

A
SERIOUS INQUIRY

INTO THE
NATURE AND EFFECTS

OF THE

STAGE:

AND A LETTER RESPECTING PLAY ACTORS.

BY THE

Rev. JOHN WITHERSPOON, DD. L. L. D.

Late President of the College at Princeton, New-Jersey.

ALSO

A SERMON,

ON THE

BURNING OF THE THEATRE AT RICHMOND, &c.

BY SAMUEL MILLER, D. D.

Pastor of the first Presbyterian Church in New-York.

TOGETHER WITH

AN INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS,

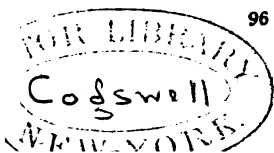
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AN
ADDRESS,
BY
SEVERAL MINISTERS IN NEW-YORK,
TO THEIR
CHRISTIAN FELLOW-CITIZENS,
DISSUADING THEM FROM
ATTENDING THEATRICAL REPRESENTATIONS,
AND DESIGNED AS AN
INTRODUCTION
TO
DR. WITHERSPOON'S INQUIRY.

AN ADDRESS,

&c.

THE excitement produced, everywhere throughout our country, by the recent calamity which befel the capital of the state of Virginia, is in many instances accompanied with a solemn inquiry into the moral tendency of the Theatre—the unhappy occasion of that calamity. The friends of religion, generally, in this city, while they weep over the woes of Richmond, appear anxious to improve the painful dispensation for the moral good of the present and the rising generation. We accordingly embrace the opportunity, offered by the present state of public sensibility, to address you on the subject of the Stage, and to direct your inquiries into the character of an institution, which is, always, by us, esteemed pernicious to society, and which, at the present period, will be examined by you, with more than ordinary interest. You will not do us the injustice to allege, that we, in this effort, ignobly take the advantage of an afflictive casualty for the purpose of gratifying any illiberal prejudice of our own, or promoting personal and sinister views. You will, on

the contrary, we trust, acknowledge, that in improving the proper season for uttering an affectionate warning, we discharge a duty which we owe, to our own character, to you, whose usefulness and welfare we desire to promote, and to that God, before whom, you and we are both acting our part in life, and before whom we must all appear hereafter to render a full and accurate account. In this hope,

Dear Christian Brethren,

We now address you, and recommend it to you, in the name of the Great God our Saviour, whose Disciples you are, to **WITHHOLD ALL SUPPORT FROM THE PLAY-HOUSE.**

In this recommendation, we are confident, that we are urging upon your attention a plain christian duty. It is inconsistent with your holy calling to countenance the Theatre, because, *in its origin and history it has been a public nuisance in society, in its present constitution it is criminal, under every form it is useless, and it must necessarily tend to demoralize any people who give it their support.*

1. The Theatre owes its origin to the revelry which accompanied the celebration of the feast of Bacchus, the God of wine, in the licentious ages of heathen idolatry. Dramatic representations

formed a part of that worship which the Athenians offered to this false God; and were perfectly in character with the worshippers themselves and the object of their adoration. The actors imitated whatever the poets thought proper to feign of their idol. Men and women in masquerade, appeared night and day before the public, practising the most gross immoralities, and indulging in every species of debauchery. The Goat, which is said to be injurious to the vine, and the name of which in Greek is *Tragos*, is the animal sacrificed on this occasion to *Bacchus*; and hence the revelry itself was called *tragedy*, and the actors *tragedians*.* The feasts were celebrated during the vintage. So gratifying however did those shows prove to the public taste in Athens, that they were demanded more frequently than the season, to which they originally belonged, recurred. *Thespis*, accordingly, about five hundred and thirty-six years before the christian æra, embodied a company of actors, and carried them about with him on his cart to perform tragedies wherever an audience could be assembled. And afterwards under the direction of *Æschylus*, a public Theatre was erected and

* *Τραγῶς-ἄδῃ. Τραγῶδες-Τραγῶδες.*

appropriated to dramatic representations. Comedy,* which was, at first, a mimicry and abuse of living and well known characters, for the amusement and gratification of the idle and the profligate, soon followed tragedy, on the public Theatre. From Greece these exhibitions passed over to Rome. But, in neither place, did the immoral tendency of the stage escape the observation of the more sober Heathen. Their wisest and best men, their philosophers and magistrates deprecated the licentious tendency of this school of scandal, and gave warning of its danger to every society in which the evil was tolerated. Both in Athens and in Rome, the stage was not unfrequently suppressed by positive statute. The evil was popular, however, and the remedy was ineffectual. The Theatre fell, only under the power of the Gospel.

