

A N

ARGUMENT

To prove that the

Tragedy of Douglas

Ought to be

Publickly burnt by the hands of the
Hangman.

A sect, whose chief devotion lies
In odd perverse antipathies ;
Who falling out with that, or this,
And finding somewhat still amiss, ———
Compound for sins they are inclin'd to,
By damning those they have no mind to.

HUD.

E D I N B U R G H:

Printed in the Year M,DCC,LVII. [Price Threepence.]

A N

A R G U M E N T, &c.

J O S E P H A D D I S O N, Esq; was certainly drunk, when he laid it down as a maxim, in one of his spectators, “that
 “ a perfect tragedy is the noblest production of human nature.” His opinion, I know, but too universally prevails; and I am aware of the dangers that attend writing against received maxims. The voice of the people, is justly held to be the voice of God; and the author escapes well, who suffers no greater loss than his reputation, for having openly contradicted the notions of the venerable multitude. Yet, from I don’t know what motive, whether it be the love of truth, or a regard to the welfare of my fellow citizens, I feel an irresistible inclination to write against the favourite tragedy of *Douglas*, and endeavour to prove, by reasons that seem unanswerable to me, that the author of that much extoll’d piece deserves to be stigmatized,

tized, and his performance to be publickly burnt by the hands of the hangman.

And perhaps it may be found, after I have executed my charitable design, that the majority are not on the side the world imagines. The greatest part of the rich and gay, indeed, will always have a pride in supporting what they believe to be the most rational, elegant, and refined of all entertainments. But in this country of freedom, where every man has a right to chuse his opinion in all matters, sacred and prophane; and where the bulk of people are silent, rather because they do not know what to say, than thro' any defect in the passions; I am next to certain, that I shall be able to open such an universal cry against this minion of persons of rank and taste, as shall forever condemn him and all his works, past, present and future, not to oblivion, but to perpetual infamy and disgrace.

And having the trumpet to sound, as it were, to so great a body as the vulgar of my native country, I must be allowed the liberty of using a considerable variety of *notes*, that, if it be possible, I may hit the *tone* of every puppy in the pack; that is to say, (to descend from the poetical style,

stile, which I abhor) I will muster up such a number of arguments, as cannot fail, one or other of them, to reach conviction to every true presbyterian in Scotland: Nor shall I trouble myself much about their consistency with each other; for I expect that every candid reader will be contented with that argument that hits his own fancy, and leave the rest to his neighbours; always remembering, that my work is sanctified by the sincere design of opening the eyes of my deluded countrymen, and warning them to shun the paths that lead to perdition.

And here I shall omit all general declamations against the stage, for I aim only at particulars. I do indeed believe it to be an invention of the devil, and I cannot deny that it has always been supported by his agents: I know it is pernicious to the morals of men, and altogether inconsistent with true religion. But as I likewise believe, that puppet-shews, ballads in dialogue, romances, fictions of poets, not to mention musick, and painting, and whatever else imitates the passions and manners of men, absolutely unlawful, and tend to make us in love with lying vanities; and yet am not fully instructed in the several

ral

ral *tastes* of my fellow-citizens; I do not chuse to cut down all the courts of Europe in a box, and Sir *William Wallace Wight*, and the *Pilgrim's progress*, and *Jack the giant-killer*, together with the whole works of *Henry Overton*, at a single blow; lest I should disoblige many good and worthy friends, and provoke them to a dislike of the whole of my following arguments. Besides, I am justified in this prudent measure by some great and reverend examples; for as the learned and pious clergy of this city, of whatever party or faction, (for fear of giving offence I suppose) have winked for many years at the diversions of the theatre, and permitted the most virtuous matrons, and tender virgins, to repair to that shop of iniquity unprov'd, reserving the fire of their zeal till it should be blown up by motives purely ecclesiastical: In like manner, it is wise in me, their humble disciple and imitator, to wave the general argument, and apply my whole force in one direction against the celebrated tragedy of *Douglas*.

