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ESSAY UPON WIT

by

Sir Richard Blackmore

1716

With Commentary by Joseph Addison (*Freeholder*, No. 45, 1716) and an Introduction by Richard C. Boys

Series One: Essays on Wit No. 1

Sir Richard Blackmore's *Essay upon Wit* (1716)

and

Joseph Addison's *Freeholder*, No. 45 (1716)

With an Introduction by
Richard C. Boys

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Introduction

The battle between the puritans and the sophisticates is never ending. At certain stages of cultural development the worldly wise are in the ascendent in the literary world, as they were in the Restoration and after the first World War. Yet those with a more sober view of life are never submerged, even when they are overshadowed. The court of the restored Charles gave full play to the indelicacy of Rochester, Dryden, and their circles, but most of their contemporaries were probably more content to read George Herbert, Quercus, Baxter, and Bunyan. Though the fashionable and urbane remained dominant in letters through the age of Dryden, the forces of morality were rallying, and after 1688 the court (with which Blackmore was connected) threw its weight on the side of virtue. Jeremy Collier was but the most important voice of a great movement, destined to have its effect on literature.

Sir Richard Blackmore contributed his share to the growing wave of bourgeois morality, which in the 18th century was reflected in the middle-class appeal of Addison and Steele, Lillo's *London Merchant*, and Richardson's almost feminine plea for virtue rewarded. A physician, Blackmore had turned to poetry for relaxation and composed his soporific epics, by his own admission, in the coffee-houses and in his coach while visiting patients. In the preface, to *Prince Arthur* (1695) the City Bard took occasion to flay the Wits of the day for their immorality, an attack which he followed up in 1697 with the Preface to *King Arthur*, whose thinly disguised political allegory won him a knighthood. Up to this point the Wits had treated him with amused scorn, but when he called his big guns into action in the *Satyr against Wit* (dated 1700 but issued late in 1699) the Wits set out to crush him for once and all. *Commendatory Verses on the Author of the Two Arthurs and the Satyr against Wit* (1700), the reply, was far from commendatory. Edited by Tom Brown and sponsored by Christopher Codrington, this miscellany attempted in scurrilous and often bad verse to laugh the Knight out of literary existence. Its main distinction lies in the list of contributors, among whom were Sir Charles Sedley, Richard Steele, Tom Brown, and probably John Dennis. Blackmore's supporters answered *Commendatory Verses* with *Discommendatory Verses on Those Which are Truly Commendatory, on the Author of the Two Arthurs, and the Satyr against Wit*. (1700). It is not at all certain that Blackmore emerged second best in this exchange of blows in the miscellanies. At any rate, unabashed he went on to write more epics on Elizabeth, Alfred, Job, and to win himself a doubtful immortality by being pilloried in Pope's *Dunciad*.

Throughout his writings Blackmore has a good deal to say about Wit, and much about the abuse of it. While Swift in the *Tale of a Tub* scolds the Wits for their addiction to nonsense and irreligion, Blackmore goes still further in the *Satyr*, seeing Wit as something which, in common practice, is evil and vicious, to be eradicated as quickly as possible. It is the enemy of virtue and religion (in the Preface to *Creation*, 1712, he links it with atheism), a form of insanity, in opposition to 'Right Reason', and the seducer of young men. Combatting its iniquities, Blackmore proposes to set up a Bank and Mint of Wit to assure that it will be refined and purified. By this process, the works of Dryden, Congreve, Southerne, Wycherley, Garth, and Vanbrugh will be melted down to separate the sludge from the pure metal. In the *Nature of Man* (1711) he takes a more kindly attitude towards Wit and pairs it with Sense, Reason, Genius, and even Piety. While he is moderate in his denunciation of Wit in the *Essay upon Wit*, he does insist that even at its best it can never be noble. Wit is harmful, he states, because it is often employed in immoral subjects, raillery, ridicule, and satire. It is chiefly useful as ornamentation: "The Addition of Wit to Proper Subjects, is like the artful Improvement of the Cook, who by his exquisite Sauce gives to a plain Dish, a pleasant and unusual Relish".

Addison's *Freeholder* essay (No. 45) was inspired by Blackmore's *Essay upon Wit*, to which he paid a compliment in his opening remarks (much to the disgust of Swift, who accused him of double-dealing). Although Addison had praised Blackmore's *Creation* warmly in the *Spectator* No. 339, he had not always been friendly, for earlier Blackmore had sneered at Addison in the *Satyr against Wit*, a jibe that drew Steele's reply in *Commendatory Verses*.

Blackmore's *Essay upon Wit* appeared in his *Essays upon Several Subjects*; the one-volume first edition of this work was published in 1716 and was followed by the second edition, in two volumes, the following year. The present reprint is from the first edition. The 1716 *Freeholder* No. 45 here reproduced is from the edition of 1758. Both copies are owned by the University of Michigan.

AN ESSAY UPON WIT.

The Inclinations of Men, in this their degenerate State, carry them with great Force to those voluptuous Objects, that please their Appetites and gratify their Senses; and which not only by their early Acquaintance and Familiarity, but as they are adapted to the prevailing Instincts of Nature, are more esteem'd and pursu'd than all other Satisfactions. As those inferior Enjoyments, that only affect the Organs of the Body are chiefly coveted, so next to these, that light and facetious Qualification of the Mind, that diverts the Hearers and is proper to produce Mirth and Alacrity, has, in all Ages, by the greatest Part of Mankind, been admir'd and applauded. No Productions of Human Understanding are receiv'd with such a general Pleasure and Approbation, as those that abound with Wit and Humour, on which the People set a greater Value, than on the wisest and most instructive Discourses. Hence a pleasant Man is always caress'd above a wise one, and Ridicule and Satyr, that entertain the Laughters, often put solid Reason and useful Science out of Countenance. The wanton Temper of the Nation has been gratify'd so long with the high Seasonings of Wit and Raillery in Writing and Conversation, that now almost all Things that are not accommodated to their Relish by a strong Infusion of those Ingredients, are rejected as the heavy and insipid Performances of Men of a plain Understanding and meer Masters of Sense.

Since the Power of Wit is so prevalent, and has obtained such Esteem and Popularity, that a Man endow'd with this agreeable Quality, is by many look'd on as a Heavenly Being, if compar'd with others, who have nothing but Learning and a clear arguing Head; it will be worth the while to search into its Nature, and examine its Usefulness, and take a View of those fatal Effects which it produces, when it happens to be misapply'd.

