

**THE EPIGRAM OF COMPLIMENT.**

Most of us must have reason to deplore the decadence of Epigram—of Epigram, I mean, as written in the form of verse, and compressed within the limits of couplet or quatrain. There is plenty of prose epigram going about; there is a wonderful amount of it in the daily and weekly newspaper; and some of our best speakers never open their mouths but to give some utterance to some pithy and some witty sayings. Epigram in verse, however, is but rare among us; you get a little of it occasionally in the comic papers, but, it is admitted, not of the best kind. It is written to amuse, and frequently amuses; but it is not of the sort which

“On the stretched forefinger of all time Sparkles for ever.  
Nor is this, indeed, to be expected. Our publicists write too rapidly and too much to be able to produce anything in this way which shall be perfectly satisfying and enduring. You cannot manufacture epigrams by the dozen. You ought to be pleased if you turn out a good one in a lifetime; nor, so far as fame goes, would your labour have been wasted. Many a man has earned literary immortality by merely producing a couple of lines which stuck to the memory of his countrymen. Look at Cleveland's couplet:

“Had Cain been Scot, God would have changed his doom.  
Not forced him wander, but compelled him home.”

It is not altogether admirable, for it is almost too concentrated and elliptical. But it has done for the writer's reputation what all the rest of his works put together have failed to do. The instance is not, perhaps, perfectly in point, for the lines in question are a portion only of a satiric poem. Still, they show what a happy hit in the direction of a couplet is able to achieve for the preservation of an author's memory. The only requirement is, that the hit should really be a happy one; that the saying, whether couplet, or quatrain, or even longer, should be *totus teres atque rotundus*, like those famous lines by Rogers on Lord Dudley:

They say Ward has no heart, but I deny it;  
He has a heart, and gets his speeches by it.”

Here is a couplet on which it is utterly impossible to improve, which says what it has to say once for all in such a perfect manner, that you feel the displacement or alteration of a word would injure it. Of course, epigrams survive of which expressions like these cannot be used—which are clever in style and in point, but which you by no means consider out of the range of emendation. But if these are not yet forgotten, they may be forgotten some day—unless, indeed, they live by virtue of association with some person, thing or event. The perfect epigram exists on no such terms: it lives, and always will live, by virtue of its aptness to its end; by reason of the consummate character of its wit, its expression, and its form; because it enshrines for ever some quip or some conceit which no one has been able to put into a better shape.

But if epigram, as epigram, is rare, what is to be said of that phase of it which I have called the epigram of compliment? If I deplore the scarcity of epigrams which are like so many barbs piercing and adhering to a wound, still more do I deplore the paucity of epigrams which glow and gleam like the eyes of a woman on her lover—gleaming with wit and glowing with good humour. The want of the former is not, perhaps, to be regretted, except from a literary point of view; for there is always something acid in the taste of sarcasm and satire, and the Martials of our verse are not the pleasantest of fellows. But the want of the latter is regrettable indeed, because it seems to indicate the decline, not only of wit and of literary skill, but of that exquisite chivalry and that perfect courtesy which are of the essence of true compliment. It looks as if we had lost the art of saying elegant things; as if the graceful speech had gone out with the graceful manners of our grandfathers.

In fact, if I were asked to name the last of those who wielded the grand style in compliment, I think I should name Sydney Smith. It was he, you remember, who, when a young lady, looking at some flowers in a garden, remarked, “I fear that pea will never come to perfection,” took her by the hand, and said, “Permit me to lead perfection to the pea.” What would some of us not give nowadays to be able to say anything so spontaneous and so admirable as that! What would we not give, too, if we could put together four such lines as those which Sydney Smith wrote on the subject of Professor Airey, the astronomer, and his beautiful wife! Keep in mind the avocation of the gentleman and the beauty of the lady, and you will be charmed with this:

“Airey alone has gained that double prize  
Which forced musicians to divide the crown;  
His works have raised a mortal to the skies,  
His marriage vows have drawn an angel down.”

The allusion to the famous passage in Dryden's *Alexander's Feast* will of course be observed by everybody.

Then, if you want something to place beside that quatrain, take this couplet by Luttrell, which is better known by far than the lines just quoted, and comes down to us with the imprimatur of the poet Rogers; I mean the distich upon Miss Tree, the singer, afterwards Mrs. Bradshaw, of whom Luttrell said:

“On this Tree if a nightingale settles and sings,  
The Tree will return her as good as she brings.”

