

solation, to shout "plagiarism" is the most comforting to authors who have failed, or amateurs who have never had the pluck to try. For this reason, probably, a new play seldom succeeds but some unlucky amateur produces his battered old MS., and declares that the fortunate author has stolen from him, who hath Fortune for his foe. Indeed, without this resource it is not known how unaccepted theatrical writers would endure their lot in life. But if stealing is so ready a way to triumph, then humanity may congratulate itself on the wide prevalence of moral sentiments. So very few people greatly succeed (and scarce any one who does not is called a thief) that even if all successful persons are proved robbers, there must be a lofty standard of honesty in literature. On the other hand it is a melancholy fact that the very greatest men of all—Shakespeare, Molière, Virgil (that furtive Mantuan), Pausanias, Theocritus, and Lord Tennyson—are all liable to the charge of theft, as that charge is understood by the *advocatus Diaboli*. It is a little odd, not only that our greatest is so small, but that our smallest—the persons who bark at the chariot of every passing triumph—are so great. They have never stolen, or nothing worth stealing, or nothing that any one would buy. But Dante: why, the whole idea of a visit to Hell, and a record of it, was a stock topic in early mediæval literature. But Bunyan: every library possesses, or may possess, half a dozen earlier Progresses by earlier Pilgrims. But Virgil: when he is not pilfering from Homer or Theocritus (who notoriously robbed Sophon) he has his hand in the pocket of Apollonius Rhodius. No doubt Bavius and Mævius mentioned these truths in their own literary circle. No doubt they did not gloss over the matter, but frankly remarked that the "Æneid" was a *pastiche*, a string of plagiarisms, a success due to Court influence, and the mutual admiration of Horace, Varro, and some other notorious characters. Yet the "Æneid" remains a rather unusual piece of work.

Some one, probably Gibbon, has remarked about some crime or other, that it is "difficult to commit, and almost impossible to prove." The reverse is the truth about plagiarism. That crime is easy to prove, and almost impossible to commit. The facility of proof is caused by the readiness of men to take any accusation of this sort for granted, and by the very natural lack of popular reflection about the laws that govern literary composition. Any two passages or situations, or ideas, that resemble each other, or are declared to resemble each other when they do not, are, to the mind of the unliterary person, a sufficient basis for a charge of plagiarism. These circumstances account for the ease with which plagiarism is proved. Yet it is difficult, if not impossible, to commit. For he who is charged with plagiarism is almost invariably guilty of a literary success. Now, even the poorest and most temporary literary success (say that of a shilling novel) rests on the production of a *new thing*. The book that really wins the world, even for a week, from its taxes, and politics, and wars and rumours of war, must be in some way striking and novel. The newness may lie in force of fancy, or in charm of style, or in both; or in mere craftsman's skill, or in high spirits, or in some unusual moral sympathy and insight, or in various combinations of these things. In all such cases, and always, it is what is *new*, it is the whole impact of the book as one thing, that enables it to make its way to the coveted front. Now, what is stolen cannot be new; it can be nothing but the commonplaces of situation, and incident, and idea—each of them as old as fiction in one shape or other. Not the matter, but the casting of the matter; not the stuff, but the form given to the stuff, makes the novel, the novelty, and the success. Now, nobody can steal the form; nobody, as in the old story (or nobody except a piratical publisher), can "steal the brooms ready-made." The success or failure lies not in the materials, but in the making of the brooms, and no dullard can make anything, even if he steals all his materials. On the other hand, genius, or even considerable talent, can make a great deal, if it chooses, even out of stolen material—if any of the material of literature can be properly said to be stolen, and is not rather the possession of whoever likes to pick it up.

There are, unluckily, plenty of men and women who take credit, among their relations and friends, for the authorship of anonymous books which have been successful. They are "claimants," like the Tichborne pretender, rather than successful plagiarists. The case of George Eliot and "Adam Bede" is well-known. There was a person named Liggins who gave himself out for the author, and even reaped some social if not pecuniary benefit.