* *Komos*: was the God of revelry among the Greeks; and seems to be the same with *CHEMOSH*, the abomination of the Moabites. It is but another name for Bacchus. From the name of the Idol, both the sacred and profane writers employ *komos*, to designate that obscene festivity which was accompanied with drunkenness and music. This word is translated "rioting," Rom. 13 13. and "revellings," Gal 5. 21. & 1 Pet 4. 3. In these texts of scripture, the wanton amusements of the Theatre are expressly prohibited. The word Comedy is not, however, derived from the Idol *Comus*; but is compounded from *κωμη*, a town or village, and *ωδη*, a song. The abusive and scurrilous songs of strolling companies through the streets gave rise to Comedy.

The primitive church could not be supposed to abet a system of licentiousness of which the sensible Pagans were themselves ashamed. Christians were then as well as now exposed to seduction, from the common vices of society: but they resisted temptation with characteristic firmness. The Theatre was given up, as well as the other abominations of the heathen. Its representations were not congenial to a taste formed upon evangelical principles: nor could a correct morality hold communion with those unfruitful works of darkness. It required however on the part of the christian individual great circumspection and resolution to abstain from the criminal pleasures in which all around him were accustomed to indulge. Circumstances gave strength to the temptation. It was often recommended by the solicitations and example of a neighbour, an intimate companion of early life, a partner in business, a superior in talents and influence, and perhaps too by a wife, a brother, and a parent. The revelation of the will of God was the christian's support against the seductive influence, of affection, of frowns, and of injuries. Could he rise up, from the word of inspiration, and go to the obscene entertainment of the Play-House? That word says, *Whether, therefore, ye eat, or*

drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, revellings, and abominable idolatries. Be ye, therefore, followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love as Christ also loved us. But—all uncleanness—let it not be once named among you, as becometh Saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting which are not convenient. In correspondence with these directions, the church ordained that no play-actor should be admitted to communion without renouncing his profession. If he ever afterwards returned to his former employment he was excommunicated. The Theatre gave way, as christianity prevailed among the nations, and, in process of time, disappeared from Christendom.* Nor did it re-appear, until superstition succeeded in spreading her sable mantle

* It is a fact worthy of observation, that the Emperor Julian when, about the middle of the fourth century, he tried to restore paganism as the religion of the Roman Empire, Ordained—"That none of the priests, or those employed at the altars, should be allowed to attend the Theatres, or be seen in company of a charioteer, player, or dancer." He gave this reason for it—that the Gallileans had gained their ascendancy by their priests and people avoiding such causes of corruption, and the profligacy to which they lead. Do christians consider, as wisely as did Julian, the tendency of the Theatre? See Milner, Vol. 2. p. 123, 124.

over the christian nations. Dramatic representations were then enlisted in her service as they had originally been devoted to the worship of Heathen Gods. Certain parts of scripture history became the subject of the Drama, and afforded carnal amusement under pretence of promoting the knowledge and practice of religion. The Church of Rome, however, by her councils repeatedly raised her voice against the Theatre—the Protestant Churches with one accord condemned it, and the most faithful and pious men of every country set their faces against this evil. Irreligious and wealthy men in the European nations first introduced into their own houses such exhibitions; and when luxury and a false, as well as a licentious taste, became prevalent, the public stage obtained, in such nations, a permanent establishment. From the European continent it was introduced into England, and thence was imported into this part of America.

2. The Theatre under its present constitution in our own country, is in its nature criminal.

In order to determine whether Christians may consistently give it their presence and support, the Stage must be considered as we find it organized. It must be examined, not, as an imaginary system, but, *as it, in fact, now exists.*

And the followers of Christ, will require nothing more, to dissuade them from supporting it, than evidence that it is, in its nature, Sinful. Such evidence is of easy attainment.

Tried, by the laws of the Christian religion, the Theatre is obviously criminal, as it respects both *the actual performance of Plays*, and the very *Profession of a Play-actor*. This trial however cannot justly depend on the merits of one Play, or the personal character of an individual Actor. The System must be examined as a whole.

As it respects, in the *first* place, the actual performance of plays it is sufficient to observe in evidence of criminality, That, although there is no tragedy or comedy whatever, performed on the stage, that recommends morality upon the principles of the Gospel of the grace of God, or recommends at all to practice, the christian graces, there is scarcely one which does not contain obscene allusion, false morality, or a profanation of the name of God. And can you christians support by your presence, and by the property which God has conferred upon you for good, a set of men in the very work of conferring ornament on pernicious sentiment, in rendering licentiousness agreeable to the audience, and in violating the third commandment for your own

amusement? Will you consent to pay them for treating with disrespect your Creator and Redeemer, and think yourselves guiltless? It is impossible.

