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Lecture XLVII. Comedy - Greek and Roman - French - English Comedy

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LECTURE XLVII.

COMEDY — GREEK AND ROMAN — FRENCH — ENGLISH COMEDY.

LECT. XLVII. COMEDY is sufficiently discriminated from Tragedy, by its general spirit and strain. While pity and terror, and the other strong passions form the province of the latter, the chief or rather sole instrument of the former, is ridicule. Comedy proposes for its object, neither the great sufferings nor the great crimes of men; but their follies and flighter vices, those parts of their character, which raise in beholders a sense of impropriety, which expose them to be censured, and laughed at by others, or which render them troublesome in civil society.

THIS general idea of Comedy, as a satirical exhibition of the improprieties and follies of mankind, is an idea very moral and useful. There is nothing in the nature, or general plan of this kind of composition, that renders it liable to censure. To polish the manners of men, to promote attention to the proper decorums of social behaviour, and above all to render vice

ridiculous, is doing a real service to the world. Many vices might be more successfully exploded, by employing ridicule against them, than by serious attacks and arguments. At the same time, it must be confessed, that ridicule is an instrument of such a nature, that when managed by unskilful, or improper hands, there is hazard of its doing mischief, instead of good, to society. For ridicule is far from being, as some have maintained it to be, a proper test of truth. On the contrary, it is apt to mislead, and seduce, by the colours which it throws upon its objects; and it is often more difficult to judge, whether these colours be natural and proper, than it is to distinguish between simple truth and error. Licentious Writers, therefore, of the Comic class, have too often had it in their power to cast a ridicule upon characters and objects which did not deserve it. But this is a fault, not owing to the nature of Comedy, but to the Genius and turn of the Writers of it. In the hands of a loose immoral Author, Comedy will mislead and corrupt; while, in those of a virtuous and well-intentioned one, it will be not only a gay and innocent, but a laudable and useful entertainment. French Comedy is an excellent school of manners; while English Comedy has been too often the school of vice.

THE rules respecting the Dramatic Action, which I delivered in the first Lecture upon Tragedy, belong equally to Comedy; and hence, of course, our disquisitions concerning it are

LECT. shortened. It is equally necessary to both these
XLVII. forms of Dramatic Composition, that there be a proper unity of action and subject: that the unities of time and place be, as much as possible, preserved; that is, that the time of the action be brought within reasonable bounds; and the place of the action never changed, at least, not during the course of each Act; that the several Scenes or successive conversations be properly linked together; that the Stage be never totally evacuated till the Act closes; and that the reason should appear to us, why the personages, who fill up the different Scenes, enter and go off the Stage, at the time when they are made to do so. The scope of all these rules, I showed, was to bring the imitation as near as possible to probability; which is always necessary, in order to any imitation giving us pleasure. This reason requires, perhaps, a stricter observance of the dramatic rules in Comedy, than in Tragedy. For the action of Comedy being more familiar to us than that of Tragedy, more like what we are accustomed to see in common life, we judge more easily of what is probable, and are more hurt by the want of it. The probable and the natural, both in the conduct of the story, and in the characters and sentiments of the persons who are introduced, are the great foundation, it must always be remembered, of the whole beauty of Comedy.

THE subjects of Tragedy are not limited to any country, or to any age. The Tragic Poet may lay his Scene, in whatever region he pleases.

He may form his subject upon the history, LECT. XLVII.
either of his own, or of a foreign country; and he may take it from any period that is agreeable to him, however remote in time. The reverse of this holds in Comedy, for a clear and obvious reason. In the great vices, great virtues, and high passions, men of all countries and ages resemble one another; and are therefore equally subjects for the Tragic Muse. But those decorums of behaviour, those lesser discriminations of character, which afford subject for Comedy, change with the differences of countries and times; and can never be so well understood by foreigners, as by natives. We weep for the heroes of Greece and Rome, as freely as we do for those of our own country: but we are touched with the ridicule of such manners and such characters only, as we see and know; and therefore the scene and subject of Comedy, should always be laid in our own country, and in our own times. The Comic Poet, who aims at correcting improprieties and follies of behaviour, should study "to catch the manners living as they rise." It is not his business to amuse us with a tale of the last age, or with a Spanish or a French intrigue; but to give us pictures taken from among ourselves; to satirize reigning and present vices; to exhibit to the age a faithful copy of itself, with its humours, its follies, and its extravagancies. It is only by laying his plan in this manner, that he can add weight and dignity to the entertainment which he gives us. Plautus, it is true, and Terence,

