

CRITICISM.

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Criticism bids fair to become so dangerous a trade that ere long newspaper proprietors will find themselves constrained to refrain from noticing any book or play unless they can give it unqualified commendation. If an action for libel is to lie against a newspaper for saying that the works published recently by a particular firm are not so good as those published by the same firm some years back, newspaper criticism must sink into mere puffery. The case of *Johnston v. The Atheneum* is the latest instance of the danger of attempting to criticise modern productions.

We quote the above from the *Observer* and if the statement were true a change in the law would be urgent. An author, especially in this busy age, is naturally anxious to have his work reviewed, for that is the best, almost the only way of attracting the attention of the public. If a novel gets a long notice in the *Times* it a commercial success. We may see the importance attached to criticism by looking at theatrical and book advertisements. The book or the play is recommended to the public by a string of extracts from newspaper and review notices. But it is not the business of the critic to please the author. He is rather the expert for the public. It is his duty to tell the public whether, in his opinion, this book is worth reading, or this play is worth seeing. Besides that, he should point out perfections and defects. If criticism is not free it is worse than valueless. If the critic were not allowed to censure as well as praise, the only use of criticism would be to promote the sale of worthless books, or to induce people to go to the theatre to see stupid plays. But the statement of the *Observer* is not well founded. Criticism is not a dangerous trade unless the critic exceeds the well-defined limits of literary and art criticism. Suppose a reviewer wrote of a novel:—"This is the most vile story it was ever our cruel fate to read. The plot is a jumble of plagiarised incidents. The personages are not characters, but Punch and Judy puppets. The author's style is weakest slip-slop. We observe that the price of this novel is £1 11s. 6d., but whoever pays for it a penny more than the waste-paper dealer will give for it will pay a penny too much." That might be an unjust criticism—as unjust as some of the slashing reviews that distinguished the early days of the *Edin-*

burgh. But, however unjust, it would not be unlawful. Or suppose a dramatic critic wrote of a play:—"This drama is beneath criticism, and we should not notice it except to warn the public not to waste time and money, and to incur a loss of temper, in visiting the theatre, whilst the manager insults his patrons by the production of such arrant trash. There is no plot; or, at least, we were not able to see any reason why this drama should not be played backwards. The dialogue is dreariest commonplace. We only marvel that any person could have strung together so many words without one line of humour, wit, or imagination. In our opinion the author has written the stupidest drama that has ever been produced on any stage." That might be an unjust criticism, but it would not be unlawful. Surely, then, there is no pretence for saying that criticism is a dangerous trade for a reviewer; for a dramatic critic can hardly incur the risk of writing a libel if he says nothing except what appears on the face of the book or play. Now and then it is the duty of the critic to censure what he deems to be the moral tendency of a book or play; and that involves a risk of libel, because such a criticism is more or less a reflection upon the morality of the author. But even in such instances, a prudent—and we will add a just—critic can write with safety. If he barely asserts that a book or play is immoral, he may be unjust to the author. He may be wrong in his opinion, and he may unjustly deter the public from reading the book or seeing the play; and in such a case it is right that he should have to pay costs and damages, unless he can justify his language. But suppose the reviewer faithfully describes some scenes in the novel, and quotes some passages, and writes:—"We consider these scenes and these passages immoral, and we hold that they render the novel an immoral novel;" it is very doubtful indeed whether the novelist would succeed in an action for libel even though the review of the critic was unjust, for he would have afforded everyone who read his criticism an opportunity of forming an independent judgment as to whether his censure was or was not merited. So with regard to a play. When the critic barely says a