In the *second* place, the very profession of a Play-actor, is a criminal one. It was esteemed infamous even in Pagan Rome, and in every civilized society it is still disgraceful. In the light of the Gospel it is sinful.

By habitually acting in a fictitious character, truth and integrity are banished the profession, and insincerity is reduced to a system. By rendering mimicry a trade, and the amusement of men perishing in sin the principal purpose of life, the play-actor is guilty of a prostitution of the talents God has for his own glory conferred on his creatures. By repeated exertions to enter into the spirit of the character to be represented, and accordingly cherishing the feelings and the passions of the vicious, it is the play-actor's trade to cultivate the propensities which he ought to mortify; and it is not surprising that he usually exemplifies, in his own deportment, the impiety which he has so often represented on the public stage.

These evils are essential to the Theatre, and suffice to prove that the institution is in its nature sinful.

3. It is, under every form in which it can be presented, useless.

In endeavouring to dissuade you christians from attending the Theatre, we do not ask of you a great sacrifice. We do not call upon you to the performance of a hazardous duty, in which health, or property, or life can be endangered. On other occasions you may justly be urged to resist even *unto blood striving against sin*; but in this instance we recommend to you to relinquish only that which you will yourselves admit to be every way useless.

The Theatre cannot profit you in either body or soul. It has nothing calculated to promote your interest in time or through eternity. Its entertainments are all adapted to the taste of the vain, the idle, and the profligate, and will never aid you in obtaining the end of your creation. Were it of any use, as a school of morality, it would have been sanctioned by a recommendation from the Supreme Law-giver. It would commend itself by its fruits in the distinguished virtue and piety of both the play-actors themselves, and those who habitually attend on their performances. As an intellectual exercise, instead of increasing knowledge, and invigorating genius, it dissipates, it enfeebles, and unfits the mind for the one thing needful.

Sufficient means of enjoying healthful exercise, the pleasures of social intercourse, and improving conversation, exist independently of Theatrical representation. For the acquisition of knowledge in arts, in science, in polite literature, and in morality you have no need of the stage. All the aids of christian erudition and practical godliness dwell, far, far, from its tabernacles. Nor is there an instance on record among the many thousand votaries of the drama, of a man or woman converted from sin unto God and built up in holiness and comfort by the exhibitions of the play house.

Is it by frequenting the Theatre, that the tradesman learns industry, that the merchant acquires his practical skill, that the civilian is fitted for the government of empires, that the learned professions are studied with success, that mothers and daughters become qualified to act their important part in society, or any one whatever becomes wiser or better? Wherefore, then, the vast expenditure both of time and treasure lavished upon this establishment:* and what the loss to society, were it utterly unknown?

* Time is money, for the industrious improvement of it promotes wealth, and idleness hastens to poverty. Independently however of the sacrifice of time in preparing

4. Theatrical representations necessarily tend to demoralize every society in which they are supported.

While tragedy purposes by an exhibition of great and heroic character to cultivate a dignified morality, and comedy promises to laugh out of countenance every kind of folly and vice, both are false to their promise, and the unwary is grossly deceived. The idle and the profligate still continue to weep over tragical distress, and continue to laugh immoderately at the buffoonery of comedy, without ever undergoing a reform. It must be so. Infidelity and licentiousness are intro-

for the Theatre, in attending upon it, and in conversing about its amusements, there is a vast expenditure of money.

The Theatre in this city is the property of two gentlemen, who rent it to the present managers Messrs. Cooper and Price for the sum of six thousand dollars per annum. The expenses of the managers every play-night is averaged at four hundred and fifty dollars. Supposing the Theatre to be open three nights in each week, during eight months in the year, the annual expense of the managers will amount to fifty thousand dollars. But these managers for such an expenditure must calculate on suitable compensation. Messrs. Cooper and Price must expect not only to live by their trade; but also to make money. It is probably not above the truth if we allow, ten thousand dollars to satisfy their expectations and to defray incidental expenses. The Theatrical establishment will at this rate cost the city of New-York, annually the sum of sixty thousand dollars. And can you christians contemplate this spectacle without horror? A city enjoying the law and the gospel of God, bestowing 60,000 dollars per annum, on an immoral association of play actors, whose trade consists in demoralizing the habits and corrupting the taste of your sons and your daughters.

duced, under every form, which would diminish disgust, or be calculated to render them agreeable to the audience.