LECT. did not follow this rule. They laid the scene
XLVII. of their Comedies in Greece, and adopted the
Greek laws and customs. But it must be remembered, that Comedy was, in their age, but a new entertainment in Rome; and that then they contented themselves with imitating, often with translating merely, the Comedies of Menander, and other Greek Writers. In after times, it is known that the Romans had the "*Comœdia Togata*," or what was founded on their own manners, as well as the "*Comœdia Palliata*," or what was taken from the Greeks.

COMEDY may be divided into two kinds: Comedy of Character, and Comedy of Intrigue. In the latter, the plot, or the action of the Play, is made the principal object. In the former, the display of some peculiar character is chiefly aimed at; the action is contrived altogether with a view to this end, and is treated as subordinate to it. The French abound most in Comedies of Character. All Moliere's capital Pieces are of this sort; his *Avare*, for instance, *Misanthrope*, *Tartuffe*; and such are Destouches's also, and those of the other chief French Comedians. The English have inclined more to Comedies of intrigue. In the Plays of Congreve, and, in general, in all our Comedies, there is much more story, more bustle and action, than on the French Theatre.

In order to give this sort of Composition its proper advantage, these two kinds should be properly mixed together. Without some interest-

ing and well-conducted story, mere conversation is apt to become insipid. There should be always as much intrigue, as to give us something to wish, and something to fear. The incidents should so succeed one another, as to produce striking situations, and to fix our attention; while they afford at the same time a proper field for the exhibition of character. For the Poet must never forget, that to exhibit characters and manners, is his principal object. The action in Comedy, though it demands his care, in order to render it animated and natural, is a less significant and important part of the performance, than the action in Tragedy: as in Comedy, it is what men say, and how they behave, that draws our attention, rather than what they perform, or what they suffer. Hence it is a great fault to overcharge it with too much intrigue; and those intricate Spanish plots that were fashionable for a-while, carried on by perplexed apartments, dark entries, and disguised habits, are now justly condemned and laid aside: for by such conduct, the main use of Comedy was lost. The attention of the Spectators, instead of being directed towards any display of characters, was fixed upon the surprising turns and revolutions of the intrigue; and Comedy was changed into a mere Novel.

In the management of Characters, one of the most common faults of Comic Writers, is the carrying of them too far beyond life. Wherever ridicule is concerned, it is indeed extremely difficult to hit the precise point where true wit

LECT. ends, and buffoonery begins. When the Miser, XLVII. for instance, in Plautus, searching the person whom he suspects for having stolen his casket, after examining first his right hand, and then his left, cries out, "*ostende etiam tertiam*," "show me your third hand," (a stroke too which Moliere has copied from him) there is no one but must be sensible of the extravagance. Certain degrees of exaggeration are allowed to the Comedian; but there are limits set to it by nature and good taste; and supposing the Miser to be ever so much engrossed by his jealousy and his suspicions, it is impossible to conceive any man in his wits suspecting another of having more than two hands.

CHARACTERS in Comedy ought to be clearly distinguished from one another; but the artificial contrasting of Characters, and the introducing them always in pairs, and by opposites, gives too theatrical and affected an air to the Piece. This is become too common a resource of Comic Writers, in order to heighten their Characters, and display them to more advantage. As soon as the violent and impatient person arrives upon the Stage, the Spectator knows that, in the next scene, he is to be contrasted with the mild and good-natured man; or if one of the lovers introduced be remarkably gay and airy, we are sure that his companion is to be a grave and serious lover; like Frankly and Bellamy, Clarinda and Jacintha, in Dr. Hoadly's *Suspicious Husband*. Such productions of Characters by pairs, is like

the employment of the Antithesis in discourse, which, as I formerly observed, gives brilliancy indeed upon occasions, but is too apparently a rhetorical artifice. In every sort of Composition, the perfection of art is to conceal art. A masterly Writer will therefore give us his characters, distinguished rather by such shades of diversity as are commonly found in Society, than marked with such strong oppositions, as are rarely brought into actual contrast, in any of the circumstances of life.