Or take again those equally well-known lines of Lord Erskine, addressed to Lady Payne one day

after he had been complaining of illness in her house:

“’Tis true I am ill, but I need not complain,  
For he never knew pleasure that never knew Payne.”

The latter, perhaps, is just the least bit obvious; but the former is—what Rogers called it—“quite a little fairy tale.”

A very happy compliment, in the form of a pun upon a name, was perpetrated by James Smith in reference to Maria Edgeworth, whose highly-improving narratives are not, to be sure, so popular as they were upon a time. Smith wrote of her:

“We every-day bards may ‘Anonymous’ sign;  
That refuge, Miss Edgeworth, can never be thine.  
Thy writings, where satire and moral unite,  
Must bring forth the name of their author to light,  
Good and bad join in telling the source of their birth;  
The bad own their edge and the good own their worth.”

I am not aware that the writer of this epigram got anything in return for his neat saying, but we know that he did so in the case of his lines on Mr. Strahan, the King's Printer. These ran as follows:

“Your lower limbs seemed far from stout  
When last I saw you walk;  
The cause I presently found out,  
When you began to talk.”

The power that props the body's length,  
In due proportion spread,  
In you mounts upwards, and the strength  
All settles in the head.”

Strahan was so delighted with the lines that he immediately made a codicil to his will, bequeathing Smith the sum of three hundred pounds. It is doubtful, I should say, whether any literary effort was ever so admirably remunerated.

It was to be expected that we should find in the works of Moore—the bright and the vivacious—instances, and particularly happy ones, of the epigram of compliments. Moore lived in an atmosphere of such things, and had the ability at once to conceive and to execute them. A genuine wit, if ever there was one, he had just the requisite facility and felicity of verse, and could turn a quatrain more artistically than almost any other poet of his day. The following is worth quoting because it recalls epigrams very much the same in point by at least two earlier writers. For example, Moore wrote in these terms

“ON A LADY.

With woman and apples both Paris and Adam  
Made mischief enough in their day;  
God be praised that the fate of mankind, my dear madam,  
Depends not on us, the same way.”

For, weak as I am with temptation to grapple,  
The world would have doubly to rue thee;  
Like Adam, I'd gladly take from thee the apple,  
Like Paris, at once give it to thee.”

Robert Fergusson, one of the melancholy group of “inheritors of unfulfilled renown,” had already written before Moore, “On being asked which of Three Sisters was most beautiful”:

“When Paris gave his voice, in Ida's grove,  
For the resistless Venus, Queen of Love,  
’Twas no great task to pass a judgment there,  
Where she alone was exquisitely fair.”

But here, what could his ablest judgment teach,  
When wisdom, power, and beauty reign in each?  
The youth, nonplused, behoved to join with me,  
And wish the apple had been out in three.”

Of course the idea here is not quite identical with that of Moore; but both writers use the legend of Paris and the apple to give distinction to their clever rhymes. And so does Allan Ramsay in a quatrain written probably before Fergusson was born—this was “On receiving an Orange from a Lady”:

“Now, Priam's son, thou may'st be mute,  
For I can blithely boast with thee:  
Thou to the fairest gave the fruit,  
The fairest gave the fruit to me.”

Here the idea and the expression are both particularly neat.

To return to Moore for a moment. Let us take his lines “To a Lady,” composed in obvious expansion of a remark made by Lord Herbert of Chisbury to a nun at Venice: “Moria pur quando vuol,” said his lordship, “non è bisogno mutar ni faccia ni voce per esser un angelo.”—“Die whenever you will, you will not need to change either face or voice in order to be an angel.” And so Moore:

“Die when you will, you need not wear  
At heaven's court a form more fair  
Than beauty here on earth has given;  
Keep but the lovely looks we see,  
The voice we hear, and you will be  
An angel ready made for heaven.”

As an anonymous writer had written many years before, “On a beautiful and virtuous young Lady”:

This, however, is rather elegant hyperbole than wit. Let us take something which is more truly epigrammatic in its nature. Let us take, for example, the four lines which Dr. Wolcot wrote when his nightcap, which had been lent to him by Nelson, caught fire in a candle, and was nearly burned:

“Take your nightcap again, my good lord, I desire,  
For I wish not to keep it a minute;  
What belongs to a Nelson, wherever there's fire,  
Is sure to be instantly in it.”

Take again Lord Lyttelton's lines on Lady Brown—if, indeed, they are Lord Lyttelton's. They are attributed to him, and not unreasonably. He wrote:

“When I was young and *débonnaire*  
The brownest nymph to me was fair;  
But now I'm old and wiser grown,  
The fairest nymph to me is Brown.”