Tho perhaps the Talent which we call Wit, like that of Humour, is as clearly understood by its simple Term, as by the most labour'd Description; an Argument or which is this, That many ingenious Persons, by their unsuccessful Essays to explain it, have rather obscur'd than illustrated its Idea; I will notwithstanding adventure to give the Definition of it, which tho it may fall short of Perfection, yet I imagine, will come nearer to it, than any that has yet appear'd. *Wit is a Qualification of the Mind, that raises and enlivens cold Sentiments and plain Propositions, by giving them an elegant and surprizing Turn.*

It is evident, that Wit cannot essentially consist in the Justness and Propriety of the Thoughts, that is, the Conformity of our Conceptions to the Objects we conceive; for this is the Definition of Truth, when taken in a Physical Sense; nor in the Purity of Words and Expression, for this may be eminent in the Cold, Didactick Stile, and in the correct Writers of History and Philosophy: But Wit is that which imparts Spirit to our Conceptions and Diction, by giving them a lively and novel, and therefore an agreeable Form: And thus its Nature is limited and diversify'd from all other intellectual Endowments. Wit therefore is the Accomplishment of a warm, sprightly, and fertile Imagination, enrich'd with great Variety of proper Ideas; which active Principle is however under the Direction of a regular Judgment, that takes care of the Choice of just and suitable Materials, prescribes to the tighter Faculties the due Bounds of their Sport and Activity, and assists and guides them, while they imprint on the Conceptions of the Mind their peculiar and delightful Figures. The Addition of Wit to proper Subjects, is like the artful Improvement of the Cook, who by his exquisite Sauce gives to a plain Dish, a pleasant and unusual Relish. A Man of this Character works on simple Proportions a rich Embroidery of Flowers and Figures, and imitates the curious Artist, who studs and inlays his prepar'd Steel with Devices of Gold and Silver. But Wit is not only the Improvement of a plain Piece by intellectual Enameling; besides this, it animates and warms a cold Sentiment, and makes it glow with Life and Vigor; and this it effects, as is express'd in the last Part of the Definition, by giving it as elegant and surprizing Turn. It always conveys the Thought of the Speaker or Writer cloath'd in a pleasing, but foreign Dress, in which it never appear'd to the Hearer before, who however had been long acquainted with it; and this Appearance in the Habit of a Stranger must be admirable, since Surprise naturally arises from Novelty, as Delight and Wonder result from Surprise; which I have more fully explain'd in the former Essay.

As to its efficient Cause; Wit owes its Production to an extraordinary and peculiar Temperament in the Constitution of the Possessors of it, in which is found a Concurrence of regular and exalted Ferments, and an Affluence of Animal Spirits refin'd and rectify'd to a great degree of Purity; whence being endow'd with Vivacity, Brightness and Celerity, as well in their Reflexions as direct Motions, they become proper Instruments for the sprightly Operations of the Mind; by which means the Imagination

can with great Facility range, the wide Field of Nature, contemplate an infinite Variety of Objects, and by observing the Similitude and Disagreement of their several Qualities, single out and abstract, and then suit and unite those Ideas, which will best serve its purpose. Hence beautiful Allusions, surprising Metaphors and admirable Sentiments are always ready at hand: And while the Fancy is full of Images collected from innumerable Objects and their different Qualities, Relations and Habitudes, it can at pleasure dress a common Notion in a strange, but becoming Garb; by which, as before observ'd, the same Thought will appear a new one, to the great Delight and Wonder of the Hearer. What we call Genius results from this particular happy Complexion in the first Formation of the Person that enjoys it, and is Nature's Gift, but diversify'd by various specifick Characters and Limitations, as its active Fire is blended and allay'd by different Proportions of Phlegm, or reduc'd and regulated by the Contrast of opposite Ferments. Therefore as there happens in the Composition of a facetious Genius a greater or less, tho still an inferior degree of Judgment and Prudence, and different Kinds of Instincts and Passions, one Man of Wit will be vary'd and distinguish'd from another. That Distinction that seems common to Persons of this Denomination, is an inferior Degree of Wisdom and Discretion; and tho these two Qualities, Wit and Discretion, are almost incapable of a friendly Agreement, and will not, but with great Difficulty, be work'd together and incorporated in the Constitution of any Individual; yet this Observation is not so conspicuous in any, as in those, whose native Complexion comes the nearest to a Subversion and Absence of Mind, tho it should never degenerate into that distemper'd Elevation of the Spirits: Nothing is more common, than to see Persons of this Class always Think Right, and always Act Wrong; admirable for the richness, delicacy, and brightness of their Imaginations, and at the same Time to be pity'd for their want of Prudence and common Sense; abounding with excellent Maxims and instructive Sentiments, which however are not of the least Use to themselves in the Conduct of their Lives. And hence it is certain, that tho the Gentlemen of a pleasant and witty Turn of Mind often make the industrious Merchant, and grave Persons of all Professions, the Subjects of their Raillery, and expose them as stupid Creatures, not supportable in good Company; yet these in their Turn believe they have as great a right, as indeed they have, to reproach the others for want of Industry, good Sense, and regular Oeconomy, much more valuable Talents than those, which any mere Wit can boast of; and therefore wise Parents, who from a tender Concern for the Honour and Happiness of their Children, earnestly desire they may excel in intellectual Endowments, should, instead of refin'd Parts and a Genius turn'd for pleasant Conversation, wish them a solid Understanding and a Faculty of close and clear Reasoning, these Qualifications being likely to make them good Men, and the other only good Companions.

And this leads to another Observation, namely, That Persons of facetious Talents and agreeable Humour, in whose Temperament, Judgment, and Discretion, as before observ'd, are usually found in a disproportionate Measure, are more inclin'd than others to Levity and dissolute Manners: The same swiftness of Thought and sprightliness of Imagination, that qualifies them for ingenious Conversation, Sports of Fancy and Comick Writing, do likewise give them an exquisite Taste of sensual Pleasures, and expose them to the prevailing Power of Tempting, tho forbidden Enjoyments. The Passions and Appetites of these Men, from the same Spring from whence they derive their extraordinary Parts, that is, a Redundancy of warm and lively Spirits, are more violent and impatient of Restraint, than those in a cooler and less active Complexion, who however may be more eminent in the superior Faculties of the Mind: Hence it will be no wonder, that while their Propensions to Pleasure are much stronger, and their Reason much weaker than those of other Men, they should be less able than others, to resist the Allurements of criminal Delights; and this Remark is confirm'd by daily Experience. How few of this facetious and comick Species of Men, caress'd and applauded for their shining Parts and witty Discourses, escape the Snares that encompass them, and preserve their Vertue and Sobriety of Manners? It too often happens, that a Man elevated above the rest by his uncommon Genius, is as much distinguish'd by his extraordinary Immorality: And it would be well if it stop'd here; but by degrees he often grows much worse, by adding Impiety and Profaneness to Looseness of Manners: For being unable, that is, having a moral Impotence of Will to restrain his evil Propensions and govern his vicious Appetites, and finding his guilty Enjoyments, attended with inward Uneasiness and unavoidable Remorse, and being conscious that his irregular Life is inconsistent with Safety and Happiness in a Future State; to remove the troublesome Misgivings of his Mind from the Apprehensions of Guilt here, and rid himself of the Fears of Suffering hereafter, he at length disclaims the Belief of a Supream Being and a Future Existence, and with much ado brings over his Judgment to the side of his Passions: This ingenious Libertine, having too little strength of Reason to subdue his Appetites, and too much Wit to think, that if that be not done, he shall escape at last Divine Punishment, abolishes his Creed for the Quiet of his Mind, and renounces his God to preserve his Vices.

