it is necessary to some good end? Now, why should there be any different rule in writing than in conversation? What is done either way is the same in substance, *viz.* communicating information; and writing, which may be called visible speech, is much more lasting in its nature and extensive in its effects. If any ask, How, or why the knowledge of history is necessary to the purposes of religion? I answer, It is necessary for proving the truths of nature, and confirming those of revealed religion, for repelling the attacks of adversaries, and giving us such a view of the plan of Providence, as may excite us to the exercise of the duties of adoration, thankfulness, trust, and submission to the supreme disposer of all events. Real facts only are proper for this purpose, and not feigned stories, in the choice and dressing of which, experience teaches us, the great end is, that man may be pleased, and not that God may be glorified.

ed or ridiculed, virtue set upon a throne, rewarded and honoured; Let it be called to mind, that, as has been shewn above, the author is not left at liberty to do in this as he pleases. He must gratify the public taste, and the rules he is obliged to observe have rather the contrary effect. For he must divest his bad characters of what is most horrid and shocking, and present them less deformed than they really are. Besides, tho' he may conceal a part, he must not alter nature so far as he goes, but take it as he finds it. Accordingly, some of our modern critics tell us, that there ought to be no particular moral in a dramatic performance, because that is a departure from nature, and so not in taste.

It ought not to be forgotten, that attending dramatic representations is not only seeing a great plurality of bad characters without necessity, and seeing them with patience, but it is seeing them with pleasure. Whether or not entertainment be yielded to be the only or ultimate effect of plays, surely, it cannot be denied to be one effect sought and expected from them, and from every part of them. An actor is as much applauded, and gives as much pleasure to the spectators, when he represents a bad character to the life, as a good. Is there no danger then, that a heart softened by delight, should be more liable to infection from evil than at other times? Is there no danger, that an association should be formed in the mind, between the sense of pleasure and the commission of sin? Will any person affirm, that, in such circumstances, he feels that holy indignation against sin, which every Christian ought to conceive upon seeing it committed? Or, that he is able to preserve that awe and fear, which he ought to have of the just judgment of God, when he sees the crimes that merit it boldly re-acted, and finely mimicked in a personated character.

So far is this from being the case, that every person attending the representation of a play, enters in some measure himself, as well as the actors, into the spirit of each character, and the

more

more so the better the action is performed. His attention is strongly fixed, his affections are seized and carried away, and a total forgetfulness of every thing takes place, except what is immediately before him. Can the various passions be so strongly excited as they are sometimes known to be, and no effect remain? Will not the passion of love, for example, after it has been strongly felt by the spectator in sympathy with the actor, be a little more ready to recur, especially as nature prompts, and various solliciting objects are daily presented to his eyes? The author terminates his plot as he sees best, and draws what conclusions he thinks proper from his characters, but he has no reason to think, that he can controul the passions which he raises in the spectators in the same manner, and not suffer them to exceed the bounds of his description. Will not the passion of revenge, that right hand of a false greatness of mind, after it has been strongly excited in the theatre, be apt to rise again upon every real or supposed provocation? Some learned observers of nature tell us, that every passion we feel causes a new modification of the blood and spirits; if there is any truth in this, then every passion excited in the theatre takes possession for a time of the very animal frame, makes a seat to itself, and prepares for a speedy return.

Having thus endeavoured to shew, that the stage, whether amusement or instruction be aimed at in it, cannot be attended by any Christian without sin; there is a third general argument against it, which merits consideration. It is, that no person can contribute to the encouragement of the stage, without being partaker of the sins of others. This is proper to be attended to, as it is against a public theatre that the arguments in this essay are chiefly levelled; so that, if it be criminal at all, every person attending it, is not only faulty by his own proper conduct, but is farther chargeable with the guilt of seducing others. Besides without this, the argument, to some, would not be altogether compleat, for after all that has been advanced, there

may be a few, who in a good measure yield it to be true, and yet have another subterfuge remaining. They acknowledge, perhaps, that it is a most hazardous amusement, to which others ought ordinarily to be preferred; That the bulk of plays will, much more probably, pollute than improve the far greatest part of those who attend them. Yet still, they are apt to figure to themselves particular cases as exceptions from the general rule, and to suppose, there are *some* plays which may be attended, or at least, that there are *some* persons who have so much clearness of judgment, and so much constancy in virtue, as to separate the corn from the chaff. At a particular time, they suppose, a person of this kind may, without receiving any hurt, be improved by the fine sentiments contained in plays; and also learn something, to be applied to other purposes, of that force and justness of action, that grace and beauty of behaviour, which is no where seen in so great perfection as on the stage.

