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*Young Fashion* — Hell and Furies, is this to be borne ?

*Lory* — Faith, sir, I cou'd almost have given him a knock o' th' pate myself.



## A SHORT VIEW OF THE IMMORALITY AND PROFANENESS OF THE ENGLISH STAGE.

By JEREMY COLLIER.

[JEREMY COLLIER, reformer, was born in Cambridgeshire, England, in 1650. He was educated at Cambridge, became a clergyman, and was a "nonjuror" after the Revolution; not only refusing the oath, but twice imprisoned, once for a pamphlet denying that James had abdicated, and once for treasonable correspondence. In 1696 he was outlawed for absolving on the scaffold two conspirators hanged for attempting William's life; and though he returned later and lived unmolested in London, the sentence was never rescinded. Besides polemics and moral essays, he wrote a cyclopedia and an "Ecclesiastical History of Great Britain," and translated Moreri's Dictionary. His one still famous and readable set of works are the two here excerpted, with the further replies and rejoinders, lasting for ten years, from 1698 on. They were aimed at the drama in general about as much as at the Restoration drama in particular, Shakespeare receiving harder measure than some of the worst contemporaries; but the living jades were the ones which winced, and the current drama grew cleaner.]

### PREFACE.

BEING convinc'd that nothing has gone farther in debauching the age than the stage-poets, and playhouse, I thought I could not employ my time better than in writing against them. These men sure take virtue and regularity for great enemies, why else is the disaffection so very remarkable? It must be said, they have made their attack with great courage, and gained 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 murder. To do them right, their measures are politicly taken: to make sure work on't, there's nothing like destroying of principles; practice 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 warehouse would have been a large work; but being afraid of overcharging the reader, I thought a pattern might do.

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 marked. To confound them in speech is the way to confound them in practice. Ill qualities ought to have ill names, to prevent their being catching. Indeed, things are in a great measure governed by words: to gild over a foul character serves only to perplex the idea, to encourage the bad, and mislead the unwary. To treat honor and infamy alike is an injury to virtue and a sort of leveling in morality. I confess I have no ceremony for debauchery, for to compliment vice is but one remove from worshipping the devil.

#### THE IMMODESTY OF THE STAGE.

In treating this head, I hope the reader does not expect that I should set down chapter and page, and give him the citations at length. To do this would be a very unacceptable and foreign employment. Indeed the passages, many of them, are in no condition to be handled; he that is desirous to see these flowers, let him do it in their own soil: 'tis my business rather to kill the root than transplant it. But that the poets may not complain of injustice, I shall point to the infection at a distance, and refer in general to play and person.

Now among the curiosities of this kind we may reckon Mrs. Pinchwife, Horner, and Lady Fidget in the *Country Wife*; Widow Blackacre and Olivia in the *Plain Dealer*. These, though not all the exceptionable characters, are the most remarkable. I'm sorry the author should stoop his wit thus low, and use his understanding so unkindly. Some people appear coarse and slovenly out of poverty: they can't well go to the

charge of sense. They are offensive, like beggars, for want of necessaries. But this is none of the Plain-Dealer's case; he can afford his muse a better dress when he pleases. But then, the rule is, where the motive is the less, the fault is the greater. To proceed, Jacinta, Elvira, Dalinda, and Lady Plyant, in the *Mock Astrologer*, *Spanish Fryar*, *Love Triumphant*, and *Double Dealer*, forget themselves extremely: and almost all the characters in the *Old Bachelor* are foul and nauseous. *Love for Love*, and the *Relapse*, strike sometimes upon this sand, and so likewise does *Don Sebastian*.

I don't pretend to have read the stage through, neither am I particular to my utmost. Here is quoting enough unless 'twere better. Besides, I may have occasion to mention somewhat of this kind afterwards. But from what has been hinted already, the reader may be over-furnished. Here is a large collection of debauchery; such pieces are rarely to be met with. 'Tis sometimes painted at length, too, and appears in great variety of progress and practice. It wears almost all sorts of dresses to engage the fancy, and fasten upon the memory, and keep up the charm from languishing. Sometimes you have it in image and description; sometimes by way of allusion; sometimes in disguise; and sometimes without it. And what can be the meaning of such a representation, unless it be to tincture the audience, to extinguish shame, and make lewdness a diversion? This is the natural consequence, and therefore one would think 'twas the intention too. Such licentious discourse tends to no point but to stain the imagination, to awaken folly, and to weaken the defenses of virtue. It was upon the account of these disorders that Plato banished poets his commonwealth, and one of the Fathers calls poetry *vinum demonum* — an intoxicating draught made up of the devil's dispensatory.

