

***From A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage
(1698)¹***

By Jeremy Collier

[Preface]

Being convinc'd that nothing has gone farther in Debauching the Age than the Stage Poets, and Play-House, I thought I could not employ my time better than in writing against them. These Men sure, take Vertue and Regularity, for great Enemies, why else is their Disaffection so very Remarkable? It must be said, They have made their Attack with great Courage, and gain'd no inconsiderable Advantage. But it seems Lewdness without Atheism, is but half their Business. Conscience might possibly recover, and Revenge be thought on; and therefore like Foot-Pads, they must not only Rob, but Murther. To do them right their Measures are Politickly taken: To make sure work on't, there's nothing like Destroying of Principles; Practise must follow of Course. For to have no good Principles, is to have no Reason to be Good. Now 'tis not to be expected that people should check their Appetites, and balk their Satisfactions, they don't know why. If Virtue has no Prospect, 'tis not worth the owning. Who would be troubled with Conscience if 'tis only a Bugbear, and has nothing in't but Vision, and the Spleen?

My Collection from the English Stage, is much short of what They are able to furnish. An Inventory of their Ware-House would have been a large Work: But being afraid of over charging the Reader, I thought a Pattern might do.

In Translating the Fathers, I have endeavour'd to keep close to their Meaning: However, in some few places, I have taken the Liberty of throwing in a Word or two; To clear the Sense, to preserve the Spirit of the Original, and keep the English upon its Legs.

There's one thing more to acquaint the Reader with; 'Tis that I have Ventured to change the Terms of Mistress and Lover, for others somewhat more Plain, but much more Proper. I don't look upon This as any failure in Civility. As Good and Evil are different in Themselves, so they ought to be differently Mark'd. To confound them in Speech, is the way to confound them in Practise. Ill Qualities ought to have ill Names, to prevent their being Catching. Indeed Things are in a great measure Govern'd by Words: To Guild over a foul Character, serves only to perplex the Idea, to encourage the Bad, and mislead the Unwary. To treat Honour, and Infamy alike, is an injury to Virtue, and a sort of Levelling in Morality. I confess, I have no Ceremony for Debauchery. For to Compliment Vice, is but one Remove from worshipping the Devil.

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[Introduction]

The business of Plays is to recomend Virtue, and discountenance Vice; To shew the Uncertainty of Humane Greatness, the suddain Turns of Fate, and the Unhappy Conclusions of Violence and Injustice: 'Tis to expose the Singularities of Pride and Fancy, to make Folly and Falsehood contemptible, and to bring every Thing that is Ill Under Infamy, and Neglect. This Design has been oddly pursued by the English Stage. Our Poets write with a different View, and are gone into an other Interest. 'Tis true, were their Intentions fair, they might be Serviceable to this Purpose. They have in a great measure the Springs of Thought and Inclination in their Power. Show, Musick, Action, and Rhetorick, are moving Entertainments; and rightly employ'd would be very {2}significant. But Force and Motion are Things indifferent, and the Use lies chiefly in the Application. These Advantages are now, in the Enemies Hand, and under a very dangerous Management. Like Cannon seized they are pointed the wrong way, and by the Strength of the Defence the Mischief is made the greater. That this Complaint is not unreasonable I shall endeavour to prove by shewing the Misbehaviour of the Stage with respect to Morality, and Religion. Their Liberties, in the Following Particulars are intolerable. viz. Their Smuttiness of Expression; Their Swearing, Profainness, and Lewd Application of Scripture; Their Abuse of the Clergy; Their making their Top Characters Libertines, and giving them Success in their Debauchery. This Charge, with some other Irregularities, I shall make good against the Stage, and shew both the Novelty and Scandal of the Practise. And first, I shall begin with the Rankness, and Indecency of their Language.

[from Chapter 1, The Immodesty of the Stage]

[...] To argue the Matter more at large.