Upon this subject in general, it may be affirmed, that those who have this confidence in the strength of their own virtue, are far from being the persons who may be most safely trusted in a place of danger. On the contrary, those will probably be most truly steadfast, when exposed to temptation, who are most diffident of themselves, and do not wantonly run into it. Yet, since some may take encouragement from such apprehensions, it is proper to observe, that, tho' there were truth in their pretence, yet would it not therefore be lawful for them to attend the theatre. They could not do so without contributing to the sins of others, a thing expressly prohibited in the holy scriptures, and, indeed, diametrically opposite to the two principal branches of true religion, concern for the glory of God, and compassion to the souls of men.

There are two ways in which the occasional attending of plays, by those who are of good character, even supposing it not hurtful to themselves, contributes to the sins of others.

(1.) By supporting the players in that unchristian occupation.

(2.)

(2.) Encouraging, by their example, those to attend all plays indiscriminately, who are in most danger of infection.

First, It contributes to support the players in an unchristian occupation. After what has been said above, and which I now take for granted, on the impropriety of plays as an amusement, and the impossibility of furnishing a stage with nothing but found and wholesome productions, little doubt can remain, that the occupation of players is inconsistent with the character of a Christian. Whatever occasional presence may be to some spectators, continual performing can never be lawful to the actors. On the very best supposition, it is a life of perpetual amusement, which is equally contrary to reason and religion. It is a mean prostitution of the rational powers, to have no higher end in view, than contributing to the pleasure and entertainment of the idle part of mankind, and, instead of taking amusement with the moderation of a Christian, to make it the very business and employment of life. How strange a character does it make for one to live, in a manner, perpetually in a mask, to be much oftener in a personated than in a real character? And yet this is the case with all players, if, to the time spent in the representation, you add that which is necessary to prepare for their public appearances. What foul polluted minds must these be, which are such a receptacle of foreign vanities, besides their own natural corruption, and where one system or plan of folly is obliterated only to make way for another.

But the life of players is not only idle and vain, and therefore inconsistent with the character of a Christian, but it is still more directly and grossly criminal. We have seen above, that, not only from the taste of the audience, the prevailing tendency of all successful plays must be bad, but that, in the very nature of the thing, the greatest part of the characters represented must be vicious. What then is the life of a player? It is wholly spent in endeavouring to express the language, and exhibit a perfect picture of the passions of vicious men. For this purpose, they must

strive to enter into the spirit, and feel the sentiments proper to such characters. Unless they do so, the performance will be quite faint and weak, if not wholly faulty and unnatural. And can they do this so frequently without retaining much of the impression, and, at last, becoming in truth what they are so often in appearance, Do not the characters of all men take a tincture from their employment and way of life? How much more must theirs be infected, who are conversant, not in outward occupations, but in characters themselves, the actions, passions and affections of men? If their performances touch the audience so sensibly, and produce in them so lasting an effect, how much more must the same effects take place in themselves, whose whole time is spent in this manner.

This is so certain, and, at the same time so acknowledged a truth, that even those who are fondest of theatrical amusements, do yet, still, esteem the employment of players a mean and fordid profession. Their character has been infamous in all ages, just a living copy of that vanity, obscenity, and impiety which, is to be found in the pieces which they represent. As the world has been polluted by the stage, so they have always been more eminently so, as it is natural to suppose, being the very cisterns in which this pollution is collected, and from which it is distributed to others. It makes no difference in the argument, that we must here suppose the stage to be regulated and improved, for, as it has been shown, that it can never be so regulated as to be safe for the spectators, it must be always worse for the actors, between whom and the audience the same proportion will still remain. Can it then be lawful in any to contribute, in the least degree, to support men in this unhallowed employment? Is not the theatre, truly and essentially, what it has been often called rhetorically, the school of impiety, where it is their very business to learn wickedness? And will a Christian, upon any pretended advantage to himself, join in this confederacy against
God,

God, and assist in endowing and upholding the dreadful seminary?

Secondly, Men of good character going occasionally to the theatre contributes to the sins of others, by emboldening those to attend all plays indiscriminately, who are in most danger of infection. If there be any at all, especially if there be a great number, to whom the stage is noxious and sinful, every one without exception is bound to abstain. The apostle Paul expressly commands the Corinthians to abstain from lawful things, when their using them would make their brother to offend, that is to say, would lead him into sin. *But take heed, lest by any means, this liberty of yours become a stumbling-block to them that are weak. For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idols temple, shall not the conscience of him that is weak, be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols? And thro' thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died. But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend*.*