I grant the abuse of a thing is no argument against the use of it. However, young people particularly should not entertain themselves with a lewd picture, especially when it is drawn by a masterly hand; for such a liberty may probably raise those passions which can neither be discharged without trouble nor satisfied without a crime. 'Tis not safe for a man to trust his virtue too far, for fear it should give him the slip. But the danger of such an entertainment is but part of the objection; 'tis all scandal and meanness into the bargain. It does in effect degrade human nature, sinks reason into appetite, and breaks down the distinction between man and beast. Goats

and monkeys, if they could speak, would express their brutality in such language as this.

To argue the matter more at large.

Smuttiness is a fault in behavior 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 honor, and want education and thought to furnish out a genteel conversation. Barrenness of fancy makes them often take up those scandalous liberties. A vicious 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.

Obscenity in any company is a rustic uncreditable talent; but among women 'tis particularly rude. Such talk would be very affrontive in conversation, and not endured 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 playhouse? Or does the place transform their inclinations and turn their former aversions into pleasure? Or were their pretenses to sobriety elsewhere nothing but hypocrisy and grimace? Such suppositions as these are all satire and invective. They are rude imputations upon the whole sex. To treat the ladies with such stuff is no better than taking their money to abuse them. It supposes their imagination vicious and their memories ill furnished; that they are practiced in the language of the stews, and pleased with the scenes of brutishness, when at the same time the customs of education and the laws of decency are so very cautious and reserved in regard to women. I say so very reserved that 'tis almost a fault for them to understand they are ill used. 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 ladies 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 later case, it entertains them with their own aversion, which is ill nature and ill man-

ners enough in 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 mentioned 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. For instance, The Orphan's Monimia makes a very improper description; and the royal Lenora, in the Spanish Fryar, runs a strange length in the history of love. And do princesses use to make their reports with such fulsome freedoms? Certainly this Lenora was the first queen of her family. Such raptures are too luscious for Joan of Naples. Are these the tender things Mr. Dryden says the ladies call on him for? I suppose he means the ladies that are too modest to show their faces in the pit. This entertainment can be fairly designed for none but such. Indeed, it hits their palate exactly. It regales their lewdness, graces their character, and keeps up their spirits for their vocation. Now to bring women under such misbehavior is violence to their native modesty and a misrepresentation of their sex. For modesty, as Mr. Rapin observes, is the character of women. To represent them without this quality, is to make monsters of them, and throw them out of their kind. Euripides, who was no negligent observer of human nature, is always careful of this decorum. Thus Phædra, when possessed with an infamous passion, takes all imaginable pains to conceal it. She is as regular and reserved in her language as the most virtuous matron. 'Tis true, the force of shame and desire, the scandal of satisfying and the difficulty of parting with her inclinations, disorder her to distraction. However, her frenzy is not lewd; she keeps her modesty even after she has lost her wits. Had Shakespeare secured this point for his young virgin Ophelia, the play had been better contrived. Since he was resolved to drown the lady like a kitten, he should have set her a swimming a little sooner. To keep her alive only to sully her reputation and discover the rankness of her breath was very cruel. But it

may be said the freedoms of distraction go for nothing ; a fever has no faults, and a man *non compos* may kill without murder. It may be so : but then such people ought to be kept in dark rooms, and without company. To show them, or to let them loose, is somewhat unreasonable. But after all, the modern stage seems to depend upon this expedient. Women are sometimes represented silly and sometimes mad, to enlarge their liberty and screen their imprudence from censure. This politic contrivance we have in Marcella, Hoyden, and Miss Prue. However, it amounts to this confession : that women, when they have their understandings about them, ought to converse otherwise.

In fine, modesty is the distinguishing virtue of that sex, and serves both for ornament and defense : modesty was designed by Providence as a guard to virtue ; and that it might be always at hand, 'tis wrought into the mechanism of the body. 'Tis likewise proportioned to the occasions of life, and strongest in youth when passion is so too. 'Tis a quality as true to innocence as the senses are to health ; whatever is ungrateful to the first is prejudicial to the latter. The enemy no sooner approaches but the blood rises in opposition, and looks defiance to an indecency. It supplies the room of reasoning and reflection ; intuitive knowledge can scarcely make a quicker impression ; and what, then, can be a surer guide to the unexperienced ? It teaches by sudden instinct and aversion ; this is both a ready and a powerful method of instruction. The tumult of the blood and spirits and the uneasiness of the sensation are of singular use. They serve to awaken reason, and prevent surprise. Thus the distinctions of good and evil are refreshed, and the temptation kept at a proper distance.

