

those who do not violate the following canon:—That man being the only animal that laughs and reasons, the connection between reason and ridicule seems to be very close, and the faculty of laughter seems superadded to our constitution to keep absurdity within bounds, and to lead us to look at the unavoidable follies of each other with good humoured sympathy rather than scornful disgust. From which it would follow as a sort of corollary that there can be no legitimate subject of laughter where the feelings or rightful interests of others are seriously wounded or assailed. Tested by this canon, Shakespeare's good taste seems to have rejected two kinds of ridicule.

- (1.) That which owes its point to caricature and burlesque.
- (2.) That which owes its point to coarseness and indecency.

The burlesquing of religion and religious superstition has always been a capital resource of the comic poets. If we in the Nineteenth century can find any amusement whatever in Byron's travesties of Olympus, how exquisitely absurd to an Athenian mob, in the days of Aristophanes, must have been the figure of Prometheus under an umbrella, Hercules, the glutton, Bacchus the young fop, and Iris, the soubrette. But can we feel equally sure that these caricatures were not a grave stumbling-block to the more sober-minded. From such caricature Shakespeare is free—not though he had not the cloth to restrain him, would he have indulged in Tom Ingoldsby's loud laughter against the vulgar idea of demons and saints and that ineffable fiend with horns and tail and hoof, whom Cuvier ruthlessly dismissed as a gannivorous animal. Take that boisterous scene of a group of demons at dinner:—

Few ate more hearty  
Than Madame Astarte,  
And Hecate considered the belle of the party.

Here's Lucifer lying blind drunk with Scotch ale,  
While Beelzebub's tying huge knots in his tail.

This, no doubt, is pure burlesque without intentional irreverence, but at the time, when it was written, to the old-fashioned and fastidious it would scarcely appear so.

In Shakespeare, again, we have no coarseness or indecency, save such as is the inevitable outgrowth of the plainness of his age. He, however, never trades upon it nor passes it off for wit. To use his own word, he has love songs without bawdry, which is strange; but what he has not, is that unblushing indecency that was soon to spread over Court and capital and stage, establishing its dominion over the dramatic decameron of the Restoration, corrupting the manners and with them the morals of the dramatist, and forbidding them, at the risk of seeming dull, to be anything but improper. Had Shakespeare lived and written in accordance with the dominant reaction against Puritanism, we should probably have possessed an English Aristophanes with a muse too naked to be shamed.

The enjoyment that proceeds from the absurdities of weaklings and fools has always had a recognized place, though not one of a very high order, in the range of merriment. The sight of those who have the beard and body of a man, with the intellect of a baby, produces great mirth and satisfaction to the vulgar mind. It is in this department of the comic that there seems most foundation for the theory of Hobbes that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the inferiority of others. Of the innumerable people who have laughed at Lord Dundreary, a large proportion, no doubt, did so with increased heartiness from the comfortable conviction that here was at least one "fellow" to whom they were intellectually superior. I need scarcely point to the clown in the "Winter's Tale" as exhibiting an instance of a similar kind. But there is another and better way in which fools and simpletons become a source of amusement, and that is by the unexpected displays which they sometimes make of wit, spirit and ingenuity, for which one gave them no credit, and in particular by their successful retort upon assailants who had looked upon them as an easy prey. In this, to my mind, lies the zest of the plot in the "Merry Wives of Windsor" that shows the shrewd, witty, but vain Falstaff baffled, mocked, befooled by those country bourgeois wives whom, as a wit and courtier, he pretended to despise, but intended to debauch.

Does Shakespeare ever intentionally perpetrate that witticism known as the Irish bull? I think he does—the essence of the genuine bull seems to consist in an unconscious self-contradiction. An example of a perfect verbal bull is contained in the dictum of the Irish Doctor that sterility is often hereditary. A self-contradiction that has a certain plausibility at first sight, and which I have seen imposed upon a very grave physician who was not Irish. As a counterpart to this I would quote Paulina's amusing absurdity when she prays that the daughter of Leontes may have no jealousy in her composition,

Lest she suspect as he does,  
Her children not her husband's.

A very ludicrous class of failures are those of which Mrs. Slipshod in Joseph Andrews, and Mrs. Malaprop in the Rivals, supply us with the richest or most finished examples. The attempts of ignorant persons to use fine and peculiar words and the unconscious substitution of others bearing a different meaning or character, never fail to amuse. To generalize we may say that every instance of unsuccessful affectation, every assumption of a false character, that is at once detected, every preposterous attempt to shine where excellence is hopeless—all these are fertile sources of entertainment and legitimate objects of ridicule. It is to this principle that we owe those dolts of erudition Sir Nathaniel and Holofernes, that solemn fop, Don Armado, the boorish Costard with his ad dunghill for ad unguem, and the servant in the Winter's Tale with his Saltiers for Satyrs.

Among the instances of ridiculous absurdity in what may be called suicidal statements are those extravagances known as gasconades. In these the speaker wishing to magnify his character or achievements, so rashly overstates his case as to defeat his purpose by becoming incredible—vaulting ambition that o'er-leaps itself and falls on the other side. It seems a favorite style of American wit to push a fact or story to such a degree of exaggeration as to be literally a *reductio ad absurdum*. The comic effect on the stage of the sayings and doings of gasconading cowards is familiar to us by the frequent representation of such characters as in Miles Gloriosus, Bobadil, Falstaff, and ancient Pistol.

And what of that scamp Autolycus? The merry Bohemian that forms the staple of laughter in the "Winter's Tale." As a brain creature I place him side by side with the youngest Moth—that shrewd young rogue—that handful of wit, as Costard calls him, who has purchased his little experience by his penny of observation. For the enjoyment of the fun of both, a certain childish swiftness of gleeful apprehension is required. It does not shine so much in its pure wit as in its overflowing humour, and in the inexhaustible fertility of ludicrous devices by which laughter is excited. Furnivall closes his critique on the play with these words:—"Not only do we see Shakespeare's freshness of spirit in his production of Perdita, but in his creation of Autolycus. That at the close of his dramatic life, after all the troubles he had passed through, Shakespeare had yet the youngness of heart to bubble out wit, this merry rogue, the incarnation of fun and rascality, and let him sail off successful and unharmed is wonderful, and that there is no diminution of his former comic power, is shown, too, in his clown who wants but something to be a reasonable man."

## Correspondence.

To the Editors of the MCGILL UNIVERSITY GAZETTE.

MCGILL COLLEGE SONG-BOOK.

SIRS,—A mass meeting of the students of all the faculties will be held in Dr. Girdwood's class-room, Medical Building, on Tuesday evening February 12th, at 8 o'clock, for the purpose of discussing the advisability of compiling a new collection of songs for the use of students of this college. As there is an absolute and immediate necessity for a song-book, it is earnestly hoped that there will be as large an attendance as possible.

Yours &c.,

W. G. STEWART.