

# Preface to the Tragedies

Hannah More  
1830

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# **PREFACE TO THE TRAGEDIES.**

**by**

# HANNAH MORE.

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I am desirous to anticipate a censure which the critical reader will be ready to bring forward on the apparent inconsistency between the contents of this Volume, composed of dramatic pieces, and several sentiments not unfrequently introduced in some of the other Volumes, respecting the dangerous tendency of certain public amusements, in which dramatic entertainments will be naturally included. The candid reader will be able to solve the paradox, when it is intimated at what different periods of life these different pieces were written. The dates, if they were regularly preserved, would explain that the seeming disagreement does not involve a contradiction, as it proceeds not from an inconsistency, but from a revolution in the sentiments of the Author.

From my youthful course of reading, and early habits of society and conversation, aided perhaps by that natural but

secret bias which the inclination gives to the judgment, I had been led to entertain that common, but, as I must now think, delusive and groundless hope, that the Stage, under certain regulations, might be converted into a school of virtue; and thus, like many others, inferred, by a seemingly reasonable conclusion, that though a bad play would always be a bad thing, yet the representation of a good one might become not only harmless but useful; and that it required nothing more than a correct judgment and a critical selection, to transform a pernicious pleasure into a profitable entertainment.

On these grounds, (while perhaps, as was intimated above, it was nothing more than the indulgence of a propensity,) I was led to flatter myself that it might be rendering that inferior service to society, which the fabricator of safe and innocent amusements may reasonably be supposed to confer, to attempt some theatrical compositions, which, whatever other defects might be justly imputable to them, should at least be found to have been written on the side of virtue and modesty; and which should neither hold out any corrupt image to the mind, nor any impure description to the fancy.

As the following pieces were written and performed at an early period of my life, under the above impressions, I feel it a kind of duty (imploing pardon for the unavoidable egotism to which it leads), not to send them afresh into the world in this collection, without prefixing to them a candid declaration of my altered view. In so doing, I am fully aware that I equally subject myself to the opposite censures of two different classes of readers, one of which will think that the best evidence of my sincerity would have been the suppression of the Tragedies

themselves, while the other will reprobate the change of sentiment which gives birth to the qualifying preface.

I should perhaps have been inclined to adopt the first of these two opinions, had it not occurred to me that the suppression would be thought disingenuous; and had I not been also desirous of grounding on the publication, though in a very cursory manner, my sentiments on the general tendency of the drama; for it appeared but fair and candid to include in this view my own compositions; and thus, in some measure, though without adverting to them, to involve myself in the general object of my animadversions, and to take my own plays as the text from which I preach.

I am not, however, even now about to controvert the assertion of some of the ablest critics, that a well-written tragedy is perhaps one of the noblest efforts of the human mind;—I am not even now about to deny, that of all public amusements it is the most interesting, the most intellectual, and the most accommodated to the taste and capacities of a rational being; nay, that it is almost the only one which has *mind* for its object; the only one which has the combined advantage of addressing itself to the imagination, the judgment, and the heart; that it is the only public diversion which calls out the higher energies of the understanding in the composition, and awakens the most lively and natural feelings of the heart in the representation.

With all this decided superiority in point of mental pleasure which the Stage possesses over every other species of public entertainment, it is not to be wondered at that its admirers and advocates, even the most respectable, should cherish a hope,

that under certain restrictions, and under an improved form, it might be made to contribute to instruction as well as to pleasure; and it is on this plausible ground that we have heard so many ingenious defences of this species of amusement.

What the stage might be under another and an imaginary state of things, it is not very easy for us to know, and therefore not very important to enquire. Nor is it indeed the soundest logic to argue on the *possible* goodness of a thing, which, in the present circumstances of society is doing positive evil, from the imagined good that thing might be conjectured to produce in a supposed state of unattainable improvement. Would it not be more safe and simple to determine our judgment as to the character of the thing in question on the more visible, and therefore more rational grounds of its actual state, and from the effects which it is known to produce in that state?

For, unfortunately, this Utopian good cannot be produced, until not only the Stage itself has undergone a complete purification, but until the audience shall be purified also. For we must first suppose a state of society in which the spectators will be disposed to relish all that is pure, and to reprobate all that is corrupt, before the system of a pure and uncorrupt theatre can be adopted with any reasonable hope of success. There must always be a congruity between the taste of the spectator and the nature of the spectacle, in order to effect that point of union which can produce pleasure: for it must be remembered that people go to a play not to be *instructed*, but to be *pleased*. As we do not send the blind to an exhibition of pictures, nor the deaf to a concert, so it would be leaving the projected plan of a pure Stage in a state of imperfection, unless the general

corruption of human nature itself were so reformed as to render the amusements of a perfectly purified Stage palatable. If the sentiments and passions exhibited were no longer accommodated to the sentiments and passions of the audience, corrupt nature would soon withdraw itself from the vapid and inappropriate amusement; and *thin*, I will not say *empty*, benches would too probably be the reward of the conscientious reformer.