The Objects about which Wit is exercis'd, are the common and less important Actions of Life. It is the Province of the Civil Magistrate to make Laws against enormous Crimes and great Immoralities, and by punishing Offenders, to deter Men from the like Transgressions; but they take no notice of lower Errors, either because they have not such noxious Influence on the State, or because it is impossible to foresee and enumerate their numberless Classes, and prevent their Growth: Where then the Legislator

ends, the Comick Genius begins, and presides over the low and ordinary Affairs and Manners of Life. It extends its Power and Jurisdiction over the wide Field of inferior Faults and ridiculous Follies, over the Districts of Indiscretion, Indecency, and Impertinence, and is Visitor of the Regions void of Discipline, Politeness, and Civility.

Wit is employ'd in its own Province, when the Possessor of it exercises his Genius on the ordinary Customs and Manners of Life, either in Conversation, or Comick Writing. It has therefore no place in the Works where severe Knowledge and Judgment are chiefly exercis'd; those superior Productions of the Understanding must be express'd in a clear and strong manner, without intervening Strains of Wit or facetious Fancies, which, were they admitted, would appear incongruous and impertinent, and diminish the Merit of the Writing. Hence Wit has no place in History, Philology, Philosophy, or in the greater Lyrick or Epick Poems; the two last of which containing either the Praises of Deities or Demi-Gods, or treating of lofty and illustrious Subjects; such as the Foundation, Rise, and Revolution of Kingdoms, Commotions of State, Battles, Triumphs, solemn Embassies, and various other important Actions of Princes and Heroes, are exalted above the Sphere of Wit and Humour. The Strength and Dignity of the sublime Stile is debas'd and adulterated by the foreign and improper Mixture of light Sentiments, and pretty Fancies. These Sallies and Sports of the Imagination, will no more advance the Beauty of such superior Productions, than the Addition of glittering Tinsel and glass Beads will improve the Imperial Purple, or adorn the Crowns of great Monarchs. And therefore we see, with what judicious Care *Virgil* has avoided this Error; how clear are his celebrated Writings from the least sprinkling of Wit and pleasant Conceits, which corrupt the Purity, debase the Majesty, and sully the Lustre of the greater Species of Poetry? And as the Gravity and Chastness of the sublime Stile, in the Works last mention'd, will not endure the gay Ornaments of Fancy; so does that light Dress more misbecome the pious and wise Discourses, that come either from the Pulpit or the Press. Wit is so far from being a Grace or Improvement of Divine Eloquence, that on the contrary, it destroys its Dignity, breaks its Force, and renders it base and puerile.

The End and Usefulness of this ingenious Qualification, is to delight and instruct. It animates and sweetens Conversation, by raising innocent Mirth and good Humour; and by this Effect it relieves Domestick Cares, revives Men of Business and studious Professions, and softens the Asperity of morose Dispositions. It suspends uneasy and anxious Thoughts, dispels cloudy and fallen Melancholy, and by unbending and exhilarating the Minds of the Assembly, gives them new Life and Spirit to resume the Labour of their respective Employments. The Exercise of Wit and a pleasant Genius, excels all other Recreations. What is the Satisfaction that arises from Country Sports, or the politer Diversions of Balls and Operas, compar'd with the delightful Conversation of Men of Parts and facetious Talents? Other Amusements, how agreeable soever, only please the Body and gratify the Senses, but this strikes the Imagination, touches the Passions, and recreates the Intellectual Faculties. And as the Taste of the Soul is more delicate and exquisite than that of the Body, so much superior are the Pleasures of one to those of the other: It is no wonder then, that the Assemblies of Friends are dull and heavy, that Feasts and Wine are flat Entertainments, unless some ingenious Persons are present to improve their Taste, and enliven the Company by agreeable Discourses.

Another part of the Province in which Wit is properly exercis'd, are ingenious Writings, intended to please and improve the People; and this is more various and extensive than Comick Poetry, tho of the same Kind; for it takes in not only the Subjects of Prudence and Decency, regular Behaviour and vertuous Actions, but likewise the justness of Human Sentiments and Opinions in Points of Controversy; of the last, the Dialogue of Dr. *Eachard* against Mr. *Hobbes* is a famous Example, where, by great Strength and Solidity of Reason, mixt with agreeable Wit and Raillery, he entertains and informs the Reader, and at once exposes and confutes the conceited Philosopher. An Instance of the first is, the celebrated History of *Don Quixote*, compil'd by the *Spanish Wit Michael de Cervantes*; a Book so well imagin'd, and writ with so much Spirit and fine Raillery, that it effectually procur'd the End of the admirable Author; for by turning into Mirth and Ridicule the reigning Folly of Romantick Chivalry, and freeing the Minds of the People from that fashionable Delusion, he broke the Force of as strong an Enchantment, and destroy'd as great a Monster as was ever pretended to be vanquish'd by their imaginary Heroes. And many more Books on other moral Subjects have been compos'd with much Wit and Vivacity in our own and foreign Countries, to expose Vice and Folly, and promote Decency and Sobriety of Manners. But the Productions of this Nature, which have of late appear'd in this Nation, whether we regard the just and generous Sentiments, the fertile Invention, the Variety of Subjects, the surprizing Turns of Wit and facetious Imagination, the genteel Satire, the Purity and Propriety of the Words, and the Beauty and Dignity of the Diction, have surpass'd all the Productions of this kind, that have been publish'd in any Age or Country. The Reader no doubt is before-hand with me, and concludes, that I mean the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, which for the greatest Part, have all the Perfection of Writing, and all the Advantages of Wit and Humour, that are requir'd to entertain and instruct the People: And it must chiefly be owing to the great Depravity of Manners in these loose and degenerate Times, that such worthy Performances have produc'd no better Effects.

But this excellent and amiable Qualification of the Mind is too apt to be abus'd and perverted to ill purposes. Instead of being engag'd on the Side of Vertue, and us'd to promote just Notions and Regularity of Life, it is frequently employ'd to expose the most Sacred Things, to turn Gravity and reserv'd Behaviour into Ridicule, to keep in Countenance Vice and Irreligion, and with a petulant and unrestrain'd Liberty, to deride the Principles and Practices of the wisest and best of Men. The Conversation of ingenious Libertines generally turns upon Reveal'd Religion and the venerable Teachers of it; or on those of the Laity, who seem most sincere in the Belief of Christianity, and express the greatest Conformity in their Actions to the Precepts of it. Nothing gives so high a Seasoning to their Raillery, and more improves the Taste of their Jests, than some sharp and pointed Ingredients, that wound Religion and the Professors of it; whereof some are made the Entertainment of the Company by these facetious Scoffers, and expos'd as Persons fetter'd with Prepossessions, and biass'd by Notions of Vertue, deriv'd from Education and the early Instructions of canting Parents. Others are represented as indebted for their Piety to the Prevalency of the Spleen, and an immoderate mixture of Melancholy in their Complexion, which, say they, give to the Mind a superstitious Turn, and fill the Head with religious Chimeras, frightful Phantomes of Guilt, and idle Fears of imaginary Punishments; while others are ridicul'd as Men of a cold and phlegmatick Complexion, without Spirit and native Fire; who derive, say they, their Vertue, not from Choice or Restraint of Appetite, but from their deadness and indisposition to Pleasure; not from the Power of their Reason, but the Weakness of their Passions. It would be endless to enumerate the various Ways which the atheistical Wit and merry Libertine employ, to take off all Veneration of Religion, and expose its Adherents to publick Derision. This is certainly the greatest Abuse of Wit imaginable. In all the Errors and monstrous Productions of Nature, can any appear more deform'd than a Man of Parts, who employs his admirable Qualities in bringing Piety into Contempt, putting Vertue to the Blush, and making Sobriety of Manners the common Subject of his Mirth; while with Zeal and Industry, he propagates the malignant Contagion of Vice and Irreligion, poisons his Friends and Admirers, and promotes the Destruction of his native Country? And if these foolish Wits and ingenious Madmen could reflect, they would soon be convinc'd, that while they are engag'd against Religion they hurt themselves; and that Wit and Humour thus misapply'd, will prove but a wretched Compensation for their want of Vertue.

