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A

LETTER

TO A

LADY

Concerning the

NEW

Play House.

Ag't Plays.

L O N D O N,

Printed and Sold by Joseph Downing in Bartho-
lomew Close near West-Smithfield, 1706.

17. *Januar.* 5.



*A Letter to a L A D Y con-
cerning the New Play-
House.*

Madam,

IT was methought with some more than ordinary Satisfaction that you seem'd, when I was last to wait upon your Ladiship, to speak of the pleasant and convenient Scituation of your House, as being near the Court, open to the Park, and but a little way from the New-Playhouse which is lately Built in your Neighbourhood. And it came into my Head, after I was gone from you, that this last, being the only new convenience of your House (for it was as near the Court and the Park before as now) was consequently what did then most sensibly affect you. I forgot then to ask your Ladiship at whose Charge that Topping Playhouse was Built ; but I can't but think that the Money contributed towards it, would have been much better bestow'd in Building of Churches ; of which at your End of the Town, there is, I'm sure, much greater want than of Playhouses ; tho' I fear they

that were most free of their Money towards the one, would have been most backward in contributing towards the other. I can't but suspect, Madam, (tho' I hope I am mistaken in it) that your Ladiship has lent an helping Hand to this Work; but I'm sure your Discourse gave me Ground enough to believe, that you intend now it is finish'd, to partake of the Benefit of it, and to see Plays more frequently than you could conveniently do, especially in the Winter season, while the Playhouses were at a greater distance. I beg leave therefore, Madam, with all submission, to lay before your Ladiship my Thoughts concerning this matter; begging Pardon for my Boldness in offering to give my Advice unask'd, and a favourable Interpretation of what I shall say.

And, that I may not lay a stumbling Block at the Threshold, I do not now affirm that it is absolutely and altogether unlawful ever to go to see a Play; but this, I hope, I may say with less offence; that to frequent the Playhouse in the condition 'tis now in, is not a matter of *good Report*; that it is a thing which a good Christian may very well have some Scruples about, and consequently that it is much safer to be forborn, especially when no good Reason can be given for going to see a Play, but only for Diversion sake, and *that* end may as well be serv'd other ways, by such Sports and Recreations as are
more

more evidently innocent and *blameless*.

More *blameless*? you'll say; why, what Harm is there, or can there be, in seeing those things acted upon the Stage, which, while we live in the World, and converse among Men, we can't but see acted every Day upon the great Stage or Theatre of the World? And there is certainly no more than this in seeing a Play; for we see nothing at the Playhouse, but what we see every Day in walking the Streets; A Play is but a Picture, which therefore we may certainly look upon as innocently as upon the thing which it is the Picture of; and while we disapprove the Action or thing Represented, we may be pleas'd with the Art and Skill of the Painter. And indeed after all the noise and clamour that has been of late Years rais'd against Plays, and all the Complaints that have been made of the Looseness and Immorality of the Stage, the worst Plays that have been acted (nay, the worse the better in this respect) are but true Pictures and lively Representations of the things that are seen every Day and every where; and there's nothing worse ever to be seen within the Playhouse, than is to be seen without.

Give me leave, Madam, to answer; There's a great deal of difference between doing a thing by Constraint, and doing it by Choice; while we live in the World, and converse among Men, it is necessary that we should have our
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Eyes and our Ears open, because otherwise we shall not be able to do any Business; we shall be altogether unfit for Society; And while our Eyes and our Ears are open, it must needs be that in a Wicked World, we must see and hear a great deal of Wickedness: But if we could know beforehand what things would be at any time presented to our Senses, we might shut them up, and if we did really abominate all Wickedness as much as we ought to do, we should shut them up at those times when we foresaw any Evil or Wickedness would be presented to them. For we do so in other cases; If we happen to have a Glimpse of any very unclean or loathsome Object, we instantly turn away our Eyes from it, and will see as little of it as we can; Or if any harsh and very ungrateful Noise reaches our Ears, we presently stop them, and will endure to hear no more of it. And what sight can be more filthy and loathsome than the sight of Sin and Wickedness? What Noise can be more harsh and ungrateful to a Pious Ear, than Swearing, Blasphemy, Prophaneness, and filthy Communication? It is our great unhappiness therefore, that while we live in this World, we can't avoid sometimes Seeing and Hearing these things: But it is our own Fault only if we *choose* to see and hear such things when we may avoid it; and to go out of our way on *purpose* to see and hear such things, I can't but think an Argument

ment that we have not so great an abhorrence of them as we ought to have.

