

in which men of sense find entertainment, consists of nothing but a quick and original succession of ideas,—a finding, as it were, of something in nothing,—a rapid turning of the hearer's mind to some new phase of thought and sparkling imagery. The man of shallow gravity, and besides an uneasy half-consciousness that he has nothing of the sort about him, is too dull of perception to see the delicate links between one thought and another; and he takes that for a mere chaos of laughing jargon, in which finer apprehensions perceive as much delightful association as men of musical taste do in the most tricksome harmonies and accompaniments of Mozart and Beethoven. Between such gravity and such mirth there is as much difference as between the driest and dreariest psalmody, and that excellent laughing trio,—“E voi ridete,”—which is sung in “Cosi fan tutte.” A Quaker's coat and a garden are not more dissimilar; nor a death-bell and the birds after a sunny shower.

It is on such occasions, indeed, that we enjoy the perfection of what is agreeable in humanity,—the harmony of mind and body,—intellect, and animal spirits. Accordingly, the greatest geniuses appear to have been proficient in this kind of nonsense, and to have delighted in dwelling upon it, and attributing it to their favourites, Virgil is no joker, but Homer is; and there is the same difference between their heroes, Aeneas and Achilles, the latter of whom is also a player on the harp. Venus, the most delightful of the goddesses, is Philomedeides, the laughter loving;—an epithet, by the way, which might give a good hint to a number of very respectable ladies, who “love their lords,” but who are too apt to let ladies less respectable run away with them. Horace represents Pleasantry as fluttering about Venus in company with Cupid—

“*Quem Jocus circumvolat, et Cupido;*”

and these are followed by Youth, the enjoyer of animal spirits, and by Mercury, the god Persuasion. There is the same difference between Tasso and Aristo as between Virgil and Homer; that is to say, the latter proves his greater genius by a completer and more various hold on the feelings, and has not only a fresher spirit of Nature about him, but a truer, because a happier; for the want of this enjoyment is at once a defeat and a deterioration. It is more or less a disease of the blood; a falling off from the pure and uncontradicted blithesomeness of childhood; a hampering of the mind with the altered nerves; dust gathered in the watch, and perplexing our passing hours.

It may be thought a begging of the question to mention Anacreon, since he made an absolute business of mirth and enjoyment, and sat down systematically to laugh as well as to drink. But on that very account, perhaps, his case is still more in point: and Plato, one of the gravest, but not the shallowest, of philosophers, gave him the title of the Wise. The disciple of Socrates appears also to have been a great enjoyer of Aristophanes; and the divine Socrates himself was a wit and a joker.

But the divine Shakespeare—the man to whom we go for everything, and are sure to find it, grave, melancholy or merry—what said he to this exquisite kind of non-

sense? Perhaps next to his passion for detecting nature and over-informing it with poetry, he took delight in pursuing a joke; and the lowest scenes of his in this way say mote to men whose faculties are fresh about them, and who prefer enjoyment to criticism, than the most doting of commentators can find out. They are instances of his animal spirits, of his sociality, of his passion for giving and receiving pleasure, of his enjoyment of something wiser than wisdom.

The greatest favourites of Shakespeare are made to resemble him in this particular. Hamlet, Mercutio, Touchstone, Jacques, Richard the Third, and Falstaff, “inimitable Falstaff,” are all men of wit and humour, modified according to their different temperaments or circumstances; some from health and spirits, others from sociality, others from a contrast with their very melancholy. Indeed, melancholy itself, with the profoundest intellects, will rarely be found to be anything else than a sickly temperament, induced or otherwise, preying in its turn upon the disappointed expectation of pleasure; upon the contradiction of hopes, which this world is not made to realize, though, let us never forget, it is made, as they themselves prove, to suggest. Some of Shakespeare's characters, as Mercutio and Benedick, are almost entirely made up of wit and animal spirits; and delightful fellows they are, and ready, from their very taste, to perform the most serious and manly offices. Most of his women, too, have an abundance of natural vivacity, Desdemona herself is so pleasant of intercourse in every way, that, upon the principle of the respectable mistakes above mentioned, the Moor, when he grows jealous, is tempted to think it a proof of her want of honesty. But he must make Shakespeare speak for himself, or we shall not know how to be silent on this subject. What a description is that which he gives of a man of mirth—of a mirth, too, which he has expressly stated to be within the limit of what is becoming! It is in “Love's Labour's Lost:”—

“A merrier man,  
Within the limit of becoming mirth,  
I never spent an hour's talk withal.  
His eye begets occasion for his wit:  
For every object that the one doth catch,  
The other turns to a mirth-moving jest;  
Which his fair tongue, conceit's expositor,  
Delivers in such apt and gracious words,  
That aged ears play truant at his tales,  
And younger hearings are quite ravished;  
So sweet and voluble is his discourse.”

We have been led to these reflections, partly to introduce the conclusion of this article; partly from being very fond of a joke ourselves, so making our self-love as proud as possible; and partly from having spent some most agreeable hours the other evening with a company, the members of which had all the right to be grave and disagreeable that rank and talent are supposed to confer, and yet, from the very best sense of the forgetfulness of both, were as lively and entertaining to each other as boys. Not one of them, perhaps, but had his cares—one or two, of no ordinary description; but what then? These are the moments, if we can take advantage of them, when sorrows are shared, even unconsciously; moments, when melancholy intermits her fever, and hope takes a leap into enjoyment; when the pilgrim of life, if