In this Place I crave leave to transcribe some Passages relating to this Subject, from the Writings of a good Judge of Wit, and as great a Master of it as perhaps any Nation ever bred, I mean Archbishop *Tillotson*; "I know not how it comes to pass, *says he*, that some Men have the Fortune to be esteem'd Wits, only for jesting out of the common Road, and for making bold to scoff at those things, which the greatest Part of Mankind reverence—. If Men did truly consult the Interest, either of their Safety or Reputation, they would never exercise their Wit in such dangerous Matters. Wit is a very commendable Quality, but then a wise Man should have the keeping of it. It is a sharp Weapon, as apt for Mischief as for good Purposes, if it be not well manag'd: The proper use of it is to season Conversation, to represent what is Praise-worthy to the greatest Advantage, and to expose the Vices and Follies of Men, such things as are in themselves truly ridiculous: But if it be apply'd to the Abuse of the gravest and most serious Matters, it then loses its Commendation. If any Man thinks he abounds in this Quality, and hath Wit to spare, there is scope enough for it within the Bounds of Religion and Decency; and when it transgresseth these, it degenerates into Insolence and Impiety—And afterwards: A sharp Wit may find something in the wisest Man, whereby to expose him to the Contempt of injudicious People. The gravest Book that ever was written, may be made ridiculous, by applying the Sayings of it to a foolish purpose, for a Jest may be obtruded upon any thing; and therefore no Man ought to have the less Reverence for the Principles of Religion, or for the Holy Scriptures, because idle and profane Wits can break Jests upon them. Nothing is so easy, as to take particular Phrases and Expressions out of the best Book in the World, and to abuse them, by forcing an odd and ridiculous Sense upon them." And in another place, having mention'd the most proper Objects of Wit, he thus expresses himself,—"This I say on purpose to recommend to Men a nobler Exercise for their Wits, and if it be possible, to put them out of Conceit with that scoffing Humour, which is so easy and so ill-natur'd, and is not only an Enemy to Religion, but to every thing else that is wise and worthy; and I am very much mistaken, if the State as well as the Church, the Civil Government as well as Religion, do not in a short space find the intolerable Inconvenience of this Humour."

Tho the Persons addicted to this impious Folly, expose the sacred Mysteries of Christianity, and make its Votaries the common Topick of their Raillery, it cannot thence be concluded, that they are certain that those whom they thus deride, as whimsical, stupid, and deluded Men, have not the least Reason to support their Religious Principles and Practice; for if they were sure of this, they would treat such unhappy Persons as Men rob'd of their Senses, with Tenderness and Compassion; for none will allow such distemper'd Minds to be proper Subjects of Ridicule and Derision: But those, who attentively observe the Manner and Air of these jesting Libertines, when they laugh at Vertue, will see plainly their licentious Mirth springs from other Principles; either from this, That the Example of many Persons, who in earnest embrace and profess the Articles of Religion, continually disturbs their Opinion of themselves, and creates severe Misgivings and Distrust in their Minds, lest their Notions about Religion

should not be true, when they observe, that many Persons of eminent Parts, superior Reason and Erudition, maintain with Zeal quite contrary Sentiments; or else it proceeds from their Hatred of Men of Vertue, founded in the Dissimilitude of Dispositions and Manners, and Disagreement in Interest, Employments and Designs; or from an Envy of their great Merit, innocent Life, and worthy Actions, which from the prevailing Power of their own vicious Inclinations, they are unable to imitate; for after all their Raillery and Expressions of Contempt, Vertue has that native Lustre and amiable Appearance, that will compel Men secretly to esteem it, even while they deride the Possessors of it. Such is the Pride and Vanity of degenerate Nature, that loose Men will always endeavour to level the eminent Characters of religious and sober Persons, and reduce them to the inferior Degree of their own: And for that end, they will labour to sink the Opinion and Esteem of any Excellence or Merit, to which themselves can make no Pretence. While they cannot equal the bright Example of Vertue in others, they strive to sully or efface it, and by turning it into Ridicule, make it seem rather the Dishonour and Deformity, than the Beauty and Perfection of the Mind: And if they can disgrace Religion, and subvert all moral Distinction, Men will be valu'd only for their intellectual Endowments, and then they imagine they have gain'd their Point, since the Superiority of Wit, as they suppose, is on their Side. These seem to me the genuine and natural Causes, why Men of great Parts and extraordinary Wit, but of loose Principles and immoral Lives, who above all others affect Popularity and gasp after Applause, take so much Pleasure, without the least regard to Modesty and Decency, in a Christian Country to mock Religion and jerk with spiteful Satire Men of Vertue and inoffensive Behaviour.

WIT is likewise misapply'd, when exercis'd to ridicule any unavoidable Defects and Deformities of Body or Mind; for since nothing is a moral Blemish, but as it is the Effect of our own Choice, nothing can be disgraceful but what is voluntary, and brought freely upon our selves; and since nothing is the proper Object of Raillery and Ridicule, but what is shameful, it must be a Violence to Reason and Humanity, to reproach and expose another for any thing that was not in his Power to escape. And therefore to make a Man contemptible, and the Jest of the Company, by deriding him for his mishapen Body, ill figur'd Face, stammering Speech, or low Degree of Understanding, is a great Abuse of ingenious Faculties.

Nor is it a less criminal Use of this Talent, when it is exercis'd in lascivious and obscene Discourses. The Venom is not less, but more infectious and destructive, when convey'd by artful Insinuation and a delicate Turn of Wit; when impure Sentiments are express'd by Men of a heavy and gross Imagination, in direct and open Terms, the Company are put out of Countenance, and nauseate the Coarseness of the Conversation: but a Man of Wit gilds the Poison, dresses his wanton Thoughts in a beautiful Habit, and by slanting and side Approaches, possesses the Imagination of the Hearers, before his Design is well discover'd; by which means he more effectually gains Admission to the Mind, and fills the Fancy with immodest Ideas.

Nothing can be more ill-manner'd, or disagreeable to Persons of Vertue and Sobriety of Manners, than wanton and obscene Expressions; on which Subject the excellent Archbishop *Tillotson* has the following Paragraph: "Nothing that trespasses upon the Modesty of the Company, and the Decency of Conversation, can become the Mouth of a wise and vertuous Person. This kind of Conversation would fain pass for Wit among some sort of Persons, to whom it is acceptable; but whatever savours of Rudeness and Immodesty, and Ill-Manners, is very far from deserving that Name; and they that are sober and vertuous cannot entertain any Discourse of this kind, with Approbation and Acceptance. A well bred Person will never offend in this way. And therefore it cannot but be esteem'd as an Affront to modest Company, and a rude presuming upon their Approbation, impudently taking it for granted, that all others are as lewd and dissolute as themselves."