THE Style of Comedy ought to be pure, elegant, and lively, very seldom rising higher than the ordinary tone of polite conversation; and, upon no occasion, descending into vulgar, mean, and gross expressions. Here the French rhyme, which in many of their Comedies they have preserved, occurs as an unnatural bondage. Certainly, if Prose belongs to any composition whatever, it is to that which imitates the conversation of men in ordinary life. One of the most difficult circumstances in writing Comedy; and one too, upon which the success of it very much depends, is to maintain, throughout, a current of easy, genteel unaffected dialogue, without pertness and flippancy; without too much studied and unseasonable wit; without dulness and formality. Too few of our English Comedies are distinguished for this happy turn of conversation; most of them are liable to one or other of the exceptions I have mentioned. The Careless Husband, and, perhaps, we may add the Provoked

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L E C T. Husband, and the Suspicious Husband, seem to
XLVII. have more merit than most of them, for easy and natural dialogue.

THESE are the chief observations that occur to me, concerning the general principles of this species of Dramatic Writing, as distinguished from Tragedy. But its nature and spirit will be still better understood, by a short history of its progress; and a view of the manner in which it has been carried on by Authors of different nations.

TRAGEDY is generally supposed to have been more ancient among the Greeks than Comedy. We have fewer lights concerning the origin and progress of the latter. What is most probable, is, that, like the other, it took its rise accidentally. from the diversions peculiar to the feast of Bacchus, and from Thespis, and his Cart; till, by degrees, it diverged into an entertainment of a quite different nature from solemn and Heroic Tragedy. Critics distinguish three stages of Comedy among the Greeks; which they call, the Ancient, the Middle, and the New.

THE Ancient Comedy consisted in direct and avowed satire against particular known persons, who were brought upon the Stage by name. Of this nature are the Plays of Aristophanes, eleven of which are still extant; Plays of a very singular nature, and wholly different from all Compositions which have, since that age, born the name of Comedy. They show what a turbulent and licentious Republic that of Athens was, and what unrestrained scope the Athenians gave to ridicule,
when

when they could suffer the most illustrious personages of their state, their generals, and their magistrates, Cleon, Lamachus, Nicias, Alcibiades, not to mention Socrates the Philosopher, and Euripides the Poet, to be publicly made the subject of Comedy. Several of Aristophanes's Plays are wholly political satires, upon public management, and the conduct of generals and statesmen, during the Peleponnesian war. They are so full of political allegories and allusions, that it is impossible to understand them without a considerable knowledge of the history of those times. They abound too with Parodies of the great Tragic Poets, particularly of Euripides; to whom the Author was a great enemy, and has written two Comedies, almost wholly in order to ridicule him.

VIVACITY, Satire, and Buffoonery, are the characteristics of Aristophanes. Genius and force he displays upon many occasions; but his performances, upon the whole, are not calculated to give us any high opinion of the Attic taste of wit, in this age. They seem, indeed, to have been composed for the mob. The Ridicule employed in them is extravagant; the wit for the most part, buffoonish and farcical; the personal raillery, biting and cruel; and the obscenity that reigns in them, is gross and intolerable. The treatment given by this Comedian, to Socrates the Philosopher, in his Play of "The Clouds," is well known; but however it might tend to disparage Socrates in the public esteem, P. Brumoy

LECT. in his Théâtre Grec, makes it appear, that it
XLVII. could not have been, as is commonly supposed
the cause of decreeing the death of that philosopher, which did not happen till twenty-three years after the representation of Aristophanes's Clouds. There is a Chorus in Aristophanes's Plays; but altogether of an irregular kind. It is partly serious, partly comic; sometimes mingles in the Action, sometimes addresses the Spectators, defends the Author, and attacks his enemies.