In the first place, there is hardly a single word of this admir'd piece true, from the beginning to the end of it; for tho' there was a paper printed under the title of *the*
full

full and true history, I can easily prove that it is all an invention, and perfectly inconsistent with the thread of Scottish history. As for instance, he makes the landing of the Danes to have been in East-Lothian; whereas, in reality, it was in the shire of Air, and at the very town call'd by that name. Our author, I presume, has falsified this important fact, to flatter the gentlemen and farmers of that rich country to support his play. In chronology too he has made a palpable error, when he represents his hermit as alive at the time of this invasion of the Danes; and yet says, that in his youth he was a soldier under that warlike prince Godfrey of Boulogne. One would have imagined that after the just and severe censures that have been past on the Latin poet Virgil, for such an error in chronology, our author might have taken warning. But the presumption and folly of poets is infinite.—Thus it appears, that our boasted poet, is either entirely ignorant of the history of his own country, or has wilfully falsified many important facts, so that he must be consider'd as a disgrace to his profession, and country, either by his ignorance, or want of veracity.

I have only touch'd upon the points
that

that are material; and can easiest be disproved; for every other circumstance of the story is the fiction of his own idle brain, and contriv'd on purpose to deceive. And what a gross immorality is implied in such an action, I need not explain to any person who is acquainted with the first principles of religion. Nor is it any excuse for, but a high aggravation of his crime, that the whole story is wrought up in such artful language, and made to have so much similitude to truth, that many persons of judgment and solidity, and otherwise of respectable characters, have been seen to weep bitterly at the representation of it! wasting those precious tears, that ought not to be shed but on the serious contemplation of human vanity, or occasions of real distress. And indeed I think it can be imputed to nothing but diabolical art, and the influence of that spirit, who lies in wait to subvert human reason; that men of sound minds can be brought to weep at events that never happened, and bewail the misfortunes of persons who never existed.

Another reason is, that the tragedy of Douglas is reported to be what they call a *good tragedy*. Now, (not to dwell on the
the

the contradiction in terms, for one may as well say, a *good hypocrite*, or a *good atheist*, as a *good tragedy*) supposing the tragedy of Douglas to contain nothing but good sentiments to represent good characters, to have a good moral tendency, to paint virtue as amiable, and vice as odious; in short to have a good effect upon the minds of the whole audience, which is granting as much as ever was ask'd; yet, for the sake of these excellencies, if there was no other reason, ought this piece to be publicly burnt by the hands of the hangman.

And here I must be allowed to use a figure, not uncommon with authors of eminent fame; the assuming of that to be true, which I formerly declin'd to prove, from reasons of prudence: for it is necessary for me now, to have it taken for granted, that stage plays, and all dramatic entertainments are absolutely unlawful, and directly contrary to the word of God: or at least, it must be admitted me, that they do infinitely more evil than good; for altho' matters of this kind are said to depend on very nice calculations, yet I see clearly, that the bad consequences of constant attendance at the theatre, are many and

B

various;

various ; whereas I perceive not one single advantage to be gain'd by frequenting that temple of vanity. Now since it would be for the benefit of mankind that the stage was abolished, he who attempts to reform it, by writing within the rules of decency and virtue, is to be consider'd as a public enemy, who takes pains to gild a poisonous pill, in order to allure you to your ruin ; and deserves equal praise with those conquerors of the earth, who by mild and equitable laws, have reconciled the conquer'd to the loss of their liberty. Whereas it is to be wish'd, that no piece were ever perform'd in the theatre, but what is shocking to humanity, and altogether abominable and detestable, that the people at last might be provok'd to drive it and all its cursed contents to hell, from whence it came. And for this reason I suppose it was, that the church of Scotland in ancient times made a law, prohibiting any of its members to form the plot of a play upon any part of scripture history, lest the people should have been insensibly led to favour the plays themselves, for the sake of that good book from which they were taken.

My next reason, which is level to the
capacity

capacity of infinite numbers, and which I am certain will do great execution, is, that the suppos'd author of Douglas is a clergyman: and what must be carefully observ'd, is said to have some peculiar qualities, such as learning, eloquence and wit, inasmuch, that his company has been very much sought after by persons of superior station; and what is worst of all, he is young. Now, as it is a thing perfectly new in this country, for a clergyman to write a tragedy, I do not see what title this rash young man had to go out of the common road. In our neighbouring country, a Dr. Young, or a Dr. Brown, may pass uncensur'd, after having written tragedies of some little reputation; for they are dignified clergymen, and have a good right to shew talents superior to most other ecclesiasticks; but in this church, which is founded on presbyterian parity, he is a bold man indeed, who ventures to distinguish himself above his brethren.