There are many who seem to have entirely forgot that this precept is to be found in the word of God, and discover not the least sence of their obligation to comply with it. If, by any plausible pretences, they imagine they can vindicate their conduct with regard to themselves, or palliate it with excuses, they are quite unmindful of the injury which they do to others. I speak not here of offending, in the sence in which that word is commonly, tho' unjustly taken, as displeasing others. Such as are displeas'd with the conduct of those who attend the theatre, because they esteem it to be sinful, are not thereby offended in the Scripture sence of that word, except in so far, as some few of them are provok'd to unchristian resentment, or induced to draw rash and general conclusions, from the indiscretion of particular

ticular persons, to the prejudice of whole orders of men. But vast multitudes are truly offended or made to offend, as they are led into a practice, which, whatever it be to those who set the example, is undoubtedly pernicious to them. Is it possible to deny, that, under the best regulation of the theatre that can reasonably be hoped for, to great numbers it must be hurtful, especially as it is enticing to all? And, if that be but allowed, persons of character and reputation cannot attend without contributing to the mischief that is done.

Perhaps it will be objected to this application of the passage of scripture cited above, that the particular danger there pointed out by the apostle, is inducing men to venture upon a practice with a doubting conscience. I think it highly probable, that this very precise case happens with many, who go to the theatre following the example of others. They are not entirely satisfied of its lawfulness, they still have some inward reluctance of mind, but adventure to gratify a carnal inclination, being emboldened by the example of those who are esteemed men of understanding and worth. But, even where their implicit trust is so strong as fully to satisfy them, and set their minds at ease, the apostle's argument holds with equal force, if, thereby, they are unavoidably led into sin.

This will probably be looked upon as a very hard law, and it will be asked, Is a man, then, never to do any thing that he has reason to believe will be misinterpreted, or abused by others to their own hurt? The hardness of the law will wholly vanish, if we remember, that it is confined to things indifferent in their nature. In duties binding of their own nature, we are under no obligation to pay any regard to the opinions of others, or the consequences of our conduct upon them. But in things originally indifferent, which become duties, or not, precisely on account of their consequences, there, we are to beware of making our brother to offend. The scripture rule is this, We must not commit the least sin under pretence of the most important

end, tho' it were to save multitudes from sins incomparably more heinous. But in matters of indifference, we are not to value the most beloved enjoyment so highly, as to endanger the salvation of one human soul by ensnaring it into sin. And can a real believer have the smallest objection, the least rising thought, against this equitable law? Shall we value any present gratification equally, nay, shall we once put it in the ballance with the spiritual interest of an immortal soul? Now, who will be so shameless as to assert, that attending a public stage is to him a necessary duty? Or what defender of the stage will be so sanguine as to affirm, that it is, or that he hopes to see it regulated so as to be safe or profitable to every mind? And yet till this is the case, it evidently stands condemned by the apostolic rule.

Since writing the above, I have met with a pamphlet just published, entitled, *The Morality of Stage-plays seriously considered*. This author convinces me, that I have, without sufficient ground, supposed, that no body would affirm attending plays to be a necessary duty; for he has either done it, or gone so very near it, that probably, the next author upon the same side will do it in plain terms, and assert, that all above the station of tradesmen who do not go to the play-house, are living in the habitual neglect of their duty, and sinning grievously against God. If this looks ridiculous, it is none of my fault, for I speak it seriously; and it is a much more natural consequence from his reasoning, than any he has drawn from it himself.

He considers the passage of the apostle Paul, and says, (which is true) that it holds only in the case of indifferent actions, but that we are to 'do good in the face of prejudice.' The way in which he shews it to be doing good, is pretty singular, but I pass it by for a little, and observe, that probably, he is not much accustomed to commenting on such passages of scripture, for, even granting his unreasonable supposition, doing good indefinitely is not opposed to indifferent actions in this, or any similar case. An action that is good in itself is indifferent when it may be exchanged for another; when one as good, or

better, may be put in its place. Nothing is opposed to indifferent actions here, but what is indispensibly necessary, and absolutely binding, both in itself, and in its circumstances. And indeed, tho' he is afraid at first to say so, he seems to carry the matter that length at last, making his conclusion a little broader than the premises, and saying in the close of the paragraph upon that subject, 'What they do to this purpose, either in opposing the bad, or promoting the good, is MATTER OF DUTY, and their conduct in it is not to be regulated by the opinion of any person who is pleased to take offence*.'

But how shall we refute this new and wonderful doctrine of its being necessary that good men should attend the theatre. I cannot think of a better way of doing it, than tearing off some of the drapery of words, with which it is adorned and disguised, and setting his own assertions together in the form of a syllogism, 'The manager of every theatre must suit his entertainments to the company, and, if he is not supported by the grave and sober, he must suit himself to the licentious and prophane.' — 'We know that in every nation there must be amusements and public entertainments, and the stage has always made one in every civilized and polished nation. We cannot hope to abolish it.'