SOON after the days of Aristophanes, the liberty of attacking persons on the Stage by name, being found of dangerous consequence to the public peace was prohibited by law. The Chorus also, was at this period, banished from the Comic Theatre, as having been an instrument of too much licence and abuse. Then, what is called the Middle Comedy, took rise; which was no other than an elusion of the law. Fictitious names, indeed, were employed; but living persons were still attacked; and described in such a manner as to be sufficiently known. Of these Comic Pieces, we have no remains. To them succeeded the New Comedy; when the Stage being obliged to desist wholly from personal ridicule, became, what it is now, the picture of manners and characters, but not of particular persons. Menander was the most distinguished Author, of this kind, among the Greeks, and both from the imitations of him by Terence, and the account given of him by Plutarch, we have much reason to regret that his writings

have perished; as he appears to have reformed, in a very high degree, the public taste, and to have set the model of correct, elegant, and moral Comedy.

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THE only remains which we now have of the New Comedy, among the Ancients, are the Plays of Plautus and Terence; both of whom were formed upon the Greek Writers. Plautus is distinguished for very expressive language, and a great degree of the *Vis Comica*. As he wrote in an early period, he bears several marks of the rudeness of the Dramatic Art, among the Romans, in his time. He opens his plays with Prologues, which sometimes preoccupy the subject of the whole Piece. The representation too, and the action of the Comedy, are sometimes confounded; the Actor departing from his character, and addressing the Audience. There is too much low wit and scurrility in Plautus; too much of quaint conceit, and play upon words. But withal, he displays more variety, and more force than Terence. His characters are always strongly marked, though sometimes coarsely. His *Amphytrion* has been copied both by Moliere and by Dryden; and his *Miser* also (in the *Aulularia*), is the foundation of a capital Play of Moliere's, which has been once and again imitated on the English Stage. Than Terence, nothing can be more delicate, more polished and elegant. His Style is a model of the purest and most graceful Latinity. His dialogue is always decent and correct; and he possesses, beyond

LECT. most Writers, the art of relating with that
 XLVII. beautiful picturesque simplicity, which never fails to please. His morality is, in general, unexceptionable. The situations which he introduces, are often tender and interesting; and many of his sentiments touch the heart. Hence, he may be considered as the founder of that serious Comedy, which has, of late years, been revived, and of which I shall have occasion afterwards to speak. If he fails in any thing, it is in sprightliness and strength. Both in his Characters, and in his Plots, there is too much sameness and uniformity throughout all his plays; he copied Menander, and is said not to have equalled him *. In order to form a perfect Comic Author, an union would be requisite of the spirit and fire of Plautus, with the grace and correctness of Terence.

WHEN we enter on the view of Modern Comedy, one of the first objects which presents itself, is, the Spanish Theatre, which has been remarkably fertile in Dramatic Productions. Lopez de Vega, Guillin, and Calderon, are the chief Spanish Comedians. Lopez de Vega, who is by

* Julius Cæsar has given us his opinion of Terence, in the following lines, which are preserved in the life of Terence ascribed to Suetonius:

Tu quoque, tu in summis, ô dimidiata Menander,
 Poneris, et merito, puri sermonis amator;
 Lenibus atque utinam scriptis adjuncta foret vis
 Comica, ut æquato virtus polleret honore
 Cum Græcis, neque in hac despectus parte jaceres;
 Unum hoc maceror, et doleo tibi deesse, Terenti.