Besides in the exercise of his poetical gifts, he must have gone through a course of study altogether foreign to his duty as a clergyman; he must have wasted a great deal of precious time, in making himself master of the Greek and Roman poets,
and

and other heathen authors of pernicious tendency ; and indeed if he be a true poet, must have been guilty of the heinous sin of idolatry, in paying little less than divine honours to his muse. And if our author possesses the superior talents ascrib'd to him, so much the more deserving of punishment has he made himself, by prostituting his genius to prophane uses, and employing the parts bestowed on him for important purposes, in the service of *Melpomene* a goddess of heathen extraction.

Had this youth of genius followed the true theological track, and devoted himself to smoking tobacco, to drinking of ale, and the study of controversy, which has been so beneficial to the Christian church, he might have made his name immortal, by some valuable treatise, like the late account of *the present state of Judas Iscariot* ; or, *the candid and impartial estimate of the profit and loss of religion*. Had he employed himself in the study of city politics, and human nature, he would certainly have become a master in experimental preaching, and one day might have produc'd some such searching piece of eloquence, as, *the rise and fall of Haman* ; or, the other characteristical discourse of an eminent

nent author. Had he followed the useful occupation of farming, or sent the savings of his stipend as a venture to sea, or dealt in the gentlemanly trade of horse-couping, he might have been tolerated; for such things are not without precedent among the brethren. Much more would he have been accounted blameless, or praise-worthy, had he spent his time in managing a burgh, or in sauntering about booksellers shops, or in diverting himself with his children by the fire-side, or in inclosing his glebe with his own hands, or in attending all the burial and christening feasts, or in digging his own garden, or any other inoffensive and profitable method of making the lazy hours pass lightly away, practis'd in city or country.

Besides, this gentleman, as I am informed, within the compass of nine or ten years, has made no less than two trips to London, for two or three months at a time, and thereby deserted his charge, and exposed himself to the high censure due for non-residence. It is very true, that many other ministers in Scotland, have been frequently absent from their charges for a longer space; and it is particularly the custom in this city, (where no man

can

can say that ministerial duty is not carefully performed in all its parts) for the ministers annually to make a journey to the country, especially during the harvest vacation, insomuch, that were it not for the uncommon strength and benevolence of one b——r, the inhabitants behoved to call in the neighbouring ministers, to join them together in wedlock, and christen their children. But then it must be noticed, that as the town is totally deserted by people of condition at that season of the year, any body is thought good enough to preach to the vulgar citizens; so likewise there is a very wide difference betwixt the employments of our young author, and those of the pious and diligent pastors of Edinburgh: for they, good men, are either travelling for their healths, or paying court to their patrons, or relaxing their minds, worn out with spiritual cares, at mineral waters, or shewing the world to their gentle spouses, and their gentle spouses to the world, or strengthening their parties in distant presbyteries, or seeking ecclesiastical preferment; whilst this extravagant author, against all order, regularity and custom, is endeavouring to obtain for himself a place in the annals of taste and literature;

terature, by this detested tragedy of Douglas, which is the cause of all my perplexity and trouble. Thanks to the watchful guardian of this church, and the power worshipped by the uncontrollable ruler of the English stage! he has not yet been able to gratify the better half of his wishes; and in them I trust with joy, for the full disappointment of all his future endeavours.

There is one circumstance I cannot reflect upon, without the utmost surprize, grief and indignation. It is, that, according to the best information I can receive, this same audacious theatrical divine is extremely popular in his own parish; and not only popular, (for I have known pious ministers much admired for their preaching, and yet, thro' the malice of Satan, brought into contempt in other respects) but entirely esteemed and beloved by every single person there. Now, this circumstance concerning our young author, I the rather believe to be true, because it consists with my own observation, that many young brethren, much of the same stamp with himself, in spite of all the secret artifices, or open attacks of the g—ly, have some how or other preserved the esteem

esteem and affections of their parishioners. There is nothing that relates to the present state of the church that hath given me me more real affliction, or occasioned more perplexing thoughts in my hours of desertion. The wiles of Satan are as endless as his malignity is great; and most successfully of all, he attacks religion in the shape of human virtue: by enduing those fine modern ministers with candor, openness, humanity, and an affectionate concern for the welfare of their parishioners, he blinds the carnal minds of the people, so that they cannot perceive how deficient they are in true grace: whereas, by infusing cunning, envy, covetousness and spiritual pride, into the hearts of many godly and orthodox brethren, he weakens their hands, and destroys the effects of all their zeal and labour.