Far be it from me to wish to restore that obsolete rubbish, compounded of ignorance and superstition, with which the monkish legends furnished out the rude materials of our early drama. I mean those uncouth pieces, in which, under the titles of *Mysteries* and *Moralities*, the most sacred persons were introduced as interlocutors; in which events too solemn for exhibition, and subjects too awful for detail, were brought before the audience with a formal gravity more offensive than levity itself. The superstitions of the cloister were considered as suitable topics for the diversions of the Stage; and celestial intelligences, uttering the sentiments and language, and blended with the buffooneries, of Bartholomew Fair, were regarded as appropriate subjects of merry-making for a holiday audience. But from this holy mummery, at which piety, taste, and common sense would be equally revolted, I return to the existing state of things.<sup>1</sup>

I have never perused any of those treatises, excellent as some of them are said to be, which pious divines have written against the pernicious tendency of theatrical entertainments. The convictions of my mind have arisen solely from experience and observation. I shall not, therefore, go over the well-trodden

ground of those who have inveighed, with too much justice, against the immoral lives of too many stage professors, allowing always for some very honourable exceptions. I shall not remark on the gross and palpable corruptions of those plays which are obviously written with an open disregard to all purity and virtue; nor shall I attempt to show whether any very material advantage would arise to the vain and the dissipated, were they to exclude the theatre from its turn in their indiscriminated round of promiscuous pleasure. But I would coolly and respectfully address a few words to those many worthy and conscientious persons, who would not perhaps so early and incautiously expose their youthful offspring to the temptations of this amusement, if they themselves could be brought to see and to feel the existence of its dangers.

The question, then, which with great deference I would propose, is not whether those who risk every thing may not risk this also; but whether the more correct and considerate Christian might not find it worth while to consider whether the amusement in question be entirely compatible with his avowed character? whether it be altogether consistent with the clearer views of one who professes to live in the sure and certain hope of that immortality which is brought to light by the Gospel?

For however weighty the arguments in favour of the superior *rationality* of plays may be found in the scale, when a rational being puts one amusement in the balance against another;— however fairly he may oppose the Stage to other diversions, as being more adapted to a man of sense;—yet this, perhaps, will not quite vindicate it in the opinion of the more scrupulous Christian, who will not allow himself to think that of two evils

*either* may be chosen. *His* amusements must be blameless as well as ingenious; safe as well as rational; moral as well as intellectual. They must have nothing in them which may be likely to excite any of the tempers which it is his daily task to subdue; any of the passions which it is his constant business to keep in order. *His* chosen amusements must not deliberately add "to the weight" which he is commanded "to lay aside;" they should not irritate the "besetting sin" against which he is struggling; they should not obstruct that "spiritual mindedness" which he is told "is life and peace;" they should not inflame that "lust of the flesh, that lust of the eye, and that pride of life" which he is forbidden to gratify. A religious person, who occasionally indulges in an amusement not consonant to his general views and pursuits, inconceivably increases his own difficulties, by whetting tastes, and exciting appetites, which it will cut him out so much work to counteract, as will greatly overbalance, in a conscientious mind, the short and trivial enjoyment. I speak now on the mere question of pleasure. Nay, the more keen his relish for the amusement, the more exquisite his discernment of the beauties of composition, or the graces of action may be, the more prudent he may perhaps find it to deny himself the gratification which is enjoyed at the slightest hazard of his higher interests: a gratification which to him will be the more dangerous in proportion as it is more poignantly enjoyed.

A Christian in our days is seldom called in his ordinary course to great and signal sacrifices, to very striking and very ostensible renunciations; but he is daily called to a quiet, uniform, constant series of self-denial in small things. A dangerous and bewitching, especially if it be not a disreputable, pleasure, may perhaps have a just place among those sacrifices:

and if he be really in earnest, he will not think it too much to renounce such petty enjoyments, were it only from the single consideration that it is well to seize every little occasion which occurs of evidencing to himself that he is constantly on the watch; and of proving to the world, that in small things as well as in great he is a follower of *Him who pleased not himself*.

Little, unobserved, and unostentatious abstinences are among the silent deeds of his daily warfare. And whoever brings himself to exercise this habitual self-denial, even in doubtful cases, will soon learn, from happy experience, that in many instances abstinence is much more easily practised than temperance. There is in this case no excited sensibility to allay; there is no occasional remorse to be quieted; there is no lost ground to be recovered, no difficult backing out, only to get again to the same place where we were before. This observation adopted into practice might, it is presumed, effectually abolish the qualifying language of many of the more *sobber* frequenters of the theatre, "that they go but *seldom*, and never but to a *good play*." We give these moderate and discreet persons all due praise for comparative sobriety. But while they *go at all*, the principle is the same; for they sanction, by going sometimes, a diversion which is not to be defended on strict Christian principles. Indeed their acknowledging that it should be but sparingly frequented, probably arises from a conviction that it is not *quite* right.