Men of finer Spirits do likewise abuse their Parts, as well as misapply their Time, when to gain Applause and increase their Popularity, they run, without Distinction, into Company, and by too great Condescension and false Humanity, mingle in inferior and unworthy Assemblies; where delighted with the silly Approbation of ignorant Laughers, they shine forth in a great Effusion of Wit and Humour; by which they make themselves cheap, if not contemptible in the Opinion of wise and discerning Persons. Men of singular Wit, like Women of great Beauty, should never be unguarded; for if not endow'd with a decent Reservedness, a modest Air, and a discreet Behaviour, they sink in their Value, and by appearing in all Places, and becoming common and familiar, lose, in a great measure, their Honour, and the Opinion of their Merit. It is a meretricious Prostitution of Wit, when the Possessors of it can deny no Addresses, and refuse no Invitations and Appointments, but suffer themselves to be shown at every Entertainment; Besides the gratifying of their Vanity, by a constant pursuit of Approbation and Praise, which is the Spring whence this Prodigality of Parts and waste of facetious Humour chiefly arise; it is evident, they spend a great deal of Time, of which a wise Man can give no Account, while Wit, which should in its proper place, renew and revive the Spirits for useful Employment, becomes a continu'd Diversion, and makes everlasting Idleness the Business of Life.

It is pity that a Man of fine Spirit and a fertile, as well as delicate Imagination, should think himself

engag'd in high Conversation, when he is only employ'd in the lowest Affairs that concern Mankind. His Post is of the same Kind, and but the next in Order above that of Players on Instruments, admirable Voices, excellent Actors on the Stage, and famous Dancers; whose Province is only to amuse and recreate; and is therefore far below theirs, who are either busied in governing the State, defending their Country, improving the Minds, or relieving the Bodies of other Men.

Hence the Labours of the meanest Persons, that conduce to the Welfare and Benefit of the Publick, are more valuable, because more useful, than the Employments of those, who apply themselves only, or principally, to divert and entertain the Fancy; and therefore must be as much preferable to the Occupation or Profession of a Wit, as the Improvement and Happiness of Men is to be regarded above their Mirth and Recreation. I allow, that the Talents of these ingenious Men are very much to be esteem'd in their proper place; that is, as they unbend the Mind, relieve the Satiety of Contemplation and Labour, and by the Delight which they give, refresh the Spirits and fit them for the Returns of Study and Employment: But then it must be granted, that, as I have said, this is the meanest, as being the least beneficial Province in which our intellectual Faculties can be engag'd; and therefore these facetious Men can only claim the highest Rank among those, who are Inventors or Ministers of Pleasure, and provide Amusements and Recreations for the Busy and the Wise.

I would illustrate what I have asserted by the following Reflection. Domestick Fowls, the Hen, the Turkey, and Goose are preferable, as more useful, to the singing Bird, and the Parrot. The Ox, that ploughs the Field and brings home the Harvest, the Horse, the Mule, and even the stupid Ass, that carry their Owners, or their Goods and Merchandize, are more to be regarded than the Hound, the Lap-Dog, and various other Animals that seem to have been created only for our Pleasure and Amusement: And the Reason of this is very evident, Mankind may be very happy, and States and Kingdoms may remain in a flourishing Condition, tho there were no such diverting Creatures in the World: And from the same Consideration, Men, tho of a lower Station, who are not only beneficial, but necessary to the Well-being of Human Societies, are of far greater Importance, and therefore deserve more Esteem than those, who only are subservient to our Recreation; for the World may still subsist, and continue in very comfortable Circumstances without one, but not without the other: And 'tis easy to name some learned and powerful Communities, the Envy and Terror of their Neighbours, who tho they abound in Men of good Sense and diligent Application to Business, yet have few Wits and Jesters among them to make them merry.

The Truth of what I have asserted will farther appear, if we reflect that generally Men of a plain Understanding and good Sense, but of great Industry and Capacity for Business, are in all Governments avanc'd to Posts of Trust and great Employments in the State, while meer Wits are regarded as Men of the lowest Merit, and accordingly are promoted to the meaner and less profitable Places, being look'd on, by reason of their Inapplication and volatile Temper, as unfit for a higher Station.

Another pernicious Abuse of Wit is that which appears in the Writings of some ingenious Men, who are so hardy as to expose from the Press the most venerable Subjects, and treat Vertue and Sobriety of Manners with Raillery and Ridicule. Several, in their Books, have many sarcastical and spiteful Strokes at Religion in general, while others make themselves pleasant with the Principles of the Christian. Of the last kind this Age has seen a most audacious Example in the Book intitul'd, *A Tale of a Tub*. Had this Writing been publish'd in a Pagan or Popish Nation, who are justly impatient of all Indignity offer'd to the Establish'd Religion of their Country, no doubt but the Author would have receiv'd the Punishment he deserv'd. But the Fate of this impious Buffoon is very different; for in a Protestant Kingdom, zealous of their Civil and Religious Immunities, he has not only escap'd Affronts and the Effects of publick Resentment, but has been caress'd and patroniz'd by Persons of great Figure and of all Denominations. Violent Party-Men, who differ'd in all Things besides, agreed, in their Turn, to shew particular Respect and Friendship to this insolent Derider of the Worship of his Country, till at last the reputed Writer is not only gone off with Impunity, but triumphs in his Dignity and Preferment. I do not know, that any Inquiry or Search was ever made after this Writing, or that any Reward was ever offer'd for the Discovery of the Author, or that the infamous Book was ever condemn'd to be burnt in Publick: Whether this proceeds from the excessive Esteem and Love that Men in Power, during the late Reign, had for Wit, or their defeat of Zeal and Concern for the Christian Religion, will be determin'd best by those, who are best acquainted with their Character.

But the most extensive Abuse of Parts and Ingenuity, appears in the loose Productions of our Writers to the Stage. It was the Complaint of the celebrated Wit of *Spain*, *Michael de Cervantes*, before-cited, that the Comedies in his Time were not only extravagant and monstrous in their Contrivance, but likewise the Exemplars of Vice and Representations of Lewdness: But had the Plays in *Spain*, at that Time, been as Immoral and Unchaste as the daily Entertainments of the *British* Theatre, which have a manifest Tendency to vitiate the Taste of the People, fill their Imaginations with obscene Ideas, and their Lives with Levity, Idleness and Luxury; I say, if that great Man, whose Judgment was equal to his admirable Genius, had seen Religion and Vertue so derided, and Modesty, Reservedness, and Decency

so insulted and expos'd, his Zeal for the Honour of his Country, and his Love of Mankind, would have animated him to have attack'd the Comick Poets with the same Spirit, with which he assaulted the prevailing Folly of his Age, the Romantick Atchievements of Knights Errant; his Wit and good Sense would have made those merry Authors as odious for poisoning the People with their loose and immoral Writings, as he made the others ridiculous for their extravagant and idle Tales.