My fourth reason is, that the tragedy of Douglas is said by some sanguine friends of the author, to be an honour to our country. It is true, that some great men of antiquity have thought it very honourable to be able to compose a tragedy; and having acquired all other kinds of fame, have repined when that could not be added to compleat their glory. But these
men

men have been generally heathens, and can in no respect become examples to us. Neither do I think it is very likely, that in this cold, barren, and remote country, in which there is so little encouragement for the industrious manufacturer, and adventurous merchant, much less for such useless members of society, as the composers of idle poems ; or that out of the bosom of the poorest and most despised, tho' the best church in the world, there can possibly have arisen a tragic poet to rival Sophocles and Euripides, Corneille and Racine, Shakspear and Otway. For my part, I will not believe that he resembles any of these great prophane men but one, and that only in one single circumstance, viz. his having mistaken his employment. For Euripides was at first bred to be a wrestler ; but he was soon found unfit for that manly and laborious profession, and therefore, like our author, obliged to turn a maker of tragedies.

But if it were really true that the tragedy of Douglas conduc'd so much to the honour of our country, it ought to be kept as dead a secret as the flourishing state of any of our manufactures ; and no person who has the least regard for his native land, will be ever brought to own a truth so dangerous to our prosperity.

Have we not the greatest reason in the world to fear that the English ministry, with whom we do not stand in a very favourable light since the rebellion, will take it very much amiss, that any body here should have the presumption to think he can write the English language as well as they can do in London? Is it not highly probable, that if such an insult should ever reach their ears, they will load us with some new tax, to keep down our ambitious spirit? I have often heard it affirmed, that the French duty would not have been demanded for claret, but things allow'd to go on as they have done since the union, had it not been for that superb and magnificent building call'd the *New-Exchange*, which no doubt will surpass all the exchanges in the world, when once it is finished.

As it is therefore of the utmost importance to the welfare of our country, to prevent any jealousy from rising in the minds of the English, let us industriously suppress every appearance of genius and spirit; and I am persuaded no good Scotsman, however prejudic'd he may be, will grudge to sacrifice our single tragedy of Douglas to the interest and prosperity of his country. What would David Garrick Esq; say, were it possible for him to hear,
that

that a tragedy he rejected, as cold and unaffecting, made the whole city of Edinburgh almost mad for a fortnight, and drew endless tears and lamentations from every spectator? Let us, by one bold stroke, deliver ourselves from all future apprehensions. I am persuaded that a seasonable example of this kind, will deter other enterprizing young men, from turning their talents to the service of the stage; for, tho' it be true, that one precedent like Douglas, is enough to bring us an hundred tragedies in a year; yet I am very hopeful, that after this necessary severity shewn to that piece, there will be but very few hardy enough, to trouble us for a long time with compositions of that nature: Next Wednesday then, let it be publicly burnt by the hands of the hangman, and I shall exceedingly rejoice, that I have been instrumental (tho' unworthy) to save my country from ruin, and prevent the downfall of true religion.

My fifth reason is, that the tragedy of Douglas has certainly given great offence to the nobility and gentry of Scotland. For since it is accounted, however falsely, a proof of learning and genius to have written a successful tragedy, were not the laity intitled to lead in a matter of so much importance? and is it not the height
of

of folly and presumption, for this rash young man to step in before his betters, and take upon him, forsooth, to raise the reputation of his country higher than ever it was before, for fine writing, which is the first and most excellent of the fine arts? Have not the gentry in Scotland been always jealous of the increasing power, and abilities of the clergy? What else could have induc'd them, against their own interest, to favour presentations, of which more than two thirds are in the hands of the crown? Besides, from the success of Douglas, and the boasted merit of that performance, the laity have good ground to fear, that the next application to parliament for an augmentation of stipends, will be more successful than the former; for the English lords and commons will no doubt think it great pity, that men of so much learning and ability should be confin'd all their days to offices not so lucrative, tho' a little more honourable, than those they easily procure for a favourite footman.