— *Ergo*, According to this author, it is the duty of good men to attend the stage. But I leave the reader to judge, Whether, from the first of his propositions, which is a certain truth, it is not more just to infer, that, till the majority of those who attend the stage are good, its entertainment cannot be fit for a Christian ear; and, because that will never be, no Christian ought to go there.

And what a shameful begging of the question is his second proposition, 'That we cannot hope to abolish it.' It is hard to tell what we may hope for in this age, but we insist that it ought to be abolished. Nay, we do hope to abolish it just as much as other vices; we cannot hope to see the time when there shall be no gaming, cheating or lying, but we must still preach against

against all such vices, and will never exhort good men to go to gaming tables, to persuade them to play fair, and lessen the wickedness of the practice. In short, it is a full refutation of the extravagant assertion of good men being obliged, as matter of duty, to go to the theatre, that no such thing is commanded in the word of God, and therefore it is not, and cannot be necessary to any †. And, since it is evidently pernicious to great numbers, it can be lawful to none.

It would give Christians a much more just, as well as more extensive view of their duty, than they commonly have, if they would consider their relation to, and necessary influence on one another. All their visible actions have an effect upon others as well as themselves. Every thing we see or hear makes some impression on us, though for the most part unperceived, and we contribute, every moment, to form each others character. What a melancholy view, then, does it give us of the state of religion among us at present, that, when piety towards God has been excluded from many moral systems, and the whole of virtue confined to the duties of social life, the better half of these also should be cut of, and all regard to the souls of others forgotten or derided. Nothing, indeed, is left but a few expressions of compliment, a few insignificant offices of present conveniency: For that which some modern refiners have dignified with the name of virtue, is nothing else but polished luxury, a flattering of each other in their vices, a provocation of each other to sensual indulgence, and that *friendship of the world, which is enmity with God.*

I would now ask the reader, after perusing the preceding arguments against the stage, Whether he is convinced that it is inconsistent with the character of a Christian, or not? If he shall

† It is proper here to remark, how natural it was to suppose, that the argument would be carried this length, when the stage came to be pled for as useful in promoting the interests of virtue. And therefore I have, above, taken notice, that these prophets run silent, the propriety of which remark will more clearly appear.

shall answer in the negative, if he has still some remaining argument in its defence, or some method, which has not occurred to me, to take off the force of the reasoning, I would next ask, Whether it does not at least render it a doubtful point? Whether, joined with the concurrent testimony of the best and wisest men in all ages against it, as it appeared among them, and the impurity and corruption that still attends it, there is not at least some ground of hesitation? And, if so much be but allowed, it becomes on this very account unlawful to every Christian, who takes the word of God for the rule of his conduct. There, clear evidence, and full persuasion is required before an action can be lawful, and where doubt arises we are commanded to abstain. *Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth: and he that doubteth is damned, if he eat: because he eateth not of faith, for whatsoever is not of faith is sin*.*

Hitherto we have reasoned against what is called a *well-regulated stage*. That is to say, instead of attacking the corruptions which now adhere to it, we have endeavoured to show, that from the purpose intended by it, from the present state and general taste of mankind, and the nature of the thing itself, a public theatre is not capable of such a regulation, as to make it consistent with the purity of the Christian profession to attend or support it. If any complain, that part of the above reasoning is too abstracted, and not quite level to the apprehension of every reader, let it be remembered, that it is directed against an idea so abstracted, that it never yet did, and, from what we have seen, there is reason to believe it never can exist. It is indeed altogether imaginary, and is drest up by every author who defends it, in the manner and form that best pleases himself; so that it is infinitely less difficult to refute or shew the unlawfulness of a well-regulated stage, than to know what it is.

If the authors on this subject would enter into particulars, and give us a list of the useful and instructive plays with which

our stage is to be served; lay down a plan of strict discipline, for introducing and preserving piety and purity among the actors; and shew us by whom the managers are to be chosen, and their fidelity tried, with some general rules for their conduct; it might soon be determined by plain and simple arguments, Whether such an entertainment could be safely permitted to a Christian, or not. But, when they give us no farther account of it, than by calling it a stage properly regulated, they involve themselves, at once, in obscurity, as to the very subject of their discourse. It is no wonder then, that they can make a parade with a few glittering, unmeaning phrases, as, picture of nature, moral lecture, amiable character, compassion for virtue in distress, decency of the drama, and several others. We are put to a stand what to say to such things, for if we speak of the impure sentiments of authors, or the wanton gesticulations of actors, all these are immediately given up, and yet the fort remains as entire as ever. Therefore, the method taken in this treatise, with all the disadvantages that attend it, was look'd upon to be the best and the clearest that could be chosen; to show, that those from whom a reformation of the stage must come, are neither able nor willing to make it; that the very materials of which this fine system is to consist are naught, and therefore, so must the product be always found upon trial.

