



N^o 39. Saturday, April 14.

*Multa fero, ut placem genus irritabile vatum,
Cum scribo* ————— *Hor.*

AS a perfect Tragedy is the noblest Production of humane Nature, so it is capable of giving the Mind one of the most delightful and most improving Entertainments. A virtuous Man (says *Seneca*) struggling with Misfortunes, is such a Spectacle as Gods might look upon with Pleasure: And such a Pleasure it is which one meets with in the Representation of a well-written Tragedy. Diversions of this kind wear out of our Thoughts every thing that is mean and little. They cherish and cultivate that Humanity which is the Ornament of our Nature. They soften Insolence, sooth Affliction, and subdue the Mind to the Dispensations of Providence.

IT is no Wonder therefore that in all the polite Nations of the World, this part of the *Drama* has met with publick Encouragement.

THE modern Tragedy excels that of *Greece* and *Rome*, in the Intricacy and Disposition of the Fable; but, what a Christian Writer would be ashamed to own, falls infinitely short of it in the moral Part of the Performance.

THIS I may shew more at large hereafter; and in the mean time, that I may contribute something towards the Improvement of the *English* Tragedy, I shall take notice, in this and in other following Papers, of some particular Parts in it that seem liable to Exception.

ARISTOTLE observes, that the *Iambick* Verse in the *Greek* Tongue was the most proper for Tragedy: Because at the same time that it lifted up the Discourse from Prose, it was that which approached nearer to it than any other kind of Verse. For, says he, we may observe that Men in ordinary Discourse very often speak *Iambicks*, without taking notice of it. We may make the same Observation of our *English* Blank Verse, which often enters

enters into our common Discourse, though we do not attend to it, and is such a due Medium between Rhyme and Prose, that it seems wonderfully adapted to Tragedy. I am therefore very much offended when I see a Play in Rhyme; which is absurd in *English*, as a Tragedy of *Hexameters* would have been in *Greek* or *Latin*. The Solœcism is, I think, still greater in those Plays that have some Scenes in Rhyme and some in Blank Verse, which are to be looked upon as two several Languages; or where we see some particular Similes dignified with Rhyme, at the same time that every thing about them lies in Blank Verse. I would not however debar the Poet, from concluding his Tragedy, or, if he pleases, every Act of it, with two or three Couplets, which may have the same Effect as an Air in the *Italian* Opera after a long *Recitativo*, and give the Actor a graceful *Exit*. Besides, that we see a Diversity of Numbers in some Parts of the Old Tragedy, in order to hinder the Ear from being tired with the same continued Modulation of Voice. For the same Reason I do not dislike the Speeches in our *English* Tragedy that close with an *Hemistick*, or half Verse, notwithstanding the Person who speaks after it begins a new Verse, without filling up the preceding one; nor with abrupt Pauses and Breakings-off in the middle of a Verse, when they humour any Passion that is expressed by it.

SINCE I am upon this Subject, I must observe that our *English* Poets have succeeded much better in the Style, than in the Sentiments of their Tragedies. Their Language is very often Noble and Sonorous, but the Sense either very trifling or very common. On the contrary, in the Ancient Tragedies, and indeed in those of *Corneille* and *Racine*, tho' the Expressions are very great, it is the Thought that bears them up and swells them. For my own part, I prefer a noble Sentiment that is depressed with homely Language, infinitely before a Vulgar one that is blown up with all the Sound and Energy of Expression. Whether this Defect in our Tragedies may arise from want of Genius, Knowledge, or Experience in the Writers, or from their Compliance with the vicious Taste of their Readers, who are better Judges of the Language than of the Sentiments, and consequently relish the one

more than the other, I cannot determine. But I believe it might rectify the Conduct both of the one and of the other, if the Writer laid down the whole Contexture of his Dialogue in plain *English*, before he turned it into Blank Verse; and if the Reader, after the Perusal of a Scene, would consider the naked Thought of every Speech in it, when divested of all its Tragick Ornaments; by this means, without being imposed upon by Words, we may judge impartially of the Thought, and consider whether it be natural or great enough for the Person that utters it, whether it deserves to shine in such a Blaze of Eloquence, or shew it self in such a Variety of Lights as are generally made use of by the Writers of our *English* Tragedy.

I must in the next place observe, that when our Thoughts are great and just, they are often obscured by the sounding Phrases, hard Metaphors, and forced Expressions in which they are clothed. *Shakespear* is often very faulty in this Particular. There is a fine Observation in *Aristotle* to this Purpose, which I have never seen quoted. The Expression, says he, ought to be very much laboured in the unactive Parts of the Fable, as in Descriptions, Similitudes, Narrations, and the like; in which the Opinions, Manners, and Passions of Men are not represented; for these (namely the Opinions, Manners, and Passions) are apt to be obscured by Pompous Phrases and Elaborate Expressions. *Horace*, who copied most of his Criticisms after *Aristotle*, seems to have had his Eye on the foregoing Rule, in the following Verses:

*Et Tragicus plerùmque dolet Sermone pedesceri,
Telephus & Peleus, cùm pauper & exul uterque,
Projicit ampullas & sesquipedalia verba,
Si curat cor Spectantis tetigisse querelâ.*

*Tragedians too lay by their State, to Grieve.
Peleus and Telephus, exil'd and poor,
Forget their swelling and gigantick words.*

Id. RosCOMMON.

AMONG our Modern *English* Poets, there is none who was better turned for Tragedy than *Lee*; if instead of favouring the Impetuosity of his Genius, he had restrained

strained it, and kept it within its proper Bounds. His Thoughts are wonderfully suited to Tragedy, but frequently lost in such a Cloud of Words, that it is hard to see the Beauty of them: There is an infinite Fire in his Works, but so involved in Smoke, that it does not appear in half its Lustre. He frequently succeeds in the Passionate Parts of the Tragedy, but more particularly where he slackens his Efforts, and eases the Stile of those Epithets and Metaphors, in which he so much abounds. What can be more Natural, more Soft, or more Passionate, than that Line in *Statira's* Speech, where she describes the Charms of *Alexander's* Conversation?

Then he would talk: Good Gods! how he would talk!

THAT unexpected Break in the Line, and turning the Description of his manner of Talking into an Admiration of it, is inexpressibly Beautiful, and wonderfully suited to the fond Character of the Person that speaks it. There is a Simplicity in the Words, that out-shines the utmost Pride of Expression.

OTWAY has followed Nature in the Language of his Tragedy, and therefore shines in the Passionate Parts, more than any of our *English* Poets. As there is something Familiar and Domestick in the Fable of his Tragedy, more than in those of any other Poet, he has little Pomp, but great Force in his Expressions. For which Reason, tho' he has admirably succeeded in the tender and melting Part of his Tragedies, he sometimes falls into too great a Familiarity of Phrase in those Parts, which, by *Aristotle's* Rule, ought to have been raised and supported by the Dignity of Expression.

IT has been observed by others, that this Poet has founded his Tragedy of *Venice Preserved* on so wrong a Plot, that the greatest Characters in it are those of Rebels and Traitors. Had the Hero of his Play discovered the same good Qualities in the Defence of his Country, that he shewed for its Ruin and Subversion, the Audience could not enough pity and admire him: But as he is now represented, we can only say of him what the *Roman* Historian says of *Catiline*, that his Fall would have been Glorious (*si pro Patriâ sic concidisset*) had he so fallen in the Service of his Country.

C
Monday,