2ly. They represent their single ladies 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 vicious, they will venture to spoil a character. This mismanagement we have partly seen already. Jacinta and Belinda are further proof ; and the Double Dealer is particularly remarkable. There are but four ladies in this play, and three of the biggest of them are whores. A great compliment to quality, to tell them there is not above a quarter of them honest ! This was not the Roman breeding. Terence and Plautus his strumpets were little people ; but of this more hereafter.



3ly. 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 turned 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. I shall discover them for once, and let them stand like rocks in the margin. 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 preliminary and concluding parts are designed to justify the conduct of the play, and bespeak the favor of the company. Upon such occasions one would imagine, if ever, the ladies should be used with respect, and the measures of decency observed. But here we have lewdness without shame or example: here the poet exceeds himself. Here are such stains 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 picked out for this service. Thus the poet courts the good opinion of the audience. This is the dessert he regales the ladies with at the close of the entertainment: it seems, he thinks, they have admirable palates! Nothing can be a greater breach of manners than such liberties as these. If a man would study to outrage quality and virtue, he could not do it more effectually. But —

5ly. 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 practiced in the stews. Their deities were great examples of vice, and worshiped 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 Mercury's procuring and Jupiter's adultery the more passable in *Amphitryon*: upon this score *Gymnasium* is less monstrous in praying the gods to send her store of gallants. And thus *Charæa* defends his adventure by the precedent of *Jupiter* and *Danaë*. But the Christian religion is quite of another 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 the 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.

But notwithstanding the latitudes of paganism, the Roman and Greek theaters were much more inoffensive than ours. . . .

Some things are dangerous in report as well as in practice, and many times a disease in the description. This Euripides was aware of, and managed accordingly, and was remarkably regular both in style and manners. How wretchedly do we fall short of the decencies of heathenism! There's nothing more ridiculous than modesty on the stage: 'tis counted an ill-bred quality, and almost shamed out of use. One would think mankind were not the same, that reason was to be read backward, and virtue and vice had changed place.

What then? Must life be huddled over, nature left imperfect, and the humor of the town not shown? And pray where lies the grievance of all this? Must we relate whatever is done, and is everything fit for representation? Is a man that has the plague proper to make a sight of? and must he needs come abroad when he breathes infection, and leaves the tokens upon the company? What then, must we know nothing? Look you! All experiments are not worth the making. 'Tis much better to be ignorant of a disease than to catch it. Who would wound himself for information about pain, or smell a stench for the sake of the discovery?

(From Collier's "Defense" of the foregoing.)

Pleasure, especially the pleasure of libertines, is not the supreme law of comedy. Vice must be under discipline and discountenance, and folly shown with great caution and reserve. Luscious descriptions and common-places of lewdness are unpardonable. They affront the virtuous and debauch the unwary, and are a scandal to the country where they are suffered. The pretense of nature and imitation is a lamentable plea. Without doubt there's a great deal of nature in the most brutal practices. The infamous stews 'tis likely talk in their own way, and keep up to their character. But what person of probity would visit them for their propriety or take

poison because 'tis true in its kind? All characters of immodesty (if there must be any such) should only be hinted in remote language, and thrown off in general.

If there must be strumpets, let Bridewell be the scene. Let them come, not to prate, but to be punished. To give success and reputation to a stage libertine, is a sign either of ignorance, of lewdness, or atheism, or all together. Even those instances which will bear the relating ought to be punished.

But as for smut and profaneness, 'tis every way criminal and infectious, and no discipline can atone for the representation. When a poet will venture on these liberties, his persuasion must suffer, and his private sentiments fall under censure. For as Mr. Dryden rightly observes, *vita proba est*, is no excuse. For 'twill scarcely be admitted that either a poet or a painter can be chaste, who give us the contrary examples in their writings and their pictures. I agree with Mr. Congreve it would be very hard a painter should be believed to resemble all the ugly faces he draws. But if he suffers his pencil to grow licentious, if he gives us obscenities, the merits of Raphael won't excuse him. No, to do an ill thing well, doubles the fault. The mischief rises with the art, and the man ought to smart in proportion to his excellency. 'Tis one of the rules in painting according to Mr. Dryden and Fresnoy: to avoid everything that's immoral and filthy, unseemly, impudent, and obscene. And Mr. Dryden continues, that a poet is bound up to the same restraint, and ought neither to design or color an offensive piece. Mr. Congreve proceeds to acquaint us how careful the stage is for the instruction of the audience. That the moral of the whole is generally summed in the concluding lines of the poem, and put into rhyme that it may be easy and engaging to the memory. To this I answer, —

1st. That this expedient is not always made use of. And not to trouble the reader with many instances, we have nothing of it in *Love in a Nunnery* and the *Relapse*, both of which plays are in my opinion not a little dangerous.