I have already remarked, that it is not the object of this address to pursue the usual track of attacking *bad* plays, of which the more prudent and virtuous seldom vindicate the principle, though they do not always scrupulously avoid

attending the exhibition. I impose rather on myself the unpopular task of animadverting on the dangerous effects of those which come under the description of *good* plays; for from those chiefly arises the danger, if danger there be, to good people.

Now, with all the allowed superiority justly ascribed to pieces of a better cast, it does not seem to be a complete justification of the amusement, that the play in question is more chaste in the sentiment, more pure in the expression, and more moral in the tendency than those which are avowedly objectionable; though I readily concede all the degrees of distinction, and very important they are, between such compositions and those of the opposite character. But the point for which I am contending is of another and of a distinct nature; namely, that there will, generally speaking, still remain, even in Tragedies otherwise the most unexceptionable,—provided they are sufficiently impassioned to produce a powerful effect on the feelings, and have spirit enough to deserve to become popular;—there will still remain an essential radical defect. What I insist on is, that there almost inevitably runs through the whole web of the Tragic Drama (for to this least blameable half of stage-composition I confine my remarks, as against Comedy still stronger objections may be urged,) a prominent thread of false principle. It is generally the leading object of the poet to erect a standard of *Honour* in direct opposition to the standard of *Christianity*. And this is not done subordinately, incidentally, occasionally; but worldly honour is the very soul, and spirit, and life-giving principle of the drama. Honour is the religion of tragedy. It is her moral and political law. Her dictates form its institutes. Fear and shame are the capital crimes in her code. Against these, all the eloquence of her most powerful pleaders;

against these, her penal statutes, pistol, sword, and poison, are in full force. Injured honour can only be vindicated at the point of the sword; the stains of injured reputation can only be washed out in blood. Love, jealousy, hatred, ambition, pride, revenge, are too often elevated into the rank of splendid virtues, and form a dazzling system of worldly morality, in direct contradiction to the spirit of that religion whose characteristics are "charity, meekness, peaceableness, long-suffering, gentleness, forgiveness." "The fruits of the Spirit" and the *fruits of the Stage*, if the parallel were followed up, as it might easily be, would perhaps exhibit as pointed a contrast as human imagination could conceive.

I by no means pretend to assert that religion is excluded from tragedies; it is often incidentally introduced; and many a period is beautifully turned, and many a moral is exquisitely pointed, with the finest sentiments of piety. But the single grains of this counteracting principle scattered up and down the piece, do not extend their antiseptic property in a sufficient degree to preserve from corruption the body of a work, the general spirit and leading tempers of which, as was said above, are evidently not drawn from that meek religion, the very essence of which consists in "casting down high imaginations:" while, on the other hand, the leaven of the predominating evil secretly works and insinuates itself, till the whole mass becomes impregnated by the pervading principle. Now, if the directing principle be unsound, the virtues growing out of it will be unsound also; and no subordinate merit, no collateral excellencies, no incidental morality, can operate with effectual potency against an evil which is of prime and fundamental force and energy, and which forms the very essence of the work.

A learned and witty friend, who thought differently on this subject, once asked me if I went so far as to think it necessary to try the merit of a song or a play by the Ten Commandments? To this may we not venture to answer, that neither a song nor a play should at least contain any thing *hostile* to the Ten Commandments. That if harmless merriment be not expected to *advance* religion, we must take care that it do not *oppose* it; that if we concede that our amusements are not expected to make us better than we are, ought we not to condition that they do not make us worse than they find us? If so, then, whatever pleasantry of idea, whatever gaiety of sentiment, whatever airiness of expression we innocently admit, should we not jealously watch against any unsoundness in the general principle, any mischief in the prevailing tendency?

We cannot be too often reminded, that we are to an inconceivable degree the creatures of habit. Our tempers are not principally governed, nor our characters formed, by single marked actions; nor is the colour of our lives often determined by prominent detached circumstances; but the character is gradually moulded by a series of seemingly insignificant, but constantly recurring, practices, which, incorporated into our habits, become part of ourselves.

Now as these lesser habits, if they take a wrong direction, silently and imperceptibly eat out the very heart and life of vigorous virtue, they will be almost more sedulously watched by those who are careful to keep their consciences tenderly alive to the perception of sin, however they may elude the attention of ordinary Christians, than actions which deter by bold and decided evil.