No doubt a Comedy may be so contriv'd, that it may at once become delightful, and promote Prudence and Sobriety of Manners; that is, when the Characters are well chosen, justly delineated, and every where distinguish'd; When the various Manners are exactly imitated and carry'd on with Propriety and Uniformity; when the principal Action contains an instructive Moral, and all the Parts in a regular Connexion, Dependance and Proportion, illustrate and support each other, and have a manifest Influence on the main Event; When the Incidents are well imagin'd, and result from the Manners of the Dramatick Persons, when the Turns are surprizing, the Knots or Obstructions natural and unconstrain'd, and the unraveling of them, tho unforeseen, yet free and easy; and when the Diction is pure, proper and elegant, as well as chaste and inoffensive to the modest and vertuous Hearers. So regular and beautiful a Piece as this cannot but greatly please and divert, as well as instruct the Audience. Nor is it, I imagine, from want of Knowledge of the Rules of Writing, nor of sufficient Genius, in which this Nation abounds, that so few Comedies, distinguish'd by these Perfections, have been produc'd: But this Defect arises partly from this, that the Comick Poets are often Men of loose Manners, and therefore unlikely Persons to undertake the Promotion and Encouragement of Vertue, of which they have no Taste, and to discountenance Imprudence and Immorality, when by doing so, they must expose their own Character to derision; tho sometimes it may happen, that a loose Poet as well as Preacher, merely from his just Manner of Thinking, and his Sense of Decency in forming Discourses becoming his Character, may entertain the Audience with laudable Performances.

Another, and the chief Cause of the Immorality of the Theatre, is the ill Taste of the People, who, notwithstanding they have applauded several clean and regular Tragedies, such as those which have of late, appear'd that are worthy of the greatest Commendation, especially *Cato* and the Plays for the most part of Mr. *Row*, as great a Genius for Tragedy as any Nation in any Age has produc'd, yet still frequent and encourage the loosest Comedies. It happens, that the greatest part of Men of Wit and Humour, who not being easy in their Fortunes, work for the Stage, and are Day-Labourers to the Muses, lie under a Necessity of bringing those Productions to Market, which are in Fashion, and therefore vendible; while others, tho of ever so much greater Value, would be turn'd back upon their Hands; nor would the Actors, who live by their Employment, as the Comick Writers do by theirs, undertake to represent an Innocent, and much less a Comedy of yet higher Merit.

The several Assaults have been made upon the Comick Poets in Fashion, and many Batteries have been rais'd against the Theatre, yet hitherto they have prov'd unsuccessful; the Stage is become Impregnable, where loose Poets, supported by Numbers, Power, and Interest, in Defiance of all Rules of Decency and Vertue, still provide new Snares and Temptations to seduce the People, and corrupt their Manners. Notwithstanding the earnest Cries of this great City, that importune these Writers to reform the Theatre, and no longer to infest her Youth, and draw their Inclinations from their Professions and Employments; notwithstanding the Sighs and Tears of many once flourishing, but now disconsolate Families, ruin'd by the dissolute Lives of their chief Branches, who lost their Vertue by frequenting the fatal Entertainments of the Theatre; notwithstanding the wise and sober part of the Kingdom earnestly solicit them to spare the People, to stop the spreading Plague and slay the destroying Pen, they persevere with intrepid Resolution and inexorable Cruelty, to poison the Minds, and ruin the Morals of the Nation.

The great Archbishop *Tillotson* has set our present Theatre in a true Light in his Discourse upon *Corrupt Communication*:

"I shall only speak a few words concerning Plays, which as they are now order'd among us, are a mighty Reproach to the Age and Nation.

"To speak against them in general, may be thought too severe, and that which the present Age cannot so well brook, and would not perhaps be so just and reasonable; because it is very possible they might be so fram'd and govern'd by such Rules, as not only to be innocently diverting, but instructing and useful, to put some Vices and Follies out of Countenance, which cannot perhaps be so decently reprov'd, nor so effectually expos'd and corrected any other way. But as the Stage now is, they are intollerable, and not fit to be permitted in a civiliz'd, much less a Christian Nation. They do most notoriously minister both to Infidelity and Vice. By the Profaneness of them, they are apt to instil bad Principles into the Minds of Men, and to lessen that awe and reverence which all Men ought to have for God and Religion: and by their Lewdness they teach Vice, and are apt to infect the Minds of Men, and dispose them to lewd and dissolute Practices.

"And therefore I do not see how any Persons pretending to Sobriety and Vertue, and especially to the pure and holy Religion of our Blessed Saviour, can, without great Guilt, and open Contradiction to his holy Profession, be present at such lewd and immodest Plays, much less frequent them, as too many do, who yet would take it very ill to be shut out of the Communion of Christians, as they would most certainly have been in the first and purest Ages of Christianity."

And not only wise and sober Men have declar'd their detestation of the Immorality of the Stage, but eminent Poets themselves, who have written the most applauded Comedies, have own'd, that the Theatre stands in great need of Restraints and Regulation, and wish'd that Plays were compil'd in such an inoffensive Manner, that not only discreet and vertuous Persons of the Laity, but a Bishop himself, without being shock'd, might be present while they were acted. Mr. *Dryden* has, up and down in his Prefatory Discourses and Dedications, freely acknowledg'd the Looseness of our Dramatick Entertainments, which sometimes he charges upon the Countenance given to it by the dissolute Court of King *Charles* the Second, and sometimes upon the vitiated Taste of the People. In his Dedication of *Juvenal*, made *English*, to the late famous Earl of *Dorset*, he thus bespeaks him; "As a Counsellor bred up in the Knowledge of the Municipal and Statute Laws may honestly inform a just Prince how far his Prerogative extends, so I may be allow'd to tell your Lordship, who by an indisputed Title are the King of Poets, what an Extent of Power you have, and how lawfully you may exercise it over the petulant Scriblers of the Age. As Lord Chamberlain, you are absolute by your Office, in all that belongs to the Decency and good Manners of the Stage; You can banish thence Scurrility and Profaneness, and restrain the licentious Insolence of the Poets and their Actors, in all things that shock the publick Quiet or the Reputation of private Persons, under the Notion of *Humour*." Hence it evidently appears, that Mr. *Dryden* look'd on the Decency of the Stage to be violated in his Time, by licentious and insolent Poets; and I wish I could say, that there is less Reason of Complaint in ours; In a Copy of Verses, publish'd in one of the Volumes of the Miscellany Poems, the same celebrated Author inveighs against the Lewdness and Pollutions of the Stage in the strongest Expressions that can be conceiv'd; and in his latter days, when his Judgment was more Mature, he condemns all his loose and profane Writings to the Flames, which, he says, they justly deserve: Which is not only a free and ingenious Confession of his Fault, but a considerable Mark of Repentance, and worthy to be imitated by his Successors, who have broken in upon the Rules of Vertue and Modesty in the like manner.

Tho all Men of Vertue, who wish well to Mankind, and are zealous for the Happiness of their Country, cannot but observe the mischievous Effects of these licentious Dramatick Compositions, yet they will find it very difficult to suggest an effectual Remedy for the Cure of so obstinate an Evil. The ingenious *Spaniard* mention'd before, for stopping the Progress of this contagious Lewdness in his Country, propos'd to the Government, that an Officer or Inspector might be establish'd, with Authority to peruse and correct the Poet's Writings, and that no Comedies should be presented to the Publick without his Licence and Approbation.