Our Case in this World is like that of *Lot* while he dwelt in *Sodom*; In so wicked a Place as that was, he could not but see a great deal of wickedness; but how was he affected by it? Was he delighted with it? Did he take Pleasure therein? No; but that good Man was *vexed with the filthy Conversation of the Wicked*; The Scripture says; *That Righteous Man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing vexed his righteous Soul from Day to Day with their unlawful Deeds.* And this was right; this what every good Man in such case ought to do; He should be vex'd at that wickedness which he can't prevent, and mourn for those Sins of others which he can't but see. But how can they be thought to vex and mourn for the Wickedness that is acted upon the Stage, who not only choose to see it when they might avoid it, but also take great Delight therein; who chuse it for their Pastime, Recreation and Divertisement? If therefore that good Man did well and gave good Example, in being vexed with the filthy Conversation of the wicked among whom he liv'd, the least, I think, that can be said of those that choose such Conversation, and take Delight therein, is, that they do not well in so doing; that they do not give good Example thereby; which yet is what every Christian ought to do; what,

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I'm confident, your Ladship means to do; and what I verily believe you do in other Instances.

But I fear this is not the *most* nor the *worst* that may truly be said of those that go to Plays; I doubt, if the matter be well considered, it will appear, that the Frequenters of the Playhouse are more than *meer* Spectators of the wickedness that is acted there; for if it be granted, that he who in acting the Part of another upon the Stage, says, or does any ill thing, does really speak or do it, as much as if he had been in another Place, and in his own Cloths, and is guilty of the same Fault that he would have been guilty of, in saying or doing the same thing at another time. (which I think is what must be granted; for there is no such thing as committing a Sin in Jest; Or such *Jesting*, however it may be intended; I'm sure *is not convenient, nor such as becometh Saints*) If therefore, I say, it be granted, that *Swearing is Swearing*, and that *Prophaneness is Prophaneness*, and that *Ridiculing Religion and Sacred things is Ridiculing Religion and Sacred things*, whether the same be done by an Actor upon the Stage, or by another Man elsewhere, (and is rather of the two, worse upon the Stage, because done more publickly and before more Company than the same thing could well be done at another time) I do not see how they who, by going to Plays, do give
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Encouragement to the doing of these things; can excuse themselves from being Accessaries to the wickedness that is Acted there. For most certainly, he that hires another to do any ill thing, is at least an Accessary to it, and a Partaker in it; and I do not believe that they that make it their Business to Act Plays, would do so if they were not hired to it by the Spectators.

But perhaps it will be said, that this Censure of Plays is too harsh and severe; that the true Design of them, is to commend Virtue and to expose Vice; so that they may rather be reckon'd profitable than hurtful; there being, without doubt, in that great variety of Tempers that Men are of, some Persons that would sooner be laugh'd out of their Vices, than dissuaded from them by graver Discourse.

If this was indeed the Design of all Plays, and if this Design was always well prosecuted, much more might be said for going to see Plays than can be now; And, for my own Part, I should be so far from being an Enemy to them, that I should rather advise such Persons as your Ladship is; such, I mean, as are of plentiful Fortunes, and have much time lying upon their Hands, to spend now and then an Hour or two in the doing what might be at the same time both Diverting and profitable. But when we are to give a short Judgment concerning any thing in general, which, as it may be cir-
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cumstantiated, may be sometimes innocent, and sometimes bad, we must consider the thing as it generally and for the most part is; and then, I say, and 'tis what I believe they that have seen or read most of the Plays of our time must own, that for the generality they seem rather as if they were written with a quite contrary Design: I mean, as if they were design'd to expose and ridicule Virtue, and to make Vice appear glorious and praise-worthy. I must own, Madam, that I am not so competent a Judge of this as some others may be, nor perhaps as your Ladship is; for I never in my Life saw a Play, and have not read very many; a few of them were sufficient to give me a Surfeit, and I never car'd for them since; but so far as I can make a Judgment from those which I have Read, (and I'm sure I never chose to read the worst) their Design is as wicked as their Composure. For who, and what is He that in our Modern Plays is commonly shewn as a Pattern to be imitated, the Hero of the Play, or the accomplish'd Gentleman? What is he, I say, for the most part, but some accomplish'd Debauchee, that regards neither God nor Man, who's above the Discipline of Priestcraft, and can commit all manner of Wickedness with a boon Grace? Or, if he be not quite so bad as this, yet his greatest Accomplishments usually are, that he's well Skill'd in Fashions and Courtship and the Humours of
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the Town; This is the Man that is usually shewn to the Spectators as one whose Example 'tis fit all the Young Nobility and Gentry should conform themselves to; and I'm sure they do it too much. And on the other side, what's he that from one End of the Play to the other, is Represented as very Silly and Ridiculous beyond all the rest of Mankind? Is it not commonly one that has more Religion and more Conscience than the rest? One that has not yet worn off all the Impressions of a good and sober Education? One that can't Swear cleverly, nor Damn roundly, nor Sin impudently? Who therefore, as often as his Turn comes to appear upon the Stage, is jested upon, and laugh'd at by all the rest, as Superstitious, as Priest-ridden, or as a Puritan and Precisian, or at best as one that has been course-ly and countrily Bred? I have not, I confess, so much minded the Womens Characters; your Ladiship, I suppose, may have done that better; but in those Plays which I have happen'd to Read, very few Women have ever been brought upon the Stage but under the notion of Bawds, Whores, or Jilts, or such as were easie to be wrought upon. Which Respect commonly given by the Playmakers to the Fair Sex, should methinks work in the Ladies some Resentment; it should methinks somewhat abate of their Forwardness to go to see themselves abus'd. I'm confident the