2ly. Sometimes these comprehensive lines do more harm than good. They do so in the *Souldier's Fortune*. They do so likewise in the *Old Bachelor*, which instructs us to admirable purpose in these words: —

But, oh —  
What rugged ways attend the noon of life?

Our sun declines, and with what anxious strife,  
What pain we tug that galling load, a wife ?

This moral is uncourtly, and vicious ; it encourages lewdness and agrees extremely well with the fable. Love for Love may have somewhat a better farewell, but would do a man little service should he remember it to his dying day. Here Angelica, after a fit of profane vanity in prose, takes her leave as follows :—

The miracle to-day is that we find  
A lover true: not that a woman's kind.

This last word is somewhat ambiguous, and with a little help may strike off into a light sense. But take it at the best, 'tis not overladen with weight and apothegme. A ballad is every jot as sententious.

3ly. Supposing the moral grave and unexceptionable, it amounts to little in the present case. Alas ! the doctor comes too late for the disease, and the antidote is much too weak for the poison. When a poet has flourished on an ill subject for some hours, when he has larded his scenes with smut, and played his jests on religion, and exhausted himself upon vice : what can a dry line or two of good counsel signify ? The tincture is taken, the fancy is preëngaged, and the man is gone off into another interest. Profane wit, luscious expressions, and the handsome appearance of a libertine solicit strongly for debauchery. These things are mighty recruits to folly and make the will too hard for the understanding. A taste of philosophy has a very flat relish after so full an entertainment. An agreeable impression is not easily defaced by a single stroke, especially when 'tis worn deep by force and repetition. And as the audience are not secured, so neither are the poets this way. A moral sentence at the close of a lewd play is much like a pious expression in the mouth of a dying man who has been wicked all his lifetime. This, some ignorant people call making a good end, as if one wise word would atone for an age of folly. To return to the stage. I suppose other parts of a discourse, besides the conclusion, ought to be free from infection. If a man was sound only at his fingers' ends, he would have little comfort in his constitution. *Bonum fit ex integra causa* ; a good action must have nothing bad. The quality must be uniform, and reach to every circumstance. In short, this expedient of Mr. Congreve's, as 'tis insignificant to the purpose 'tis

brought, so it looks very like a piece of formal hypocrisy, and seems to be made use of to conceal the immorality of the play and cover the poet from censure.

Mr. Congreve, in the *Double Dealer*, makes three of his ladies strumpets. This I thought an odd compliment to quality. But my reflection it seems is over-severe. However, by his favor, the characters in a play ought to be drawn by Nature: to write otherwise is to make a farce. The stage, therefore, must be supposed an image of the world, and quality in fiction resemble quality in life. This resemblance should likewise hold in number, as well as in other respects, though not to a mathematical strictness. Thus in *Plautus* and *Terence*, the slaves are generally represented false, and the old men easy and over-credulous. Now, if the majority in these divisions should not answer to the world; if the drama should cross upon conversation, the poets would be to blame, as I believe they are in the later instance. Thus when the greatest part of quality are debauched on the stage, 'tis a broad innuendo they are no better in the boxes.

This argument he pretends proves too much, and would make us believe that by this way of reasoning, if four women were shown upon the stage, and three of them were vicious, it is as much as to say that three parts in four of the whole sex are stark naught. I answer, the case is not parallel. The representation of the play turns more upon condition than sex. 'Tis the quality which makes the appearance, marks the character, and points out to the comparison abroad. . . .

Mr. Congreve drops the defense of *Fondlewife*, and makes merry with the entertainment. His excuse is, he was very much a boy when this comedy was written. Not unlikely. He and his muse might probably be minors; but the libertines there are full grown. But why should the man laugh at the mischief of the boy, why should he publish the disorders of his nonage, and make them his own by an after approbation? He wrote it, it seems, to amuse himself in a slow recovery from a fit of sickness. What his disease was, I am not to inquire; but it must be a very ill one to be worse than the remedy. The writing of that play is a very dangerous amusement either for sickness or health, or I'm much mistaken.