It may indeed be matter of wonder, that among the many schemes and projects daily offered to the consideration of the public, there has never been any attempt to point out a plausible way, how the stage may be brought into, and kept in such a state of regulation, as to be consistent with the Christian character. There have been attempts to show how money may be in a manner created, and the national debt paid, or the annual supplies raised, without burdening the subject. Some, who have nothing of their own, have endeavoured to persuade the rest of mankind, that it is the easiest thing imaginable to grow rich in a few years, with little labour, by the improvement of moose, or bees. But none, so far as I have heard or seen, have

been so bold as to lay down a distinct plan for the improvement of the stage. When this is added to the considerations already mentioned, it will confirm every impartial person in the belief, that such improvement is not to be expected.

I hope therefore, there may now be some prospect of success, in warning every one who wishes to be esteemed a disciple of Christ against the stage, as it hitherto has been, and now is. Experience is of all others the surest test of the tendency of any practice. It is still more to be depended on than the most plausible and apparently conclusive reasoning, upon what hath never yet been tried. Let us then consider, what hath been the spirit and tendency of almost the whole plays which have been represented, from time to time, upon the stage. Have not love and intrigue been their perpetual theme, and that not in a common and an orderly way, but with resistance and impediments, such as, rivalry and jealousy, the opposition of parents, and other things of a similar nature, that the passions may be strongly excited; and that the force of love, and its triumph over every obstacle, may be set before the audience as a lesson? Is not the polite well-bred man the hero of such plays, a character formed upon the maxims of the world, and chiefly such of them as are most contrary to the gospel? Are not unchristian resentment and false honour the characteristics of every such person?

What is the character of a clergyman when it is taken from the stage? If the person introduced is supposed to possess any degree of ability, hypocrisy is the leading part of the character. But for the most part, awkwardness, ignorance, dullness and pedantry are represented as inseparable from men of that function. This is not done to correct these faults when appearing in some of that profession, by comparing them with others free from such reproachful defects, but it is the character of the clergyman in general, who is commonly introduced single, and compared with the men acquainted with the world, very little to his advantage. The truth is, it seems to be a maxim with dramatic authors, to strip men of every profession of their several

excellencies, that the rake may be adorned with the spoils: even learning is commonly ascribed to him; how consistently with truth or nature, and consequently with taste itself, I leave the reader to determine.

And where can the plays be found, at least comedies, that are free from impurity, either directly, or by allusion and double meaning? It is amazing to think, that women who pretend to decency and reputation, whose brightest ornament ought to be modesty, should continue to abet, by their presence, so much unchastity, as is to be found in the theatre. How few plays are acted which a modest woman can see, consistently with decency in every part? and even when the plays are more reserved themselves, they are sure to be seasoned with something of this kind, in the prologue, or epilogue, the music between the acts, or in some scandalous farce with which the diversion is concluded. The power of custom and fashion is very great, in making people blind to the most manifest qualities and tendencies of things. There are ladies who frequently attend the stage, who if they were but once entertained with the same images in a private family, with which they are often presented there, would rise with indignation, and reckon their reputation ruined if ever they should return. I pretend to no knowledge of these things, but from printed accounts, and the public bills of what plays are to be acted, sometimes by the particular desire of ladies of quality, and yet may safely affirm, that no woman of reputation (as it is called in the world) much less of piety, who has been ten times in a play-house, durst repeat in company all that she has heard there. With what consistency they gravely return to the same schools of lewdness, they themselves best know.

It ought to be considered, particularly with regard to the younger of both sexes, that, in the theatre, their minds must insensibly acquire an inclination to romance and extravagance, and be unfitted for the sober and serious affairs of common life. Common or little things give no entertainment upon the stage, except when they are ridiculed. There must always be something

grand, surprizing and striking. In comedies, when all obstacles are removed, and the marriage is agreed on, the play is done. This gives the mind such a turn that it is apt to despise ordinary business as mean or deride it as ridiculous. Ask a merchant whether he chooses, that his apprentices should go to learn exactness and frugality from the stage. Or, whether he expects the most punctual payments from those whose generosity is strengthened there, by weeping over virtue in distress. Suppose a matron coming home from the theatre filled with the ideas that are there impressed upon the imagination, how low and contemptible do all the affairs of her family appear, and how much must she be disposed, (besides the time already consumed), to forget or misguide them?