much the most famous of them, is said to have written above a thousand Plays; and our surprise at the number of his Productions will be diminished, by being informed of their nature. From the account which M. Perron de Castéra, a French Writer, gives of them, it would seem, that our Shakespeare is perfectly a regular and methodical Author, in comparison of Lope^z. He throws aside all regard to the Three Unities, or to any of the established forms of Dramatic Writing. One Play often includes many years, nay, the whole life of a man. The Scene, during the first Act, is laid in Spain, the next in Italy, and the third in Africa. His Plays are mostly of the historical kind, founded on the annals of the country; and they are, generally, a sort of Tragi-comedies; or a mixture of Heroic Speeches, Serious Incidents, War and Slaughter, with much Ridicule and Buffoonery. Angels and Gods, Virtues and Vices, Christian Religion and Pagan Mythology, are all frequently jumbled together. In short, they are Plays like no other Dramatic Compositions; full of the romantic and extravagant. At the same time, it is generally admitted, that in the works of Lope^z de Vega, there are frequent marks of Genius, and much force of imagination; many well drawn characters, many happy situations; many striking and interesting surprises; and, from the source of his rich invention, the Dramatic Writers of other countries are said to have frequently drawn their materials. He himself apologises for the extreme irregularity of his Composition,

LECT. from the prevailing taste of his countrymen,
 XLVII. who delighted in a variety of events, in strange
 and surprising adventures, and a labyrinth of
 intrigues, much more than in a natural and
 regularly conducted Story.

THE general characters of the French Comic
 Theatre are, that it is correct, chaste, and
 decent. Several Writers of considerable note it
 has produced, such as Regnard, Dufresny,
 Dancourt, and Marivaux; but the Dramatic
 Author, in whom the French glory most, and
 whom they justly place at the head of all their
 Comedians, is, the famous Moliere. There is,
 indeed, no Author, in all the fruitful and dis-
 tinguished age of Louis XIV. who has attained
 a higher reputation than Moliere; or who has
 more nearly reached the summit of perfection in
 his own art, according to the judgment of all
 the French Critics. Voltaire boldly pronounces
 him to be the most eminent Comic Poet, of any
 age or country; nor, perhaps, is this the decision
 of mere partiality; for taking him, upon the
 whole, I know none who deserves to be prefer-
 red to him. Moliere, is always the Satirist only
 of vice or folly. He has selected a great variety
 of ridiculous characters peculiar to the times in
 which he lived, and he has generally placed the
 ridicule justly. He possessed strong Comic powers;
 he is full of mirth and pleasantry; and his pleasantry
 is always innocent. His Comedies in Verse, such
 as the *Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe*, are a kind
 of dignified Comedy, in which vice is exposed,

in the style of elegant and polite Satire. In his Prose Comedies, though there is abundance of ridicule, yet there is never any thing found to offend a modest ear, or to throw contempt on sobriety and virtue. Together with those high qualities, Moliere has also some defects which Voltaire, though his professed Panegyrist, candidly admits. He is acknowledged not to be happy in the unravelling of his Plots. Attentive more to the strong exhibition of characters, than to the conduct of the intrigue, his unravelling is frequently brought on with too little preparation, and in an improbable manner. In his Verse Comedies, he is sometimes not sufficiently interesting, and too full of long speeches; and in his more risible pieces in Prose, he is censured for being too farcical. Few Writers, however, if any, ever possessed the spirit, or attained the true end of Comedy, so perfectly, upon the whole, as Moliere. His *Tartuffe*, in the style of Grave Comedy, and his *Avare*, in the Gay, are accounted his two capital productions.

FROM the English Theatre, we are naturally led to expect a great variety of original characters in Comedy, and bolder strokes of wit and humour, than are to be found on any other Modern Stage. Humour is, in a great measure, the peculiar province of the English nation. The nature of such a free Government as ours; and that unrestrained liberty which our manners allow to every man, of living entirely after his own taste, afford full scope to the display of singu-

LECT. larity of character, and to the indulgence of
 XLVII. humour in all its forms. Whereas, in France, the influence of a despotic court, the more established subordination of ranks, and the universal observance of the forms of politeness and decorum, spread a much greater uniformity over the outward behaviour and characters of men. Hence Comedy has a more ample field, and can flow with a much freer vein in Britain, than in France. But it is extremely unfortunate, that, together with the freedom and boldness of the Comic spirit in Britain, there should have been joined such a spirit of indecency and licentiousness, as has disgraced English Comedy beyond that of any nation, since the days of Aristophanes.