When it is recollected how many young men pick up their habits of thinking and their notions of morality from the playhouse, it is not, perhaps, going too far to suspect, that the principles and examples exhibited on the Stage may contribute in their full measure and proportion towards supplying a sort of regular aliment to the appetite (how dreadfully increased!) for duelling, and even suicide. For if religion teaches, and experience proves, the immense importance to our tempers and morals of a regular attendance on public worship, which attendance is only required of us one day in a week; and if it be considered how much the heart and mind of the attentive hearer become gradually imbued with the principles infused by this stated though unfrequent attendance; who, that knows any thing of the nature of the human heart, will deny how much more deep and lasting will be the impression likely to be made by a far more frequent attendance at those places where sentiments of a directly contrary tendency are exhibited: exhibited, too, with every addition which can charm the imagination and captivate the senses. Once in a week, it may be, the young minds are braced by the invigorating principles of a strict and self-denying religion: on the intermediate nights their good resolutions, if such they have made, are melted down with all that can relax the soul, and dispose it to yield to the temptations against which it was the object of the Sunday's lecture to guard and fortify it. In the one case, there is every thing held out which can inflame or soothe corrupt nature, in opposition to those precepts which, in the other case, were directed to subdue it. And this one grand and important difference between the two cases should never be overlooked, that religious instruction applied to the human heart is seed sown in an uncultivated soil, where much is to be

cleared, to be broken up, and to be rooted out, before good fruit will be produced: whereas the theatrical seed, by lighting on the fertile soil prepared by nature for the congenial implantation, is likely to shoot deep, spread wide, and bring forth fruit in abundance.

But to drop all metaphor.—They are told—and from whose mouth do they hear it? that "blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, and the peace-makers." Will not these, and such like humbling propositions, delivered one day in seven only, in all the sober and beautiful simplicity of our Church, with all the force of truth indeed, but with all its plainness also, be more than counterbalanced by the speedy and much more frequent recurrence of the nightly exhibition, whose precise object it too often is, not only to preach, but to personify doctrines in diametrical and studied opposition to poverty of spirit, to purity, to meekness, forbearance, and forgiveness? Doctrines, not simply expressed, as those of the Sunday are, in the naked form of axioms, principles, and precepts, but realised, embodied, made alive, furnished with organs, clothed, decorated, brought into sprightly discourse, into interesting action; enforced with all the energy of passion, adorned with all the graces of language, and exhibited with every aid of emphatical delivery, every attraction of appropriate gesture. To such a complicated temptation is it wise, voluntarily, studiously, unnecessarily to expose frail and erring creatures? Is not the conflict too severe? Is not the competition too unequal?

It is pleaded by the advocates for church-music, that the organ and its vocal accompaniments assist devotion, by enlisting the senses on the side of religion; and it is justly pleaded as an

argument in favour of both, because the affections may fairly and properly derive every honest aid from any thing which helps to draw them off from the world to God. But is it not equally true, that the same species of assistance, in a wrong direction, will produce an equally-forcible effect in its way, and at least equally contribute in drawing off the soul from God to the world? I do not presume to say that the injury will be inevitable, much less that it will be irretrievable: but I dare repeat that it is exposing feeble virtue to a powerful temptation, and to a hazard so great, that were the same reason applied to any worldly subject, it would be thought a folly to venture on any undertaking where the chances against our coming off unhurt were so obviously against us. Besides, if we may pursue the doctrine of chances a little further, that is at best playing a most unprofitable game, where, if we could even be sure that nothing would be lost, it is clear to demonstration that nothing *can* be gained; so that the certain risk is not even counterbalanced by the possible success.

It is not in point to the present design to allude to the multitude of theatrical sentiments which seem to be written as if in avowed opposition to such precepts as "Swear not at all;"—"He that looketh on a woman to lust after her, hath already committed adultery in his heart," &c. &c. We are willing to allow that this last offence, at least, is generally, I would it were invariably, confined to those more incorrect dramas which we do not now profess to consider. Yet it is to be feared we should not find many pieces—are we sure we can find one?—entirely exempt from the first heavy charge. And it is perhaps one of the most invincible objections to many tragedies, otherwise not very exceptionable, that the awful and tremendous name of the

infinitely-glorious God is shamefully, and almost incessantly, introduced in various scenes, both in the way of asseveration and of invocation.

Besides, the terms *good* and *bad* play are relative; for we are so little exact in our general definitions, that the character given to the piece often takes its colour from the character of him who gives it. Passages which to the decent moral man,—him I mean who is decent and moral on mere worldly principles,—are to the "purged eye" of a Christian disgusting by their vanity, and offensive by their levity, to speak in the gentlest terms.