But if this would have been sufficient to have prevented or remov'd this hurtful Practice, the *British* Nation would long since have had no reason to complain on this Subject. We have Officers intrusted with this useful and important Power, and are able, if they please, to hinder the spreading of the Infection, by not permitting such noxious Productions to appear in Publick: But whether those Inspectors have had a true Taste and Judgment themselves, or have diligently apply'd themselves to the Reading and Amending the Comedies put into their Hands for their Approbation, or whether they comply with the Importunity of the Actors, who tell them, that such is the Disposition of the Audience, that no Plays of that kind will appear beautiful, if they are strip'd of those Embellishments and Ornaments of Wit, which some morose and unfashionable People stile impure and obscene, and that to leave out those ingenious Strokes and Heightnings of Fancy, and put into the Mouths of the Actors only good Sense and modest and clean Expressions, is to clear and refine our Comedies from the most entertaining and delightful Parts: Perhaps they assure them, that the Audience will endure no Reformation of the Stage, and that it were altogether as adviseable to shut up the Doors of the Play-House, as to attempt a Regulation of the Pleasures and Diversions of it.

But tho Men who love their Country, born down with a Torrent of profane Libertines, Persons without Taste and Distinction of Vertue and Vice, have almost despair'd of seeing the Comick Poets reform'd, and the exorbitant Liberties of the Stage restrain'd within the Limits of modest Language and decent Behaviour; yet now their Hopes revive, and they promise to themselves a sudden and effectual Reformation of these Abuses, since the Government has plac'd so worthy a Person at the Head of the Actors, and given him ample Authority to rectify their Errors: What a happy Revolution, what a regular and clean Stage may justly be now expected? How free from all sordid and impure Mixtures, how innocent, as well as diverting, will our Comedies appear, when they have been corrected and refin'd by such an accomplish'd Director of the Dramatick Poets? One that has a true and delicate Taste, and who is sensible of the Indecencies and hurtful Nature of our Plays; who has engag'd his celebrated Pen, in defiance of sneering Wits and powerful Libertines, on the Side of Vertue, and has propagated the

Esteem of Morals, Humanity, Decorum and Sobriety of Manners; who with great Spirit, Genius, and Courage, to his lasting Honour, has publicly expos'd the Absurdities, Vices, and Follies, that stain and disgrace the Theatre; in which Censure he has not spar'd his own Performances: One who has express'd a warm Zeal on this Subject, and declar'd his generous Intention, if it were in his Power, to cleanse these polluted Places, and not to suffer a Comedy to be presented but what had past a severe Examination, and where all things which might shock a modest Ear, or be look'd on as repugnant to good Manners, might be expung'd.

But if these fair Expectations should be blasted in the Bloom, and notwithstanding the vigorous Efforts which will be made by this Reformer, Immorality shall maintain its ground and keep Possession of the Theatre, some other Expedients may be suggested to procure a Regulation. It might, perhaps be desirable, that a few Persons of Importance, Men of Learning, Gravity, and good Taste, might be commission'd by Authority, as a Check upon the Actors, to censure and suppress any Dramatick Entertainments that shall offend against Religion, Sobriety of Manners, or the Publick Peace; and all Persons should be encourag'd to send them such loose or profane Passages which they hear from the Stage, or read in the printed Plays: Nor will it be less expedient, that they should be instructed to peruse the Plays already publish'd, and which are now publickly acted, and to expunge all offensive and criminal Mixtures, that hereafter they may become a clean and innocent Diversion. Besides, this End would the more effectually be accomplish'd, if the Writers of Comedy, Farce, and Interludes, were rewarded and supported by Means independent on the Actors: For while the Poets, who write for a Maintenance, are paid by the Theatre, they will be under a great Temptation to write as desir'd and directed by the Actors, which was the Complaint of *Cervantes* above-cited, concerning the Comick Poets of *Spain*. The Actors, we may safely conclude, are not restrain'd by such rigorous Precepts of Vertue, but that they will always be inclin'd to present those Performances which will best fill the House and promote their Interest; and therefore they will readily humour the vitiated Taste of the Audience, by acting the most immoral Plays, while they find their account in doing so: And that which confirms this Observation is, that they never, as far as I have heard, rejected any Comedy merely for its Looseness, tho I believe they have refus'd many for want of that entertaining Quality. Now were the Comick Writers provided of a Subsistence some other way, they would be deliver'd from the Necessity of complying with their Actors, by writing such Plays as they shall bespeak, or at least approve, as the most likely to invite a profitable Audience.

It would prove an effectual Remedy for this Evil, if the Ladies would discountenance these loose Comedies, by expressing their dislike, and refusing to be present when they are acted: And this no doubt they would do, were they inform'd, that the Comedies which they encourage by their Appearance at the Theatre, are full of wanton Sentiments, obscene Allusions, and immodest Ideas, contain'd in Expressions of a double Meaning: for it cannot be imagin'd they would bear with Unconcernedness, much less with Pleasure, Discourses in Publick, which they detest as unsufferable in private Convention, if they knew them to be unchast. And should the Ladies assert their Esteem of Vertue, and declare openly on the Side of Modesty, the most attractive Beauty of the fair Sex, as certainly they would do, if they understood how much those amiable Qualities have been expos'd and affronted by our most eminent Comick Poets; this would lay the Ax to the Root, and at one Blow destroy this pernicious Practice; for after this, what Writer would transgress the Rules of Decency and Purity of Expression, when he knows, that by his immodest Mixtures he shall fright the Ladies from the House?

It would be another effectual Means to redress the Grievance of the Stage, if the Clergy could be prevail'd upon to condemn from the Pulpit and the Press, as well as in their Conversation, the unjustifiable Entertainments of the Theatre; would they insist upon it, and urge it as a necessary Duty of the People to avoid these Occasions, and at least Appearances of Evil; would they shew them, that by frequenting these unwarrantable Diversions, they rush into Snares, court Temptation, and invite others to follow their criminal Example; would they set before them the Hazard of playing on the nice and dubious Limits of Innocence, and adventuring to the utmost Extent of Vertue and the Frontier of Vice, there would be great hopes of stemming this strong Tide of Iniquity. And this is no more than the indispensable Obligation, which our Divines are under, whose proper Province it is to warn the People of their Danger, and to press them earnestly to fly from it. This venerable Order have, by solemn Engagements, set themselves apart, as spiritual Guides, to point out the fatal Rocks and treacherous Sands to their Neighbours, that they may not make Shipwreck of Modesty and Innocence, and plunge into the Depths of Irreligion and Vice: Nor is it obvious, why these Reverend Teachers, by their Silence and Neutrality, should give Profaneness and Immorality such fair Play, as if the Controversy between the Stage and the Pulpit were compremis'd, and the Poets and the Priests were engag'd, as indeed they ought to be, in the same good Designs, Interests, and Pursuits. It is certain, that this Mildness, and friendly Behaviour of the Clergy to the Comick Writers, cannot arise from any Respect or handsome Usage which that sacred Order has met with on the Theatre, where they have been so often jerk'd and expos'd in such a manner, that their Divine Function has been wounded through their Sides.