The actors themselves are a signal proof of this. How seldom does it happen, if ever, that any of them live sober and regular lives, pay their debts with honesty, or manage their affairs with discretion? They are originally men of the same composition with others, but their employment wholly incapacitates them for prudence or regularity, gives them a dissipation of mind and unstaidness of spirit, so that they cannot attend to the affairs of life. Nay, if I am rightly informed, that variety of characters which they put on in the theatre deprives them of common sense, and leaves them in a manner no character at all of their own. It is confidently said, by those who have thought it worth while to make the trial, that nothing can be more insipid than the conversation of a player on any other subject than that of his profession. I cannot indeed answer for this remark, having it only by report, and never having exchanged a word with one of that employment in my life. However, if it holds, a degree of the same effect must necessarily be wrought upon those who attend the stage.

But folly or bad management is not all that is to be laid to the charge of players: They are almost universally vitious, and of such abandoned characters, as might justly make those who defend the age ashamed to speak of learning virtue under such

masters. Can men learn piety from the profane, mortification from the sensual, or modesty from harlots? And will any deny that hired stage-players have always, and that deservedly, born these characters? Nay, tho' it could be supposed, that the spectators received no hurt to themselves, how is it possible that the performances of such persons can be attended, or their trade encouraged without sin?

This shews also, that attending a good play, even supposing there were a few unexceptionable, cannot be vindicated upon Christian principles. It is pled for the new tragedy lately introduced into our theatre, that it is an attempt to reform the stage, and make it more innocent, or more useful. What this piece is in itself, no body can say with certainty till it be published, tho' the account given of it by report is not exceeding favourable. But, let it be ever so excellent in itself, the bringing of one good play upon the stage is altogether insufficient; nay, is a method quite improper for reforming it. An author of a truly good piece would rather bury it in oblivion, than lend his own credit, and that of his work, for the support of those that are bad. A Christian can never attend the stage, consistently with his character, till the scheme in general be made innocent or useful. He must not sin himself, nor contribute to the sins of others, in a certain degree, because, unless he do so, they will sin without him in a higher degree. In short, such an attempt can be considered in no other light, than as encouraging a pernicious practice, and supporting a criminal association. The better the play is, or the better the characters of those who attend it are, the greater the mischief, because the stronger the temptation to others who observe it.

There is one inducement to attendance on the stage which hath more influence than all the arguments with which its advocates endeavour to colour over the practice: That it is become a part of fashionable education. Without it young persons of rank think they cannot have that knowledge of the

world which is necessary to their accomplishment; that they will be kept in rusticity of carriage, or narrowness of mind, than which nothing is more contemptible in the eyes of the rest of mankind; that they will acquire the character of stiff and precise, and be incapable of joining in polite conversation, being ignorant of the topics upon which it chiefly turns. No better than these, it is to be feared, are the reasons that many parents suffer their children to attend this and other fashionable diversions. How then shall we remove this difficulty? Why truly, by saying with the apostle John, to such as will receive it, *All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world**. It is certainly the greatest madness to seek the knowledge of the world by partaking with the wicked in their sins. Whatever knowledge cannot otherwise be acquired, is shameful, and not honourable. How cruel then are these parents, who, instead of endeavouring to inspire their children with a holy and manly resolution, of daring to appear singular in an adherence to their duty, suffer them to be plunged in sin, that they may not be defective in politeness. Why should the world, or any thing else, be known, but in order to our spiritual improvement †? Therefore

* 1 John ii. 16.

† This is not meant to condemn all human accomplishments, which have not an immediate reference to our religious improvement, but to affirm, that they ought to be kept in a just subordination and subserviency, to the great and chief end of man. There are, no doubt, a great number of arts, both useful and ornamental, which have other immediate effects, than to make men holy; and, because they are, by the greatest part of the world, abused to the worst of purposes, they are considered as having no connexion with religion at all. But this is a mistake; for a good man will be directed in the choice and application of all such arts, by the general and leading purpose of his life. And, as he who eats for no other or higher end than pleasing his palate, is justly condemned as a mean and grovelling sensualist, so, whoever has no farther view in his education and accomplishment, than to shine and make a figure in the fashionable world, does not so that act the part of a Christian. In short, these arts are among the

fore, all that is truly valuable, must, by the very supposition, be innocently learned, and to bear with a noble disdain the scoffs of more experienced sinners is the greatest glory.