But more especially, the prime, animating spirit of many of our more decorous dramas seems to furnish a strong contrast to the improved and enlarged command of our Saviour in the New Testament, on the divine prohibition against murder in the Old, in the woe denounced against anger, as containing in itself the seed and principle of murder: anger, and its too usual concomitant, revenge being the main spring on which some of our best tragedies turn.

The eloquent apologies, and the elaborate vindication of the crimes resulting from the point of honour and the dread of shame,—and with such apologies and vindications some of our most approved pieces abound,—too temptingly invite the high unbroken spirit of a warm youth, from admiring such sentiments, to adopt them: and he is liable to be stimulated first to the commission of the crime, and after he has committed it, to the hope of having his reputation cleared, by the perpetual eulogies these flattering scenes bestow on rash and intemperate bravery; on the *dignity* of that spirit which cannot brook an insult; and on

that *generous* sense of wounded honour which is ever on the watch to revenge itself. And when he hears the bursts of applause with which these sallies of resentment, these vows of revenge, these determinations to destroy or be destroyed, this solemn obtesting the great Judge of hearts to witness the innocence of—perhaps a very criminal action or intention;—when, I say, a hot-headed young man witnesses the enthusiasm of admiration which such expressions excite in a transported audience, will it not operate as a kind of stimulus to him to adopt a similar conduct, should he ever be placed in similar circumstances? and will it not furnish him with a sort of criterion how such maxims would be received, and such conduct approved in real life? For the danger does not lie merely in his hearing such sentiments delivered from the Stage, but also in seeing how favourably they are received by the audience; received, too, by those very persons who, should he realise these sentiments, would probably be the arbiters of his own conduct. These are to him a kind of anticipated jury. The scene is, as it were, the rehearsal of an acquittal at the bar of that world whose tribunal is perhaps, unhappily for him, considered as his last appeal; for it is not probably hazarding too much to conclude that, by the sort of character we are considering, human opinion will be looked upon as the highest motive of action, human praise as the highest reward, and human censure as an evil to be deprecated, even by the loss of his soul.

If one of the most virtuous of poets and of men, by the cool, deliberate, argumentative manner in which he makes his Roman hero destroy himself; this hero, too, a Pagan, consistently illustrating by this action an historical fact, and acting in a natural conformity to his own Stoical principles;—if, I say,

under all these palliating circumstances, the ingenious sophistry by which the poet was driven to mitigate the crime of suicide, in order to accommodate the sentiment to the real character of his hero;—if this Christian poet, even to his own private friend and literary associate, could appear, by the specious reasoning of his famous soliloquy, to vindicate self-murder, so that the unhappy Budgell exclaimed, when falling by his own hand,

What Cato did, and Addison approved,  
Must sure be right:—

If, I say, under all the extenuating circumstances here detailed, such a dreadful effect could be produced from a cause so little expected, or intended by its author to produce it, how much more probably are similar ill consequences likely to arise from similar causes in the hands of a poet less guarded and worse principled; and whose heroes have, perhaps, neither the apology of acknowledged paganism, nor the sanction of historic truth? For Addison, who in general has made his piece a vehicle of the noblest and most patriotic sentiments, could not avoid making his catastrophe just what he has made it, without violating a notorious fact, and falsifying the character he exhibits.

Even in those plays in which the principles which false honour teaches are neither professedly inculcated nor vindicated; nay, where, moreover, the practices above alluded to, and especially the practice of duelling, are even reprobated in the progress of the piece; yet the hero who has been reprieved from sin during four acts by the sage remonstrance of some interfering friend, or the imperious power of beauty;—beauty, which is to a Stage hero that restraining or impelling power

which law, or conscience, or Scripture, is to other men;—still in the conclusion, when the intrigue is dexterously completed, when the passion is worked up to its *acmé*, and the valedictory scene is so near at hand that it becomes inconvenient to the poet that the impetuosity of his hero should be any longer restrained; when his own patience and the expostulating powers of his friend are both exhausted together, and he seasonably winds up the drama by stabbing either his worst enemy or his best benefactor, or, as it still more frequently happens, himself: still, notwithstanding his criminal catastrophe, the hero has been exhibited through all the preceding scenes as such a combination of perfections; his behaviour has been so brave and so generous (and bravery and generosity are two qualities which the world boldly stakes against both tables of the decalogue), that the youthful spectator, especially if he have that amiable warmth and sensibility of soul which lay him so peculiarly open to seduction, is too much tempted to consider as venial the sudden and unpremeditated crime to which the unresisted impulse of the moment may have driven so accomplished a character. And a little tame tag of morality, set to a few musical periods by the unimpassioned friend, is borne down, absorbed, lost, in the impetuous but too engaging character of the feeling, fiery hero; a character, the errors of which are now consummated by an act of murder, so affectingly managed, that censure is swallowed up in pity: the murderer is absolved by the weeping auditory, who are ready, if not to justify the crime, yet to vindicate the criminal. The drowsy moral antidote at the close slowly attempts to creep after the poison of the piece; but it creeps in vain; it can never expel that which it can never reach; for one stroke of feeling, one natural expression of the passions, be the principle right or

wrong, carries away the affections of the auditor beyond any of the poet's force of reasoning to control. And *they* know little of the power of the dramatic art, or of the conformation of the human mind, who do not know that the heart of the feeling spectator is always at the command of the passions in the hand of a true poet; who snatches him with uncontrolled dominion

To Thebes and Athens when he will, and where.