He also wrote of Henrietta, Countess of Suffolk:

“Her wit and beauty for a court were made,  
But truth and goodness fit her for a shade.”

Another excellent example of elegant hyperbole,

I must not, however, pass over Burns, who, amidst much in the way of epigram that was both savage and brutal, wrote a good deal that was both polished and good-tempered. To a beautiful girl who professed to believe in the principles of “liberty and equality,” he addressed the following:

“How liberty! girl, can it be by thee named?  
Equality, too! hussy, art not ashamed?  
Free and equal, indeed, while mankind thou enchainest,  
And over their hearts as a despot thou reignest!”

Dr. Johnson composed a Latin epigram, very similar in point, upon a young Whig lady-friend of his; but both he and Burns were anticipated in the conceit by Charles Montagu, Earl of Halifax. That poetical exquisite was one of the members of the Kit-Kat Club, whose custom it was to make verses on their favourite toasts; and thus it was that he came to write as follows upon Lady Mary Churchill:

“Fairest and latest of the beauteous race,  
Blest with your parent's wit and her first blooming face,  
Born with our liberties in William's reign,  
Your eyes alone that liberty restrain.”

Something in the same strain is Horace Walpole's epigram “to Madame de Damas on her learning English”:

“Though British accents your attention fire,  
You cannot learn as fast as we admire;  
Scholars like you but slowly can improve,  
For who would teach you but the verb ‘I love’?”

This is better than his epigram on Madame du Chatelet, which is ingenious, but not sufficiently explicit.

One of the most elegant epigrams ever written was that which Lord Chesterfield was said to have composed impromptu at a ball in Dublin, “On seeing a young Jacobite Lady dressed with Orange Ribbons”:

“Say, lovely traitor, where's the jest  
Of wearing Orange on thy breast,  
While that breast, upheaving, shows  
The whiteness of the rebel rose?”

This reminds one of an “anonymous” quatrain “On some Snow that melted on a Lady's Breast”:

“Those envious flakes came down in haste,  
To prove her breast less fair,  
Grieving to find themselves surpassed,  
Dissolved into a tear.”

But still more exquisite than either is the well-known epigram in which Congreve and Somerville collaborated, and which they represented as addressed by a Yorkist prince to a Lancastrian lady, along with the gift of a white rose. It is almost too familiar for quotation:

“If this pale rose offend your sight,  
It in your bosom wear;  
’Twill blush to find itself less white,  
And turn Lancastrian there.”

But if thy ruby lip it spy,  
To kiss it shouldst thou deign,  
With envy pale ’twill lose its dye,  
And Yorkist turn again.”

This, it seems to me, is the very perfection of elegant admiration.

One of the most flattering things one man ever said about another was what Richard Kendall said about David Garrick, when comparing him with his rival, Spranger Barry. Kendall wrote, in lines which are better known than the name of the ingenious author:

“The town has found out different ways  
To praise its different Lears;  
To Barry it gives loud huzzas,  
To Garrick only tears.”

A king! Ay, every inch a king—  
Such Barry doth appear;  
But Garrick's quite another thing—  
He's every inch King Lear.”

As it happens, Garrick himself was as neat a hand at a compliment as any one that ever lived. His fluent verse is deserving of more recognition than it receives. How elegant it sometimes was may be gathered from these lines, written in Edward Moore's “Fables for the Female Sex”:

“While here the poet paints the charms  
Which bless the perfect dame,  
How unaffected beauty warms,  
And wit preserves the flame!”

Now prudence, virtue, sense agree  
To form the happy wife;  
In Lucy and her book I see  
The Picture and the Life!”

Even more happily expressed is Garrick's epitaph on Claudius Phillips the musician, the concluding couplet of which runs:

“Sleep undisturbed within this peaceful shrine,  
Till angels wake thee with a note like thine.”

Mrs. Grierson, too, had an epigram on a lady-friend, which is even better “put” than the above lines by Garrick. I refer to the lines she sent to the Hon. Mrs. Percival, along with a copy of Hutcheson's “On Beauty and Virtue”:

“Th' internal senses painted here we see:  
They're born in others, but they live in thee.  
Oh, were our author with thy converse blest,  
Could he behold the virtues of thy breast,  
His needless labours with contempt he'd view,  
And bid the world not read, but copy you.”

Unconscious beauty has found many admirers among the epigrammatists.

Charles, Earl of Halifax, wrote to Anne, Countess of Sunderland:

“All Nature's charms in Sunderland appear,  
Bright as her eyes, and as her reason clear;  
Yet still their force, to men not safely known,  
Seems undiscovered to herself alone.”