Part of a truly Virtuous and Religious Woman is very rarely acted upon the Stage, or if it be, that 'tis very untowardly Represented. Tell me, Madam, if you can, in what Play the Character of any such Lady is set off with Commendation? In what Play is it mention'd to the Honour of the Lady spoken of, that she does spend a good Part of every Day in her Closet, and of many Days in the Church; that she Suckles her own Children, and when they are grown capable, Instructs them in the Catechism, and Teaches them to say their Prayers; that she looks well to the Affairs of her House, and keeps good orders in her Family; that she is helpful to her Afflicted Neighbours, Just to Tradesmen and Shopkeepers, and Bountiful to the Poor; that she is faithful and obedient to her own Husband? &c. Nay, tell me, Madam, (for I should be glad to hear it, and I don't remember that in the Plays I have Read, I have observ'd it) where in any of our Modern Plays, Religion it self is well spoken of, or treated with decent Respect? Where any Text of Scripture is ever cited or alluded to but in Burlesque and Abuse? Where the Name of God is ever mention'd but in Prophaneness? Where a Minister is ever brought upon the Stage but to be abus'd, and laugh'd at? In a word, tell me the Play, that if it was well purg'd of all its Prophaneness, Irreligion and Obscenity, would not have its whole Plot almost spoil'd

spoil'd thereby, and be rendred very dull and heavy, and unentertaining to the Spectators? I do not affirm that there is not so much as one such Play, but I'm confident there are but few such commonly acted. Is it likely then that such Plays as are acted for the most part, and with the greatest Applause, should help to reform the World? Is it not more likely that they should, and is it not very plain by Experience that they do help very much to debauch and corrupt it?

But be that, you'll say to the Playmakers themselves, that is none of your Fault, that's not what you desir'd, or are pleas'd with. And as bad as most Plays are, yet some are better than others; and therefore you hope that they who make a Difference (as you do) and knowing before hand what Play will be Acted, never go to any but such as are more innocently diverting, and in which there is little or nothing that can justly give offence to the most chaste and pious Ears, are not liable to the same Blame with those that go to all Plays alike.

Not indeed to the *same* Blame, I grant; but if they are liable to any Blame at all, that's reason enough to forbear going to any Plays. And I doubt they can hardly be blameless who do any ways encourage or help to uphold a Trade or Profession of Men which even in their
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own Judgment, does a great deal of Hurt in the World; I say, even in their own Judgment; for why else do they make a Difference? Why, when they allow themselves to go to some Plays, do they not allow themselves to go to others, but only because they are sensible that there are some Plays acted that are not fit to be seen? And yet they that act the one, act the other, and find their Interest in both alike.

But whether the Trade of an Actor be a lawful Trade or not, I'm sure 'tis not a Trade of good Reputation; and I believe there is hardly any Man that either is or would be taken to be a Man of Conscience, who would chuse to bring up his Son to be a Player, altho' it were a more gainful Employment than any other that he could bring him up to.

And however some People, who are it may be thought or esteemed Virtuous or Religious, may satisfy themselves in sometimes going to see a Play for their Diversion, I believe there are very few, even of these, but who would blame a Clergyman, if they should happen to see him there. And why so, I pray? For if the thing be harmless and unreprouable, why may not a Clergyman do it as well as another Man? For what Law of God is a Clergyman subject to (except those that relate particularly to the Discharge of his Ministerial Office) which all other Christians are not also oblig'd by?

by? And if seeing a Play be an innocent Diversion, I think it must be granted to be a Scholarlike Diversion enough; why then should you censure your Minister for doing that, which you think you your self may do without Blame? You'll say, perhaps, (for I know not what else you can well say) that he does not well to be seen there, because he is oblig'd, by virtue of his Character and Office, to shew himself in all things a Pattern of good Works, and to be a good Example to the Flock: But you can't say this without supposing that going to Plays is a matter of some ill Example; and if so, then I say 'tis what all Christians ought to forbear as well as 'he; for whoever he be that gives ill Example in any thing, deserves blame for so doing, tho' it may be a greater Fault in one Man than in another. For even *Servants*, the Scripture Teaches, *are to Adorn the Doctrine of God our Saviour in all things*; and if so, much rather are Masters and Mistresses bound to do the same; and 'tis an Advice given in Scripture, not only to Clergymen, but to all Christians, that they should *abstain from all Appearance of Evil*.

I did not mean, Madam, when I first set Pen to Paper, to have given your Ladship the trouble of so long a Letter; but it would be now but an Addition to the Trouble I have given you, to make Excuses and beg Pardon for what

I have done. I only desire therefore, that what
Opinion soever you shall have of my Advice
you will please to believe that I am, with all
sincerity,

Madam,

Your Ladiship's,

Michaelmas day,
Sept. 29th, 1705.

most humble and

most obedient Servant

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