Now to counteract the bias given by the passions, all the flowers of rhetoric, all the flights of mere poetry, and all the blunted weapons of logic united, are ineffectual. Of course, the concluding antidote never defeats the mischief of the piece; the effect of the smooth moral is instantly obliterated, while that of the indented passion is perhaps indelible.

Let me now for a moment turn to the younger part of that sex, to whose service I have generally devoted my principal attention. A virtuous young woman, it will be said, who has been correctly educated, will turn with abhorrence from the unchaste scenes of a *loose* play. It is, indeed, so to be hoped; and yet many plays which really deserve that character escape that denomination. But I concede this point, and proceed to the more immediate object of my animadversions. The remark may be thought preposterous, should I observe, that to a chaste and delicate young mind, there is in *good* plays one danger which I will venture to assert is almost more formidable than that which is often attached to pieces more obviously censurable. The more refined and delicate the passion of love is made to appear, the more insinuating, and of course the more dangerous, will the exquisite and reiterated representation of that passion be found.

Now love being the grand business of plays, those young ladies who are frequently attending them will be liable to nourish a feeling which is often strong enough of itself without this constant supply of foreign fuel, namely, that love is the grand business of life also. If the passion be avowedly illicit, her well-instructed conscience will arm her with scruples, and her sense of decorum will set her on her guard. While, on the other hand, the greater the purity with which the passion is exhibited, provided the exhibition be very touching and warm, the more deep and irresistible will be its effect on a tender and inexperienced heart; nay, the more likely will the passion acted on the Stage be to excite a corresponding passion in the heart of the young spectatress. If she have not yet felt the passion she sees so finely portrayed, she will wish to feel it; and the not having felt it she will consider as something wanting to the perfection of her nature. She will ascribe the absence of it to a defect in her own heart which must be supplied, or to some untowardness in her own circumstances which must be removed. Thus her imagination will do the work of the passions, and the fancy will anticipate the feelings of the heart: the source this of some of the most fatal disorders in the female character!

Now to captivate such a tender and affectionate heart as that we are considering, the semblance of virtue is necessary; for while she will conceive of criminal passion as censurable, she will be equally apt to consider even the most imprudent passion as justifiable, so long as the idea of absolute crime is kept at a distance. If the love be represented as avowedly vicious, instead of lending herself to the illusion, she will allow it ought to be sacrificed to duty; but if she thinks it innocent, she persuades herself that every duty should be sacrificed to *it*. Nay,

she will value herself in proportion as she thinks she could imitate the heroine who is able to love with so much violence and so much purity at the same time. By frequent repetition, especially if there be a taste for romance and poetry in the innocent young mind, the feelings are easily transplanted from the theatre to the closet: they are made to become a standard of action, and are brought home as the regulators of life and manners. The heart being thus filled with the pleasures of love, a new era takes place in her mind, and she carries about with her an aptitude to receive any impression herself, and a constantly waking and active desire to *make* this impression in return. The plain and sober duties of life begin to be uninteresting: she wishes them to be diversified with events, and enlivened by heroes. Though she retains her virtue, her sober-mindedness is impaired; for she longs to be realising those pains and pleasures, and to be acting over those scenes and sacrifices which she so often sees represented. If the evils arising from frequent scenic representations to a young woman were limited to this single inconvenience, that it makes her sigh to be a heroine, it would be a strong reason why a discreet and pious mother should be slow in introducing her to them.

I purposely forbear in this place repeating any of those higher arguments drawn from the utter irreconcilableness of this indulgence of the fancy, of this gratification of the senses, this unbounded roving of the thoughts, with the divine injunction of bringing "every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."

But it will be said, perhaps, all this rigour may be very suitable to enthusiasts and fanatics, to the vulgar, the retired, and

the obscure; but would you exclude the more liberal and polished part of society from the delight and instruction which may be derived from the great masters of the human heart, from Shakspeare particularly?

On this subject I think myself called upon to offer my opinion, such as it is, as unreservedly as I have taken the liberty of doing on the points considered in the former part of this preface. I think, then, that there is a substantial difference between seeing and reading a dramatic composition; and that the objections which lie so strongly against the one, are not, at least in the same degree, applicable to the other. Or rather, while there is an essential and inseparable danger attendant on dramatic exhibitions, let the matter of the drama be ever so innocent, the danger in *reading* a play arises solely from the improper *sentiments* contained in it.