THE first age, however, of English Comedy, was not infected by this spirit. Neither the Plays of Shakespeare, nor those of Ben. Johnson, can be accused of immoral tendency. Shakespeare's general character, which I gave in the last Lecture, appears with as great advantage in his Comedies, as in his Tragedies; a strong, fertile, and creative genius, irregular in conduct, employed too often in amusing the mob, but singularly rich and happy in the description of characters and manners. Johnson is more regular in the conduct of his pieces, but stiff and pedantic; though not destitute of Dramatic Genius. In the Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher, much fancy and invention appear, and several beautiful passages may be found. But, in general, they abound with romantic and improbable incidents, with

overcharged and unnatural characters, and with LECT.
 coarse and gross allusions. Those Comedies of XLVII.
 the last age, by the change of public manners,
 and of the turn of conversation, since their time,
 are now become too obsolete to be very agree-
 able. For we must observe, that Comedy depend-
 ing much on the prevailing modes of external
 behaviour, becomes sooner antiquated than any
 other species of Writing; and, when antiquated,
 it seems harsh to us, and loses its power of plea-
 sing. This is especially the case with respect to
 the Comedies of our own country, where the
 change of manners is more sensible and striking,
 than in any foreign production. In our country,
 the present mode of behaviour is always the
 standard of politeness; and whatever departs from
 it appears uncouth; whereas, in the Writings
 of foreigners, we are less acquainted with any
 standard of this kind, and of course, are less
 hurt by the want of it. Plautus appeared more
 antiquated to the Romans, in the age of August-
 us, than he does now to us. It is a high proof
 of Shakespeare's uncommon genius, that, notwith-
 standing these disadvantages, his character of Fal-
 staff is to this day admired, and his "Merry
 Wives of Windsor," read with pleasure.

It was not till the æra of the Restoration of
 King Charles II. that the licentiousness which was
 observed, at that period, to infect the court,
 and the nation in general, seized, in a peculiar
 manner, upon Comedy as its province, and, for
 almost a whole century, retained possession of it.

LECT. It was then first, that the Rake became the pre-
 XLVII. dominant character, and, with some exceptions, the Hero of every Comedy. The ridicule was thrown, not upon vice and folly, but much more commonly upon chastity and sobriety. At the end of the Play, indeed, the Rake is commonly in appearance, reformed, and professes that he is to become a sober man; but throughout the play he is set up as the model of a fine gentleman; and the agreeable impression made by a sort of sprightly licentiousness, is left upon the imagination, as a picture of the pleasurable enjoyment of life; while the reformation passes slightly away as a matter of form merely. To what sort of moral conduct such public entertainments as these tend to form the youth of both sexes, may be easily imagined. Yet this has been the spirit which has prevailed upon the comic Stage of Great Britain, not only during the reign of Charles II. but throughout the reigns of King William and Queen Anne, and down to the days of King George II.

DRYDEN was the first considerable Dramatic Writer after the Restoration; in whose Comedies, as in all his works, there are found many strokes of genius, mixed with great carelessness and visible marks of hasty composition. As he sought to please only, he went along with the manners of the times; and has carried through all his Comedies that vein of dissolute licentiousness, which was then fashionable. In some of them, the in-

decency was so gross as to occasion, even in that age, a prohibition of being brought upon the Stage *. LECT. XLVII.

SINCE his time, the Writers of Comedy, of greatest note, have been Cibber, Vanburgh, Farquhar, and Congreve. Cibber has written a great many Comedies; and though in several of them, there be much sprightliness, and a certain pert vivacity peculiar to him, yet they are so forced and unnatural in the incidents, as to have generally sunk into obscurity, except two, which have always continued in high favour with the Public, "The Careless Husband," and "The Provoked Husband." The former is remarkable for the polite and easy turn of the dialogue; and, with the exception of one indelicate Scene, is tolerably moral too in the conduct, and in the tendency. The latter, the "Provoked Husband," (which was the joint production of Vanburgh and Cibber), is, perhaps; on the whole, the best Comedy in the English Language. It is liable, indeed, to one critical objection of having

* "The mirth which he excites in Comedy will, perhaps, be found not so much to arise from any original humour, or peculiarity of character, nicely distinguished, and diligently pursued, as from incidents and circumstances, artifices and surprises, from jests of action, rather than sentiment. What he had of humorous or passionate, he seems to have had, not from nature, but from other Poets; if not always a Plagiary, yet, at least, an imitator."