Like to the above is another argument in favour of the stage, that men must have amusements, and, that the stage is much better than many others, which would probably be put in its place. It is said, that of all the time spent by the fashionable part of the world, at present, in diversions, that which they allot to the stage is most innocently, or least hurtfully employed. Is there any more in this, than a declaration of the shameful luxury and degeneracy of the present age, an alarming token of approaching judgment? Do not such persons know, that all serious Christians condemn every one of these criminal pleasures, and will never allow it as any advantage to exchange one of them for another. But it is less surprising to hear such palliative arguments used in conversation: an author above referred to has been bold enough in print, to reason in the same way. He says, 'That no abuse was ever admitted on any stage, but might pass for perfect decency, when compared to what may have been often heard of, at a gossiping, a merry-making, or a meeting of young fellows †.' Again, after telling us, that we cannot hope to abolish the stage, he says, 'And if we could, we should only make way for the return of drunkenness, gaming, and rude cabals, which the more decent conversation and manners of civilized times have in a great measure abolished.' I lay hold of this gentleman's reasoning, who pleads for civilizing the world, and not sanctifying it, as a confession of the weakness of his cause, and a confirmation of all the arguments adduced in this treatise against the stage. For, if he meant to show, that stage-plays

were
number of indifferent things, which should be supremely and ultimately directed to the glory of God. When they are not capable of this, either immediately, or remotely, much more when they are contrary to it, they must be condemned.

were agreeable to the purity of the gospel, that drunkenness, is worse (if indeed it be so) could be no evidence of it at all. He must therefore, if he speaks to any purpose, plead for the toleration of sinful diversions, because they are comparatively less sinful than others; and if that is the case, I detest his principles, and so will every Christian.

Having mentioned this author, perhaps it may be expected, that I should take some notice of the other arguments brought by him in defence of the stage. It is not easy either to enumerate, or comprehend them, they are thrown together in such confusion, and expressed in such vague and general terms. He says, (page 3d) 'The people of this island are not inferior to those of any other age or country whatever. This will be a presumption, that if plays are a poison, it is at least but slow in its operation.' And (p. 17.) 'We may venture to ask, Whether knowledge, whether industry and commerce have declined in this city (Edinburgh) since the play-house was first opened here. It will be owned, that they have rather increased.' I would venture to ask, What sort of an argument this is, and what follows from it, tho' both his assertions were allowed to be true, which yet may easily be in many respects controverted. If the stage, as he would insinuate, be the cause of our improvement, then is his argument self-contradictory, for we ought to be greatly inferior in purity to the people of other countries, who have enjoyed the reforming stage much longer, which is contrary to his supposition. The truth is, the stage is not the cause, but the consequence of wealth; and it is neither the cause nor consequence of goodness or knowledge, except in so far as it certainly implies more knowledge than uncultivated savages possess, and is only to be found in what this author calls civilized nations. How easy were it for me to name several vices unknown to Barbarians, which prevail in places of taste and polished manners. Should I at the same time insinuate, that these vices have contributed to improve us in knowledge and

taste, it would be just such an argument as is here used in favour of the stage, and the plain meaning of both is, the abuse of knowledge is the cause of it.

It were worth while to consider a little our improvements in knowledge in this age, which are often the boast of not the most knowing writers. Perhaps it may be allowed, that there is now in the world a good deal of knowledge of different kinds, but it is plain we owe it to the labours of our predecessors, and not our own. And therefore, it is to be feared, we may improve it no better than many young men do, who come to the easy possession of wealth of their father's getting. They neither know the worth nor the use of it, but squander it idly away, in the most unprofitable or hurtful pursuits. It is, doubtless, an easy thing at present, to acquire a superficial knowledge, from Magazines, Reviews, Dictionaries, and other helps to the slothful student. He is now able, at a very small expence, to join the beau and the scholar, and triumphs in the taste of this enlightened age, of which he hath the comfort to reflect, that he himself makes a part. But, for our mortification, let us recollect, that, as several writers have observed, human things never continue long at a stand. There is commonly a revolution of knowledge and learning, as of riches and power. For as states grow up from poverty to industry, wealth, and power, so, from these they proceed to luxury, and vice, and by them are brought back to poverty and subjection. In the same manner, with respect to learning, men rise from ignorance to application, from application to knowledge, this ripens into taste and judgment, then, from a desire of distinguishing themselves, they supperadd affected ornaments, become more fanciful than solid, their taste corrupts with their manners, and they fall back into the gulph of ignorance. The several steps of these gradations commonly correspond; and if we desire to know in what period of each, we of this nation are at present, it is probable, we are in the age of luxury as to the first, and, in the eye at least, of a false and frothy taste as to learn-

learning, and may therefore fear, that as a late very elegant writer expresses it, We shall relapse fast into Barbarism.