The Clergy lie under such manifest Obligations to attack publick Immorality, wherever it is found, and by whatsoever Patrons of Power, Dignity, and Interest it is shelter'd and supported, thar, as I have suggested, it is not easy to imagine whence their Lenity and Tenderness for the Theatre can proceed. But if the true Reason of it, whatever it is, and which is so hard to be accounted for, were remov'd, and our Divines would interest themselves with Zeal in the Cause of Vertue, in respect to our Dramatick Entertainments, as they espouse and defend it in all other Instances, I cannot believe that the Stage, without a Regulation, would be able to stand, when batter'd with Vigor from the Pulpit. The Poets and Players would soon find themselves oblig'd to restrain their licentious Conduct, reform the Theatre, and present to the Town, if not instructive, at least inoffensive and unshocking Diversions. And it is very desirable, that this Expedient were set on foot, that the Honour of the *English* Theatre may be retriev'd; that while we justly boast of our Priority in Wit and Humour to our Neighbours, we may not be oblig'd to acknowledge the great Inferiority of our Comedies, in respect of Cleanness and moral Beauty: that we may not be reproach'd, that while we profess a Reform'd and pure Religion, we encourage an immodest and unreform'd Theatre, and that we are very defective in the Practice of Vertue and Regularity of Manners, while these Abominations are indulg'd, and these unhallow'd Groves and High Places of Immorality are frequented without Disturbance.

[Illustration]

No 45 The FREE-HOLDER

No 45 Friday, May 25.

Nimium risus pretium esi si probitatis impendis constat Quintil.

Laughter is bought too dear, if it be at the expence of honesty.

I have lately read, with much pleasure, the Essays upon several subjects published by Sir *Richard Blackmore*; and though I agree with him in many of his excellent observations, I cannot but take that reasonable freedom, which he himself makes use of, with regard to other writers, to dissent from him in some few particulars. In his reflexions upon works of wit and humour, he observes how unequal they are to combate vice and folly; and seems to think, that the finest rallery and satire, though directed by these generous views, never reclaimed one vicious man, or made one fool depart from his folly.

This is a position very hard to be contradicted, because no Author knows the number or names of his converts. As for the *Tatlers* and *Spectators* in particular, which are obliged to this ingenious and useful Author for the character he has given of them, they were so generally dispersed in single sheets, and have since been printed in so great numbers, that it is to be hoped they have made some proselytes to the interests, if not to the practice of wisdom and virtue, among such a multitude of readers.

I need not remind this learned Gentleman, that *Socrates*, who was the greatest propagator of morality in the heathen world, and a martyr for the Unity of the Godhead, was so famous for the exercise of this talent among the politest people of antiquity, that he gained the name of [Greek: ha Eibôn] *the Drôle*.

There are very good effects which visibly arose from the above-mentioned performances and others of the like nature; as, in the first place, they diverted rallery from improper objects, and gave a new turn to ridicule, which for many years had been exerted on persons and things of a sacred and serious nature. They endeavoured to make mirth instructive, and, if they failed in this great end, they must be allowed at least to have made it innocent. If wit and humour begin again to relapse into their former licentiousness, they can never hope for approbation from those who know that rallery is useless when it has no moral under it, and pernicious when it attacks any thing that is either unblameable or praise-worthy. To this we may add, what has been commonly observed, that it is not difficult to be merry on the side of vice, as serious objects act the most capable of ridicule; as the party, which naturally favour such a mirth, is the most numerous; and as there are the most standing jests and patterns for imitation in this kind of writing.

In the next place: Such productions of wit and humour, as have a tendency to expose vice and folly, furnish useful diversions to all kinds of readers. The good or prudent man may, by these means, be diverted without prejudice to his discretion, or morality. Rallery, under such regulations, unbends the mind from serious studies and severer contemplations, without throwing it off from its proper bias. It carries on the same design that is promoted by Authors of a graver turn, and only does it in another

manner. It also awakens reflexion in those who are the most indifferent in the cause of virtue or knowledge, by setting before them the absurdity of such practices as are generally unobserved, by reason of their being common or fashionable: Nay, it sometimes catches the dissolute and abandoned before they are aware of it: who are often betrayed to laugh at themselves, and upon reflexion find, that they are merry at their own expence. I might farther take notice, that by entertainments of this kind, a man may be chearful in solitude, and not be forced to seek for company every time he has a mind to be merry.

The last advantage I shall mention from compositions of this nature when thus restrained, is, that they shew wisdom and virtue are far from being inconsistent with politeness and good humour. They make morality appear amiable to people of gay dispositions, and refute the common objection against religion, which represents it as only fit for gloomy and melancholy tempers. It was the motto of a Bishop very eminent for his piety and good works in King *Charles* the Second's reign, *In servi Deo & lætare*, 'Serve God and be chearful.' Those therefore who supply the world with such entertainments of mirth as are instructive, or at least harmless, may be thought to deserve well of mankind; to which I shall only add, that they retrieve the honour of polite learning, and answer those sour Enthusiasts who affect to stigmatize the finest and most elegant Authors, both ancient and modern, (which they have never read) as dangerous to religion, and destructive of all sound and saving knowledge.

Our nation are such lovers of mirth and humour, that it is impossible for detached papers, which come out on stated days, either to have a general run, or long continuance, if they are not diversified and enlivened from time to time, with subjects and thoughts, accommodated to this taste, which so prevails among our countrymen. No periodical Author, who always maintains his gravity, and does not sometimes sacrifice to the Graces, must expect to keep in vogue for any considerable time. Political speculations in particular, however just and important, are of so dry and austere a nature, that they will not go down with the public without frequent seasonings of this kind. The work may be well performed, but will never take, if it is not set off with proper scenes and decorations. A mere Politician is but a dull companion, and, if he is always wise, is in great danger of being tiresom or ridiculous.

Besides, papers of entertainment are necessary to increase the number of readers, especially among those of different notions and principles; who by this means may be betrayed to give you a fair hearing, and to know what you have to say for yourself. I might likewise observe, that in all political writings there is something that grates upon the mind of the most candid reader, in opinions which are not conformable to his own way of thinking; and that the harshness of reasoning is not a little softned and smoothed by the infusions of mirth and pleasantry.

Political speculations do likewise furnish us with several objects that may very innocently be ridiculed, and which are regarded as such by men of sense in all parties; of this kind are the passions of our States-women, and the reasonings of our Fox-hunters.

A Writer who makes fame the chief end of his endeavours, and would be more desirous of pleasing than of improving his readers, might find an inexhaustible fund of mirth in politics. Scandal and satire are never-failing gratifications to the public. Detraction and obloquy are received with as much eagerness as wit and humour. Should a writer single out particular persons, or point his rallery at any order of men, who by their profession ought to be exempt from it; should he slander the innocent, or satirize the miserable; or should he, even on the proper subjects of derision, give the full play to his mirth, without regard to decency and good-manners; he might be sure of pleasing a great part of his readers, but must be a very ill man, if by such a proceeding he could please himself.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ESSAY UPON WIT ***

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