Familiarity is accordingly cultivated with the worst characters without necessity or impatience, and often even with delight.

The affections which are exercised and strengthened at the play-house, are always those of mere fallen nature, generally, those which harmonise with open profanity, and, never, those which are exclusively religious.

The sensibility, which is here excited and interested, is the creature of romance, which never occurs or acts in real life. In a city where real misery still calls for compassion and relief; there is no benevolence in contributing to the support of the stage for the purpose of exercising sympathy with ideal sorrow.

The moral sentiment, inculcated from the stage with all the graces of composition and delivery, is uniformly separated from the motives and principles of christianity, is never tested by the precepts of the divine law, and is, of course, both delusory and impious.

Revealed religion is never exhibited in its native purity. It is adulterated by an intermixture with fashionable maxims, and so reduced to the

standard of un sanctified taste. Therefore the wicked return from the play house highly gratified with his entertainment. But, if a good man ever retire from it, without disgust, it is because his taste has been corrupted by evil communications.

Human Pride and passion are fed by the productions of the Theatre. Desires and appetites are strengthened. The whole is a faithful ministry to the *flesh lusting against the spirit*, and directly counteracts the grand design of the gospel of Christ. So sensible must all the disciples of the drama be of this tendency that, none of them will ask in going to the play-house, the blessing of God on the exhibition which he is about to witness ; nor, upon his return home at an untimely hour, will he bow the knee and give thanks to Jehovah, for the play and the farce which constituted the entertainment of the evening.

Precious time is, profusely, squandered upon this fashionable folly. Great expense is incurred by it. In life it tends to eradicate all inclination for divine things ; it renders meditation and prayer both wearisome and painful, and at death it yields no support or comfort.

The full effect of the corrupt tendency of the stage is known only in the lives of the actors, or

in those haunts of dissipation into which profligates betake themselves from this chapel of devotion. The poisonous leaven, however, spreads, with rapid but imperceptible gradations, through all the circles of gay life, and, from them, to surrounding society. It is more destructive to the interests of true religion, than is the canker worm to the blossoms of the spring. The amateur of the Theatre values not the Bible but for its fancied resemblance of style to his favourite play; and if he enters the place where the christian minister delivers the message of his God to miserable man, he values the discourse only by the degree of *stage effect* which accompanies its delivery. Whenever a rage for Theatrical representations prevails, the religious taste is itself affected; and under the illusory idea of superior refinement, the enticing words of man's wisdom are apt to be preferred to the demonstration of the spirit.

The picture, brethren, which we have here given you of the Theatre, will, we are confident be found, though rapidly sketched, a correct outline. You may satisfy yourselves, by a perusal of other publications in which the argument is given in detail. We affectionately recommend to your attention, and republish for your perusal, an *Essay*, in which the subject has received

an ample discussion. It is from the pen of the late learned and pious Dr. Witherspoon, President of the College of New-Jersey. It is written in a plain and perspicuous style. It is replete with sensible argument, happily arranged and managed with irresistible force. In this inquiry into the nature and effects of the stage, the able author anticipates and precludes every objection, and gives ample proof of the doctrine which he proposes to maintain. A sincere christian, who reads it with sufficient care to comprehend all the reasoning which it employs, will scarcely deny, what Dr. Witherspoon has shewn, that contributing to support a public Theatre is inconsistent with the character of a christian. It will readily occur, too, to the pious mind, that a taste for the stage ought not to be cultivated by acting plays in private. The introduction of the drama into the schools of literature should be discouraged. It is very unsuitable as a branch of christian education, and has already frequently been the first step to the ruin of youth of promising talents. Many others have escaped that ruin only as *brands plucked from the burning*.

We conclude, christians, this dissuasive by quotations from the Holy Scriptures. We hope and we pray, that, through the grace of God,

they will have a due effect ; and that, hereafter, the friends of decency, of morality, of religion, will leave to the disciples of shameless frivolity the entire enjoyment of theatrical exhibitions, either as an amusement, or a system of instruction. "Take heed what ye hear. Cease to hear the instruction that causeth to err from the words of knowledge. Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble minded, support the weak. Abstain from all appearance of evil. Be not deceived, evil communications corrupt good manners. Let us walk honestly as in the day : not in chambering and wantonness. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness. Walk as children of light. For the love of Christ constraineth us—that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them. Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, think on these things, and the God of peace shall be with you."

SAMUEL MILLER,
PHILIP MILLEDOLER,
JNO. B. ROMEYN,
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