Another argument adduced by this author, is, that the apostle Paul, in preaching at Athens, quotes a sentence from one of the Greek poets, and, in writing to the Corinthians, has inserted into the sacred text a line from a Greek play which now subsists.— ‘ This, (he says), is sufficient to connect the defence of plays with the honour of scripture itself.’ The fact is not denied, though he has given but a poor specimen of the knowledge of this age, by mistaking, in the first of these remarks, the expression quoted by the apostle: for, this sentence, *In him we live, and move, and have our being*, which, he says, is a very sublime expression, and beautifully applied by the apostle, was not cited from the poet, but the following, *For we are also his offspring*. But supposing he had, (as he easily might) have hit upon the true citation, What follows from it? Did ever any body affirm, that no poet could write, or no player could speak any thing that was true? And what is to hinder an inspired writer from judging them out of their own mouths? What concern has this with the stage? If it implies any defence of the stage in general, it must imply a stronger defence of the particular play and poem, from which the citations are taken. Now, I dare say, neither this author, nor any other will assert, that these are in all respects agreeable to the Christian character. These citations do no other way connect the defence of the stage with the honour of scripture, than a minister’s citing, in writing or discourse, a passage from Horace or Juvenal, would connect the defence of all the obscenity that is to be found in the rest of their works, with the honour of preaching.

The only thing further in this essay not obviated in the preceding discourse, is what he says on the subject of the poor. ‘ That the expence laid out on the stage does not hinder the charitable supply of the poor, and that they suffer no loss by it, for it comes at last into the hands of the poor, and is paid

‘ as the price of their labour.—Every player must be maintained, clothed and lodged.’ It does not suit with any present purpose to enter into controversial altercation, or to treat this author with that severity he deserves ; and therefore I shall only say, that his reasoning upon this subject is the very same from which doctor Mandeville draws this absurd and hated consequence, ‘ Private vices are public benefits.’

The truth is, a serious person can scarce have a stronger evidence of the immorality of the stage, than the perusal of these little pieces of satyr, which have been published, in so great a variety, against the presbytery of Edinburgh, within these few weeks, because of their public admonition against it. They offer no other defence, but deriding the preaching of the gospel, blasphemously comparing the pulpit with the stage, and recrimination upon some who are supposed to live inconsistently with their character. It is not worth while to spend three words in determining, whether drunkenness, deceit and hypocrisy are worse than the stage or not, but if that is the strongest argument that can be offered in its support, wo to all those who attend it. The new reformed tragedy, has, indeed, been very unlucky in its advocates. There is an old saying, that a man is known by his company. If this be true also of a play, which one would think it should, as it must be chiefly to the taste of congenial minds, by those who have appeared in defence of Douglass, it is a work of very little merit.

It may be expected, that, having brought this performance on the field, I should add some further reflections, upon the aggravated sin of *ministers* writing plays, or attending the stage. But, though it is a very plain point, and indeed because it is so, it would draw out this treatise to an immoderate length. If any man makes a question of this, he must be wholly ignorant of the nature, and importance of the ministerial character and office. These therefore it would be necessary to open up distinctly, and to consider the solemn charge given to ministers in scripture, to

watch over the souls of their people, as those *who must give an account unto God*; to give themselves wholly to their duty, since some of those committed to them are, from day to day, entering on an unchangeable state, whose blood, when they die unconverted, shall be required at the hand of the unfaithful pastor. None can entertain the least doubt upon this subject, who believe the testimony of Moses and the prophets, of Christ and his apostles, and, if they believe not their writings, neither will they believe my words.

Instead therefore of endeavouring to prove, I will make bold to affirm, that writing plays is an employment wholly foreign to the office, and attending theatrical representations an entertainment unbecoming the character of a minister of Christ? And must not both, or either of them be a sacrilegious abstraction of that time and pains, which ought to have been laid out for the benefit of his people? Is it not also flying in the face of a clear and late act of parliament, agreeably to which the lords of council and session not long ago found the stage contrary to law, in this country? And tho' the law is eluded, and the penalty evaded, by advertising a concert after which will be performed *gratis*, a tragedy, &c. Yet, surely, the world in judging of characters, or a church court in judging of the conduct of its members, will pay no regard to the poor and shameful evasion. Can we then think of this audacious attempt at the present juncture, without applying to ourselves the words of Isaiah, *And in that day did the Lord God of hosts call to weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth, and behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen and killing sheep, eating flesh and drinkin wine; let us eat and drink for to morrow we die. And it was revealed in mine ears by the Lord of hosts, surely, this iniquity shall not be purged from you till ye die, saith the Lord of hosts, Isa. xxii. 12, 13, 14.*



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