Smuttiness is a Fault in Behaviour as well as in Religion. 'Tis a very Coarse Diversion, the Entertainment of those who are generally least both in Sense, and Station. The looser part of the Mob, have no true relish of Decency and Honour, and want Education, and Thought, to furnish out a gentile Conversation. Barrenness of Fancy makes them often take up with those Scandalous Liberties. A Vitious Imagination may blot a great deal of Paper at this rate with ease enough: And 'tis possible Convenience may sometimes invite to the Expedient. The Modern Poets seem to use Smut as the Old Ones did Machines, to relieve a fainting Invention. When Pegasus is jaded, and would stand still, he is apt like other Tits to run into every Puddle.

bscenity in any Company is a rustick uncreditable Talent; but among Women 'tis particularly rude. Such Talk would be very affrontive in Conversation, and not endur'd by any Lady of Reputation. Whence then comes it to Pass that those Liberties which disoblige so much in Conversation, should entertain upon the Stage. Do the Women leave all the regards to Decency and Conscience behind them when they come to the Play-House? Or does the Place transform their Inclinations, and turn their former Aversions into Pleasure? Or were Their pretences to Sobriety elsewhere nothing but Hypocrisy and Grimace? Such Suppositions as these are all Satyr

and Invective: They are rude Imputations upon the whole Sex. To treat the Ladys with such stuff is no better than taking their Money to abuse them. It supposes their Imagination vitious, and their Memories ill furnish'd: That they are practised in the Language of the Stews, and pleas'd with the Scenes of Brutishness. When at the same time the Customs of Education, and the Laws of Decency, are so very cautious, and reserv'd in regard to Women: I say so very reserv'd, that 'tis almost a Fault for them to Understand they are ill Used. {8} They can't discover their Disgust without disadvantage, nor Blush without disservice to their Modesty. To appear with any skill in such Cant, looks as if they had fallen upon ill Conversation; or Managed their Curiosity amiss. In a word, He that treats the Ladys with such Discourse, must conclude either that they like it, or they do not. To suppose the first, is a gross Reflection upon their Virtue. And as for the latter case, it entertains them with their own Aversion; which is ill Nature, and ill Manners enough in all Conscience. And in this Particular, Custom and Conscience, the Forms of Breeding, and the Maxims of Religion are on the same side. In other Instances Vice is often too fashionable; But here a Man can't be a Sinner, without being a Clown.

In this respect the Stage is faulty to a Scandalous degree of Nauseousness and Aggravation. For

1st. The Poets make Women speak Smuttily. Of This the Places before mention'd are sufficient Evidence: And if there was occasion they might be Multiplied to a much greater Number: Indeed the Comedies are seldom clear of these Blemishes: And sometimes you have them in Tragedy. [...]

2ly. They Represent their single Ladys, and Persons of Condition, under these Disorders of Liberty, This makes the Irregularity still more Monstrous and a greater Contradiction to Nature, and Probability: But rather than not be Vitious, they will venture to spoil a Character. [...]

3dly. They have oftentimes not so much as the poor refuge of a Double Meaning to fly to. So that you are under a necessity either of taking Ribaldry or Nonsense. And when the Sentence has two Handles, the worst is generally turn'd to the Audience. The Matter is so Contrived that the Smut and Scum of the Thought rises uppermost; And like a Picture drawn to Sight, looks always upon the Company.

4ly. And which is still more extraordinary: the Prologues, and Epilogues are sometimes Scandalous to the last degree. [...] Now here properly speaking the Actors quit the Stage, and remove from Fiction, into Life. Here they converse with the Boxes, and Pit, and address directly to the Audience. These Preliminarie and concluding Parts, are design'd to justify the Conduct of the Play, and bespeak the Favour of the Company. Upon such Occasions one would imagine if ever, the Ladys should be used with Respect, and the Measures of Decency observ'd, But here we have Lewdness without Shame or Example: Here the Poet exceeds himself. Here are such Strains as would turn the Stomach, of an ordinary Debauchee, and be almost nauseous in the Stews. And to make it the more agreeable, Women are Commonly pick'd out for this Service. Thus the Poet Courts the good opinion of the Audience. This is the Desert he regales the Ladys with at the Close of the Entertainment: It seems He thinks They have admirable Palats! Nothing

can be a greater Breach of Manners then such Liberties as these. If a Man would study to outrage Quality and Vertue, he could not do it more Effectually. But:

