

THE DRAMA.

ART. XI.—*An Impartial Review of the Stage from the Days of Garrick and Rich to the present Period; and of the causes of its degenerated and declining state, and shewing the necessity of a Reform in the System as the only means of giving stability to the present property of the Winter Theatres.* By DRAMATICUS. 8vo. pp. 26. London, C. Chapple, 1816.

HAVING, we think, established in our last number that the magnitude of our present winter theatres is most injurious to the English Drama, and to the interests of authors, it will be our business now, in continuation of the subject, to shew that it is also detrimental to proprietors and actors, and most distressing and disappointing to the auditors. We have necessarily said something of the latter branches in noticing the former in our last Review.

What we observed in our previous article with regard to Tragedy, and the injury it receives from the prodigious size of our theatres, will also apply to Comedy, though not in an equal degree: the province of the latter is different; it deals more in contrasts and broad features of character, and is very much made up of striking and ludicrous situation; but the consequence of our enormous theatres is—that even this is unavoidably carried to the extremes of caricature, and that off-set, or sucker of comedy, called Farce, (which, while it produces no wholesome fruit itself, draws away the sap and strength from the parent stock,) has its origin in this cause: it is exclusively confined to coarse humour and boisterous mirth, and may be quite as well enjoyed at the distance of fifty as of five yards. Of late years it has been gradually making encroachments, and thrusting its mother from the boards; and of many of the modern comedies it may be fairly said, that they are more properly farces in five acts: if an exception be made in favour of Sheridan, it is not that his comedies are according to the true standard, but that he has given us wit and satire instead of extravagance and vulgarity; his wit and satire, too, are not always the most refined, and can be much better understood and relished at a distance, than the delicate distinction and nice shading of passion and character which belong to good tragedy.

Were we, with one or two exceptions at the utmost, to go over the whole catalogue of modern dramatists, and to examine the principles (as far as they followed any) upon which they have written, the personages they have intro-

duced, and the dialogue they have put into the mouths of those personages, what we have advanced would be fully confirmed. Had our theatres been of moderate dimensions, few of their pieces would have been heard of after the first night, or their names only remembered by those who, having been equally unfortunate, as a consolation in their afflictions, kept an accurate register of all authors that had been damned.

There can be no stronger proof of the injury the proprietors sustain from the excessive enlargement of our theatres, than the general depreciation of theatrical property. It is known that shares are now scarcely saleable at a great discount; and how many individuals have been ruined by indirectly engaging in concerns of the kind? At present, Covent Garden is only well filled when Miss O'Neill performs, and Kean is almost the sole attraction of Drury Lane: before the former came to town, the managers of Covent Garden were in the act of making rapid retrenchments; and, until the latter appeared, Drury Lane was in a state of bankruptcy. What is the cause of Miss O'Neill's violent, unnatural, and even offensive efforts, to give effect to her dying scenes in *Belvidera* or *Isabella*, but the size of the theatres, which compels her to caricature and exaggerate even expiring agonies? Could it be endured in an area of moderate proportions—would it not be revolting to taste, and disgusting to delicacy? The same is the origin of Mr. Kean's pantomime—the wonders of his "good night," and the excellence of his fencing. People can see when they cannot hear; and if they could hear, our actors would not be obliged, as at present, to make points, instead of sustaining a fine character in its wholeness and completeness.

The proprietors have tried the experiment, and they find that melo-dramas and pantomimes will answer their purpose no longer—audiences begin to grow tired of them; and these representations cannot be carried beyond a certain extreme: however probability may be stretched in some of them, they must stop on this side of possibility: and scenery and machinery can only go to a certain extent in splendour and ingenuity. It is now a very hazardous experiment to bring out a new melo-drama, for the spectators have grown fastidious even as to this species of representation. Covent Garden has carried it to the utmost verge, and is now under the necessity of pausing: even in their zenith melo-dramas scarcely repaid the expenses incurred in their preparation;

and however flourishing the concern may have appeared, the renters, &c. of this theatre have yet received no interest for the money they advanced for the rebuilding of the house: one of the greatest and most successful actors our stage has ever produced, and who is also a proprietor of Covent Garden to a very large amount, is in this unlucky situation; and he is now about to retire, not only from the boards, but from the kingdom; and after the sale of his fine theatrical library, (the finest, next to that of the British Museum,) to retire to the Continent for the improvement of his health, to say nothing of his fortune.

With respect to actors, and the mode in which they suffer by the unreasonable proportions of our theatres, it is unnecessary to say much. Many promising performers have been found unable to sustain parts, in consequence of the inadequacy of their voices to fill the immense area of the house; and those who are gifted with extraordinary power of lungs, are obliged to keep up a continual strain, which most materially interferes with harmony and expression. Other inconveniences, with respect to acting, or the fit delivery of the part, we have elsewhere referred to, and it is the more unnecessary to enlarge upon it, because it must be obvious how much success depends upon being understood, and how much being understood depends upon being heard. In a pecuniary point of view, however, actors are severe sufferers, from the same cause which renders necessary the employment of a company of performers in proportion to the size of the house: the salaries of the principal players are perhaps sufficiently large, and if the managers restrict themselves to twenty pounds per week, those who receive it have no right to complain; but there is an immense crowd of performers who do not obtain a tenth, or even a twentieth part of that sum, and yet are sometimes put forward in characters that demand talents much above the despicable pay allotted to them. This defect, by which the representation of some of our best plays, more particularly those of Shakspeare, is ruined, is owing to the immense disproportion between the emoluments of the first-rate and the lower actors, and this disproportion is to be traced to the same source; for if such numerous companies were not necessary, the second and third rate performers might be more liberally paid, and consequently men of higher talents and better education would be found to fill their places.

All that it is necessary here to say, with regard to the

auditors, and the manner in which they are affected, we have incidentally introduced as we proceeded through the other points, and it is the less needful to enforce this part of the subject, because there is not a single visitor of our theatres who does not, in a greater or less degree, experience inconvenience and distress. It is remarked by foreigners, that the English are not a play-going nation; but we are convinced that this disinclination is much to be attributed to the disappointments to which they are subject. In short, as we stated in the outset of our former article, there is scarcely an evil under which the drama and its dependents labour, that may not be fairly attributed to the enormous and unreasonable proportions of our theatres. Were it not for the private property embarked in these concerns, as lovers of the drama, nothing would please us better than to hear, that Covent Garden and Drury Lane Theatres were again burnt to the ground.

With regard to the pamphlet on our table, we have little to say in addition to what we remarked in our preceding Number: although it dwells principally upon minor points, the observations are not deficient in good sense, and the author seems to participate with us in a sincere love for the best interests of the stage.

BIBLIOTHECA ANTIQUA.

"I study to bring forth some acceptable worke; not striving to shewe any rare invention that passeth a meane man's capacite, but to utter and reuive matter of some moment, knowne and talked of long ago, yet ouer-long hath been buried and as it seemeth laid dead, for anie fruite it hath shewed in the memory of man."

Churchyard's Sparke of Friendship to Sir W. Raleigh.

ART. XII.—*Godfrey of Bulloigne, or The Recouerie of Ierusalem. Done into English Heroicall verse, by EDWARD FAIRFAX, Gent. Imprinted at London, by Ar. Hatfield, for I. Iaggard and M. Lownes, 1600, fo. pp. 399.*

As it is in contemplation soon to reprint this early translation of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, which translation, in the words of our motto, "over-long hath been buried and as it seemeth laid dead" we have selected it as the subject for our present article that our readers may be able to judge how well it deserves the distinction it is about to receive.