To read a moral play is little different from reading any other innocent poem; the dialogue form being a mere accident, and no way affecting the moral tendency of the piece. Nay, some excellent poets have chosen that form on account of its peculiar advantages, even when the nature of their subjects precluded the idea of theatrical exhibition. Thus Buchanan wrote his fine tragedies of *The Baptist* and *Jephthah*, Grotius that of *Christ suffering*, and Milton that of *Samson Agonistes*; not to name the *Joseph*, the *Bethulia delivered*, and some other pieces of the amiable Metastasio. Nothing, therefore, could be more unreasonable than proscribe from the study or the closet well-selected dramatic poetry. It may be read with safety, because it can there be read with soberness. The most animated speeches subside into comparative tameness, and, provided they are

perfectly pure, produce no ruffle of the passions, no agitation of the senses, but merely afford a pleasant, and it may be, a not unsalutary exercise to the imagination.

In all the different kinds of poetry there will be a necessity for selection; and where could safer poetical amusement be found than in the works of Racine, whose *Athalie*, in particular, (as we have had occasion elsewhere to observe) most happily illustrates an interesting piece of Scripture history, at the same time that, considered as a composition, it is itself a model of poetical perfection. I may mention, as an exquisite piece, the *Masque of Comus*, and as interesting poems, in the dramatic form also, the *Caractacus* and *Elfrida* of Mason; the passing over which pieces in the volumes of that virtuous poet, merely because they are in a dramatic form, would be an instance of scrupulosity which one might venture to say no well-informed conscience could suggest.

Let neither, then, the devout and scrupulous on the one hand, nor the captious caviller on the other, object to this distinction: I mean between *reading* a dramatic composition, and *seeing* a theatrical exhibition, as if it were fanciful or arbitrary. In the latter, is it the mere repetition of the speeches which implies danger? is it this which attracts the audience?—No:—were even the best reader,—if he did not bring in aid the novelty of a foreign language,—to read the whole play himself without scenic decorations, without dress, without gesticulation, would such an exhibition be numerous, or for any length of time<sup>2</sup>, attended?—What, then, chiefly draws the multitude?—It is the semblance of real action which is given to the piece by different persons supporting the different parts, and by their dress, their

tones, their gestures, heightening the representation into a kind of enchantment. It is the concomitant pageantry, it is the splendour of the spectacle, and even the show of the spectators:—these are the circumstances which altogether fill the theatre—which altogether produce the effect—which altogether create the danger. These give a pernicious force to sentiments which, when *read*, merely explain the mysterious action of the human heart, but which when thus uttered, thus accompanied, become contagious and destructive. These, in short, make up a scene of temptation and seduction, of overwrought voluptuousness, and unnerving pleasure, which surely ill accords with "working out our salvation with fear and trembling," or with that frame of mind which implies that the "world is crucified to us, and we to the world."

I trust I have sufficiently guarded against the charge of inconsistency, even though I venture to hazard an opinion, that in company with a judicious friend or parent, many scenes of Shakspeare may be read not only without danger, but with improvement. Far be it from me to wish to abridge the innocent delights of life where they may be enjoyed with benefit to the understanding, and without injury to the principles. Women especially, whose walk in life is so circumscribed, and whose avenues of information are so few, may, I conceive, learn to know the world with less danger, and to study human nature with more advantage, from the *perusal* of selected parts of this incomparable genius, than from most other attainable sources. I would in this view consider Shakspeare as a philosopher as well as poet, and I have been surprised to hear many pious people universally confound and reprobate this poet with the common herd of dramatists and novelists. To his acute and

sagacious mind every varied position of the human heart, every shade of discrimination in the human character, all the minuter delicacies, all the exquisite touches, all the distinct affections, all the contending interests, all the complicated passions of the heart of man seem, as far as is allowed to human inspection to discern them, to be laid open. Though destitute himself of the aids of literature and of the polish of society, he seems to have possessed by intuition all the advantages that various learning and elegant society can bestow; and to have combined the warmest energies of passion and the boldest strokes of imagination with the justest proprieties of reasoning and the exactest niceties of conduct. He makes every description a picture, and every sentiment an axiom. He seems to have known how every being which *did* exist would speak and act under every supposed circumstance and every possible situation; and how every being which did *not* exist must speak and act if ever he were to be called into actual existence.