And here it is but just to own, that religion has gain'd one considerable advantage by the tragedy of Douglas. For several persons, not remarkable heretofore for their zeal and piety, have been lately observ'd to express themselves with a
proper

proper degree of warmth, in behalf of religion, and the sanctity of the ministerial character. Thus it was likewise during the dependance of the augmentation scheme ; for there was then a manifest increase of zealous professors. I hope our new converts will persevere, and bring forth fruit, longer than they did.

I have many other reasons to add, but understand I am happily prevented by the zeal and vigilance of the presbytery of Edinburgh, who by their wise conduct have already rais'd such a cry, as the general assembly itself will hardly be able to silence. They have long been the leading presbytery in the church, and after this master-stroke of ingenious zeal, I soon hope to see them dictate to every other presbytery in Scotland. For observe their admirable conduct ; they scorn'd to attack the stage on its weak side of comedy, or even on that of exceptionable tragedies ; but have waited many years with the utmost coolness and patience, till a tragedy appear'd with which every mortal was highly delighted, and which the best judges pronounced to be one of the most moral poems that ever was compos'd ; and that strongest part of the stage, to shew their undaunted courage and zeal, they have manfully attack'd with all their forces.

ees. But further, to shew the world the goodness of their cause, they have broke through all the barriers of the sacred character, and overturn'd the independent jurisdiction of presbyteries by a single letter.

In this wonderful letter, they have taken an effectual course with those brethren, who had the assurance to go and see the tragedy of Douglas, in the presence of many of the judges of the land, the greatest part of the ruling elders in the church, and the best and worthiest persons of every parish in town; and who have been frequently heard to say, that they did not think tragedy unlawful, that it might often do good, and was by no means contrary to scripture, or the laws of the church. But these priests of Baal shall soon be made sensible how undecent it is for them to partake of the favourite amusement of persons of rank, and how dangerous to taste of pleasures, otherwise innocent, that their brethren do not care for.

I am informed too, that the reverend presbytery have prepared a warning and admonition, and are soon to volley the thunders of the church, against the supporters of the tragedy of Douglas. The storm no doubt will be very great, for it has been long in gathering. And as they
 permit

permit you to sin on for two weeks longer, (for the paper is not to be read till the last Sunday of the month) you may firmly believe, my fellow citizens, they will make you smart the more severely for all. You are well acquainted with the clear and regular, and impartial conduct of the presbytery as a court, as well as with the decency, sobriety, and purity of a great many of the leading members in this affair. Be not therefore so head-strong, as to judge for yourselves in time to come; but be so wise as to use the advantages you possess, and surrender yourselves implicitly to the direction of your pastors. What tho' you have ground to believe, they do not act in this matter precisely according to their sentiments, remember that religion is at stake, and you must forgive them. Have but patience for a little while, and they will soon slacken their discipline. Who is me, that the nature of man cannot be altered! When this personal attack is once over, what reason have I to hope, that they will take any more notice of plays, than they did heretofore! Some of these devout father-confessors have articleed with their fair young penitents for two plays a week the rest of the winter, if they would but abstain from the tragedy of Douglas. What a key this private anecdote

note is to a great part of their conduct.

I cannot conclude this work without congratulating the reverend presbytery upon their zeal and courage, and the success of their laudable endeavours ; and admiring that wonderful concurrence of circumstances, that has produc'd such an *unusual* harmony of sentiments among them. If it should long continue, blest be the day that brought to light the tragedy of Douglas ! for union and peace among brethren, are to be purchas'd at any expense.

But let not the chosen and faithful few be too confident in this temporary union, occasion'd perhaps by passions the simple reader is little aware of. Proceed ye, you sacred band ! with vigour and resolution, before the children of this world recover their wisdom again ; if you do not strike the blow now, never more hope to find them at your mercy ; and as the first step to a full victory over this vile tragedy, move the presbytery to come in a body next Wednesday, to the place where the cross once stood, precisely at one o'clock, and you shall behold that abomination of abominations devour'd by flames hotter than your hottest zeal.