5thly. Smut is still more insufferable with respect to Religion. The Heathen Religion was in a great Measure a Mystery of Iniquity. Lewdness was Consecrated in the Temples, as well as practised in the Stews. Their Deitys were great Examples of Vice, and worship'd with their own Inclination. 'Tis no wonder therefore their Poetry should be tinctured with their Belief, and that the Stage should borrow some of the Liberties of their Theology. This made Mercurys Procuring, and Jupiters Adultery the more passable in *Amphitruon*. Upon this Score Gymnasium is less Monstrous in Praying the Gods to send her store of Gallants. And thus Chærea defends his Adventure by the Precedent of Jupiter and Danæ. But the Christian Religion is quite of an other Complexion. Both its Precepts, and Authorities, are the highest discouragement to Licentiousness. It forbids the remotest Tendencies to Evil, Banishes the Follies of Conversation, and Obliges up to Sobriety of Thought. That which might pass for Raillery, and Entertainment in Heathenism, is detestable in Christianity. The Restraint of the Precept, and the Quality of the Deity, and the Expectations of Futurity quite alter the Case. [...]

[from Chapter 4, The Stage-Poets Make Their Principal Persons Vicious and Reward Them at the End of the Play]

[...] Indeed to make Delight the main business of Comedy is an unreasonable and dangerous Principle. It opens the way to all Licentiousness, and Confounds the distinction between Mirth, and Madness. For if Diversion is the Chief End, it must be had at any Price, No serviceable Expedient must be refused, tho' never so scandalous. And thus the worst Things are said, and best abus'd; Religion is insulted, and the most serious Matters turn'd into Ridicule! As if the Blindside of an Audience ought to be caress'd, and their Folly and Atheism entertain'd in the first Place. Yes, if the Palate is pleas'd, no matter tho' the Body is Poyson'd! For can one die of an easier Disease than Diversion? But Raillery apart, certainly Mirth and Laughing, without respect to the Cause, are not such supreme Satisfactions! A man has sometimes Pleasure in losing his Wits. Frensy, and Possession, will shake the Lungs, and brighten the Face; and yet I suppose they are not much to be coveted. However, now we know the Reason of the Profaness, and Obscenity of the Stage, of their Hellish Cursing, and Swearing, and in short of their great Industry to make God, and Goodness Contemptible: 'Tis all to Satisfie the Company, and make People Laugh! A most admirable justification! What can be more engaging to an Audience, then to see a Poet thus Atheistically brave? To see him charge up to the Canons Mouth, and defy the Vengeance of Heaven to serve them? Besides, there may be somewhat of Convenience in the Case. To fetch Diversion out of Innocence is no such easy matter. There's no succeeding it may be in this method, without Sweat, and Drudging. Clean Wit, inoffensive Humour, and handsom Contrivance, require Time, and Thought. And who would be at this Expence, when the Purchase is so cheap another way? 'Tis possible a Poet may not alwaies have Sense enough by him for such an Occasion. And since we are upon supposals, it may be the Audience is not to be gain'd without straining a Point, and giving a Loose to Conscience: And when People are sick, are they

not to be Humour'd? In sine, We must make them Laugh, right or wrong, for Delight is the Cheif End of Comedy. Delight! He should have said Debauchery: That's the English of the Word, and the Consequence of the Practise. But the Original Design of Comedy was otherwise: And granting 'twas not so, what then? If the Ends of Thing are naught, they must be mended. Mischief is the Chief end of Malice, would it be then a Blemish in Ill Nature to change Temper, and relent into Goodness? The Chief End of a Madman it may be is to Fire a House, must we not therefore bind him in his Bed? To conclude. If Delight without Restraint, or Distinction without Conscience or Shame, is the Supream Law of Comedy, 'twere well if we had less on't. Arbitrary Pleasure, is more dangerous than Arbitrary Power. Nothing is more Brutal than to be abandon'd to Appetite; And nothing more wretched than to serve in such a Design. [...]