This is the point of Pope's lines on Mrs. Howard, afterwards Countess of Suffolk. After enumerating all her virtues, he goes on:

“Has she no faults, then,” Envy says, “sir?”  
Yes, she has one, I must aver;  
When all the world conspires to praise her,  
The woman's deaf, and does not hear.”

This, like most of Pope's epigrams, must be familiar to every reader. Who, for example,

does not remember his famous tribute to Sir Isaac Newton?—

“Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night:  
God said, ‘Let Newton be!’ and all was light.”

Allan Ramsay has a couplet almost identical with this; but a general consensus of opinion gives the priority of authorship to Pope. Not, indeed, that the “great little poet” was superior to plagiarism. Take his lines on Sir Godfrey Kneller, for example. The last couplet runs as follows:

“Living, great Nature feared he might outvie  
Her works, and dying, fears herself may die.”

This is admirably expressed; but the idea is taken bodily from Cardinal Bembo's epitaph on Raphael.

Pope's most successful epigram in compliment was the immortal couplet which he wrote on glass with Chesterfield's diamond pencil:

“Accept a miracle instead of wit:  
See two dull lines by Stanhope's pencil writ.”

To this, at least, he has an irrefragable claim.

Swift was another of the “courtly poets;” and was guilty of many a poetic offering to lovely dames. This is what he wrote “to Mrs. Houghton, on her praising her Husband” in the presence of the witty dean:

“You always are making a god of your spouse,  
But this neither reason nor conscience allows;  
Perhaps you will say ‘tis in gratitude due,  
And you adore him because he adores you.  
Your argument's weak, and so you will find;  
For you, by this rule, must adore all mankind.”

I pass over Dryden's famous epigram on Milton, as unworthy of the admiration which has been lavished upon it, and come to Waller, yet another of the “courtly poets,” whose lines “On a lady who writ in praise of Myra” are a very fair example of his complimentary verse. He wrote:

“While she pretends to make the graces known  
Of matchless Myra, she reveals her own:  
And when she would another's praise indite  
Is by her glass instructed how to write.”

Of Herrick's perfect little cameos of compliment, addressed to the beauties (real or fictitious) who inspired his Muse, take the following lines as an example:

“Roses at first were white,  
Till they could not agree  
Whether my Sappho's breast  
Or they more white should be.”

But being vanquish'd quite,  
A blush their cheeks bespread;  
Since which, believe the rest,  
The roses first came red.”

In a very similar tone writes an anonymous author in “Wit Restored” (1658):

“Shall I tell you how the rose at first grew red,  
And whence the lily whiteness borrow'd?  
You blushed, and straight the rose with red was dight;  
The lily kiss'd your hand, and so was white.”

With this, and a mere reference to Ben Jonson's celebrated tribute to the worth of the Countess of Pembroke, I close these few desultory notes, in the hope that, after all, we have not seen the last of the epigram of compliment, but that it may by and by be able to rival successfully the admirable performances of the past.

W. DAVENPORT ADAMS.

**HUMOROUS.**

The 5-year old son of a family the other day stood watching his baby-brother, who was making a great noise over having his face washed. The little fellow at length lost his patience, and, stamping his tiny foot, said: “You think you have lots of trouble, but you don't know anything about it. Wait till you're big enough to get a lickin' and then you'll see—won't he, mamma?”

An advertisement in an exchange says a “large gray gentleman's” shawl has been lost. That's singular. Now, if it had been a large gentleman's gray shawl, or a gray large gentleman's shawl, or a gentleman's large gray shawl, it would, of course, have been different; but the thief who would steal a shawl from a large gray gentleman deserves to have his hair turn gray in one night, and ought to be made wear a gray striped suit the balance of his days.

**MUSICAL AND DRAMATIC.**

MR. HERMANN LINDE, the German Shakespearean reader, has read the tragedy of *Macbeth* in Steinway Hall, New York, with success. He repeated the whole of the play from memory and read the parts in character. He has a dozen or more voices, which he uses with equal flexibility and effect.

EDWIN FORREST and Charlotte Cushman for years greatly admired one another. Each declared that the other was the greatest dramatic artist living. During the war they both agreed to play in “*Macbeth*,” for the benefit of a sanitary fund. They had never been on the stage together before. The performance was a great success. Both appeared at their best. But from that time they were sworn enemies and each expressed the utmost contempt for the professional qualities of the other. Forrest used to say that Cushman was “not a woman at all,” and Cushman declared that Forrest was “a butcher.”

**A CARD.**

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