JOHNSON'S Life of Dryden.

LECT. a double Plot; as the incidents of the Wronghead
 XLVII. family, and those of Lord Townly's, are separate, and independent, of each other. But this irregularity is compensated by the natural characters, the fine painting, and happy strokes of humour with which it abounds. We are, indeed, surprised to find so unexceptionable a Comedy proceeding from two such loose Authors; for, in its general strain, it is calculated to expose licentiousness and folly; and would do honour to any Stage.

SIR JOHN VANBURGH has spirit, wit, and ease; but he is to the last degree, gross and indelicate. He is one of the most immoral of all our Comedians. His "Provok'd Wife," is full of such indecent sentiments and allusions, as ought to explode it out of all reputable society. His "Relapse," is equally censurable; and these are his only two considerable Pieces. Congreve is, unquestionably, a Writer of genius. He is lively, witty, and sparkling; full of character, and full of action. His chief fault as a Comic Writer, is, that he overflows with wit. It is often introduced unseasonably; and almost every where, there is too great a proportion of it for natural well-bred conversation*. Farquhar is a light and gay Writer;

* Dr. Johnson, says of him, in his life, that "his personages are a kind of intellectual Gladiators; every sentence is to ward, or to strike; the contest of smartness is never intermitted; his wit is a meteor, playing to and fro, with alternate corruscations."

less correct, and less sparkling than Congreve; but he has more ease; and, perhaps fully as great a share of the *Vis Comica*. The two best and least exceptionable of his Plays, are the "Recruiting Officer," and the "Beaux Stratagem." I say the least exceptionable; for, in general, the tendency of both Congreve and Farquhar's Plays is immoral. Throughout them all, the Rake, the loose intrigue, and the life of licentiousness, are the objects continually held up to view; as if the assemblies of a great and polished nation could be amused with none but vicious objects. The indelicacy of these Writers, in the female characters which they introduce, is particularly remarkable. Nothing can be more awkward than their representations of a woman of virtue and honour. Indeed, there are hardly any female characters in their Plays except two; women of loose principles, or women of affected manners, when they attempt to draw a character of virtue.

THE censure which I have now passed upon these celebrated Comedians, is far from being overstrained or severe. Accustomed to the indelicacy of our own Comedy, and amused with the wit and humour of it, its immorality too easily escapes our observation. But all foreigners, the French especially, who are accustomed to a better regulated, and more decent Stage, speak of it with surprise and astonishment. Voltaire, who is, assuredly, none of the most austere moralists, plumes himself not a little upon the superior *bienfaisance*

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LECT. of the French Theatre ; and says , that the language of English Comedy is the language of debauchery, not of politeness. M. Moralt in his Letters upon the French and English Nations, ascribes the corruption of manners in London to Comedy as its chief cause. Their Comedy, he says, is like that of no other country ; it is the school in which the youth of both sexes familiarise themselves with vice, which is never represented there as vice, but as mere gaiety. As for Comedies, says the ingenious M. Diderot , in his observations upon Dramatic Poetry, the English have none ; they have, in their place, satires, full indeed, of gaiety and force, but without morals, and without taste ; *sans mœurs et sans gout*. There is no wonder, therefore, that Lord Kaims, in his Elements of Criticism, should have expressed himself, upon this subject, of the indelicacy of English Comedy, in terms much stronger than any that I have used ; concluding his invective against it in these words : “ How odious ought those Writers to
 “ be, who thus spread infection through their
 “ native country ; employing the talents which
 “ they have received from their Maker most
 “ traiterously against himself, by endeavouring
 “ to corrupt and disfigure his creatures. If the
 “ Comedies of Congreve did not rack him with
 “ remorse, in his last moments, he must have
 “ been lost to all sense of virtue.” Vol. I. 57.