From the discriminated, the guarded, the qualified perusal of such an author, it will be impossible, nor does it appear to be necessary, to debar accomplished and elegantly-educated young persons. Let not the above eulogium be censured as too strong or too bold. In every library they will find his writings; in almost every work of taste and criticism the young reader will not fail to meet with the panegyric of Shakspeare. The frequent allusions to him, and the beautiful quotations from him, will, if they light upon a corresponding taste, inflame it with the curiosity to peruse *all* his works. Now, would it not be safer, to anticipate the danger which might result from a private and unqualified perusal, for the parent to select such pieces as have in them the fewest of those corruptions which truth must allow

that Shakspeare possesses in common with other dramatic poets? For who will deny that all the excellencies we have ascribed to him are debased by passages of offensive grossness? are tarnished with indelicacy, false taste, and vulgarity? This is not the place for a discussion of those faults too obvious to be overlooked, too numerous to be detailed, too strong to be palliated. Let me, however, be permitted to observe, that though Shakspeare often disgusts by single passages and expressions, (which I will not vindicate by ascribing them to the false taste of the age in which he wrote; for though that may extenuate the fault of the poet, it does not diminish the danger of the reader,) yet perhaps the general tendency of his pieces is less corrupt than that of the pieces of almost any dramatist; and the reader rises from the perusal of Shakspeare without those distinct images of evil on his mind, without having his heart so dissolved by amatory scenes, or his mind so warped by corrupt reasoning, or his heart so inflamed with seducing principles, as he will have experienced from other writers of the same description, however exempt *their* works may be from the more broad and censurable vices of composition which disfigure many parts of Shakspeare. Lest I be misrepresented, let it be observed, that I am now distinguishing the general *result* arising from the *tendency* of his pieces, from the effect of particular passages; and this is the reason why a discriminated perusal is so important. For, after all, the *general disposition of mind* with which we rise from the reading of a work is the best criterion of its utility or mischief. To the tragedies of Shakspeare, too, belongs this superiority, that his pieces being faithful histories of the human heart, and portraits of the human character, love is only

introduced as one passion among many which enslave mankind; whereas by most other play-writers, it is treated as the monopolising tyrant of the heart.

It is not because I consider Shakspeare as a correct moralist and an unerring guide, that I suggest the advantage of having the youthful curiosity allayed by a partial perusal, and under prudent inspection; but it is for this very different reason, lest by having that curiosity stimulated by the incessant commendation of this author, with which both books and conversation abound, young persons should be excited to devour in secret an author who, if devoured in the gross, will not fail, by many detached passages, to put a delicate reader in the situation of his own ancient Pistol when eating the leek; that is, to swallow and execrate at the same time.

But to conclude,—which I will do with a recapitulation of the principal objects already touched upon. That I may not be misunderstood, let me repeat that this Preface is not addressed to the gay and dissolute; to such as profess themselves to be "lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God;"—but it is addressed to the more sober-minded; to those who believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ; who wish to be enlightened by its doctrines, to be governed by its precepts, and who profess to be "seeking a better country, even an heavenly one." The question, then, which we have been asking is, Whether the Stage, in its present state, be a proper amusement for such a character? What it would be, if perfectly reformed, and cast into the Christian mould, we have considered as another question, which it will be time enough to answer when the reformation itself takes place.

Neither, as has been observed, is it to the present purpose to insist that theatrical amusements are the most *rational*; for the question we have undertaken to agitate is, whether they are *blameless*? In this view the circumstance of going but *seldom* cannot satisfy a conscientious mind; for if the amusement be *right* we may partake of it with moderation, as of other lawful pleasures; if *wrong*, we should *never* partake of it.

Some individuals may urge that the amusements of the theatre never had the bad effects on their minds which they are said to have on the minds of others: but supposing this to be really the case, which, however, may admit of doubt, ought not such persons to reflect that by their presence they sanction that which is obviously hurtful to others, and which must, if so, be displeasing to God?

The Stage is by universal concurrence allowed to be no *indifferent* thing. The impressions it makes on the mind are deep and strong; deeper and stronger, perhaps, than are made by any other amusement. If, then, such impressions be in the general hostile to Christianity, the whole resolves itself into this short question,—Should a Christian frequent it?

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## FOOTNOTES

1: An enthusiast to the literature of my own country, and so jealous of its fame as

grudgingly to allow its comparative inferiority in any one instance, I am yet compelled to acknowledge, that as far as my slender reading enables me to form a judgment, the English Dramatic Poets are in general more licentious than those of most other countries. In that profligate reign

When all the Muses were debauch'd at Court,

the Stage attained its highest degree of dissoluteness. Mr. Garrick did a great deal towards its purification. It is said not to have since kept the ground it then gained.

2: A celebrated French reader at this time in London personated himself all the characters in a variety of plays.



#### TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE

This preface is taken from *Poems & Tragedies*, vol. 2 of *The Works of Hannah More*, a new edition with additions and corrections in eleven volumes, London, 1830.

[The end of *Preface to the Tragedies* by Hannah More]