I AM happy, however, to have it in my power to observe, that of late years, a sensible

reformation has begun to take place in English Comedy. We have, at last, become ashamed of making our public entertainments rest wholly upon profligate characters and scenes; and our later Comedies, of any reputation, are much purified from the licentiousness of former times. If they have not the spirit, the ease, and the wit of Congreve and Farquhar, in which respect they must be confessed to be somewhat deficient; this praise, however, they justly merit, of being innocent and moral.

For this reformation, we are questionless, much indebted to the French Theatre, which has not only been, at all times, more chaste and inoffensive than ours, but has, within these few years, produced a species of Comedy, of still a graver turn than any that I have yet mentioned. This which is called the Serious, or Tender Comedy, and was termed by its Opposers, *La Comédie Larmoyante*, is not altogether a modern invention. Several of Terence's Plays, as the *Andria*, in particular, partake of this character, and as we know that Terence copied Menander, we have sufficient reason to believe that his Comedies, also, were of the same kind. The nature of this Composition, does not by any means exclude gaiety and ridicule; but it lays the chief stress upon tender and interesting situations; it aims at being sentimental, and touching the heart by means of the capital incidents; it makes our pleasure arise, not so much from the

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LECT. laughter which it excites, as from the tears of
 XLVII. affection and joy which it draws forth.

In English, Steele's *Conscious Lovers*, is a Comedy which approaches to this character, and it has always been favourably received by the Public. In French, there are several Dramatic Compositions of this kind, which possess considerable merit and reputation; such as the "*Mélanide*," and "*Préjugé à la Mode*," of La Chaussé; the "*Père de Famille*," of Diderot; the "*Cénie*" of Mad. Graffigny; and the "*Nanine*," and "*L'Enfant Prodigue*," of Voltaire.

WHEN this form of Comedy first appeared in France, it excited a great controversy among the Critics. It was objected to, as a dangerous and unjustifiable innovation in Composition. It is not Comedy, said they, for it is not founded on laughter and ridicule. It is not Tragedy, for it does not involve us in sorrow. By what name then can it be called? or what pretensions hath it to be comprehended under Dramatic Writing? But this was trifling, in the most egregious manner, with critical names and distinctions, as if these had invariably fixed the essence, and ascertained the limits, of every sort of Composition. Assuredly it is not necessary that all Comedies should be formed on one precise model. Some may be entirely light and gay; others may incline more to the serious; some may partake of both; and all of them, properly executed, may furnish agreeable and useful entertainment to the Public,

Public, by suiting the different tastes of men *. L E C T.
 Serious and tender Comedy has no title to claim XLVII.
 to itself the possession of the stage, to the exclu-
 sion of ridicule and gaiety. But when it retains
 only its proper place, without usurping the
 province of any other; when it is carried on
 with resemblance to real life, and without intro-
 ducing romantic and unnatural situations, it may
 certainly prove both an interesting and an agree-
 able species of Dramatic Writing. If it become
 insipid and drawling, this must be imputed to
 the fault of the Author, not to the nature of the
 Composition, which may admit much liveliness
 and vivacity.

In general, whatever form Comedy assumes,
 whether gay or serious, it may always be
 esteemed a mark of Society advancing in true
 politeness, when those theatrical exhibitions,
 which are designed for public amusement, are
 cleared from indelicate sentiment, or immoral
 tendency. Though the licentious buffoonery of
 Aristophanes amused the Greeks for a while, they
 advanced, by degrees, to a chaster and juster
 taste; and the like progress of refinement may be

* " Il y a beaucoup de très-bonnes pièces, où il ne
 " règne que de la gaieté; d'autres toutes sérieuses, d'au-
 " très mêlées; d'autres, où l'attendrissement va jus-
 " qu'aux larmes. Il ne faut donner exclusion à aucun
 " genre; et si l'on me demandait, quel genre est le meil-
 " leur? Je répondrais, celui qui est le mieux traité."

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- LECT. concluded to take place among us, when the
XLVII. Public receive with favour, Dramatic Compositions of such a strain and spirit, as entertained the Greeks and Romans, in the days of Menander and Terence.