Mr. Liggins did not succeed in the long run, nor does literary history, perhaps, contain a single example of the triumph of a literary Perkin Warbeck. Only in very unusual and fantastic circumstances could he hope to keep the goods he stole ready-made. In the last novel on this situation, the pretender had every reason to believe that the true author of the MS. was drowned at sea. Unlucky and ill-advised pretender! The sea invariably gives up her dead—in novels. Short of such an unexpected accident as the sea's not giving up her dead, how is the true plagiarist to feel comfortable with his stolen goods? Almost his only chance, and that a bad one, would be by way of translation from some little-known language. Not long ago a story or novel by a modern author was published in a periodical. Presently the editor got a letter from a correspondent, offering to furnish "the sequel of your little tale from the Basque," or whatever the original language may have been. Yes, it is very difficult to find a language safe to steal from. Let me confess that, in a volume of tales written by way of holiday tasks, I once conveyed a passage from the Zulu. There could not have been a more bare-faced theft, and no doubt, in the present inflamed condition of the moral sense, somebody would have denounced me, had the tale been successful. But as long as you do not excite the pretty passion of envy, you may drive the Zulu cows unnoticed. There were only about three lines in the passage after all. The coolness of plagiarism has occasionally been displayed on a larger scale, as when a

novelist boldly took a whole battle scene out of Kinglake's "History of the Crimean War." He was found out, but he did not seem to care much. Probably this particularly daring theft was a mere piece of mischief—a kind of practical joke. What other explanation can be given of Mr. Disraeli's raid on Mr. Thiers, and the speech about General Saint-Cyr! Of course, Mr. Disraeli could have made a better speech for himself. Thefts of this kind, like certain literary forgeries, are prompted by the tricky spirit of Puck. But the joke is not in good taste, and is dangerous to play, because the majority of mankind will fail to see the fun of it, and will think the thief a thief in sober earnest. Only a humorous race would have made a God of Hermes, who stole cattle from the day his mother cradled him.

From these and similar cases, the difficulty, the all but impossibility, of successful plagiarism becomes manifest. If you merely use old ideas (and there are no new ideas), and so produce a fresh combination, a fresh whole, you are not a plagiarist at all. If you boldly annex the novel ready-made, either by way of translation, or publication of a manuscript not your own, you are instantly found out, and probably never get back your reputation. It appears that Mr. Charles Reade, in the "Wandering Heir," "bodily appropriated" twenty or thirty lines of a little-known poem of Dean Swift's, descriptive of fashionable life in Dublin. Mr. Reade appears to have used this poem in such a way as to make the public think it was his own composition. If he did, he acted, to say the least, with very great rashness. He reckoned without the unsuccessful novelist and the unsuccessful novelist's family. Of course he was "denounced as a plagiarist by two anonymous writers, who afterwards turned out to be a not very successful novelist and his wife." These "lynx-eyed detectives" do, pretty often, "turn out to be" unsuccessful novelists and their kinsmen. Mr. Reade then uttered loud cries of wrath, and spoke of "masked batteries manned by anonymuncula, pseudo-nymuncula and skunkula."*

All ideas are old; all situations have been invented and tried, or almost all. Probably a man of genius might make a good story even out of a selected assortment of the very oldest devices in romance. Miss Thackeray made capital stories out of the fairy tales that are older than Rameses II., and were even published by a scribe of that monarch's. Give Mr. Besant or Mr. Stevenson two lovers, and insist that, in telling these lovers' tale, the following incidents shall occur:

A Sprained Ankle.

An Attack by a Bull.

A Proposal in a Conservatory, watched by a Jealous Rival.

A Lost Will.

An Intercepted Correspondence.

Even out of these incidents it is probable that either of the authors mentioned could produce a novel that would soothe pain and charm exile. Nor would they be accused of plagiarism, because the ideas are, even by the most ignorant or envious, recognised as part of the common stock-in-trade.

Now, it is a fact that almost every notion and situation is as much part of the common stock-in-trade as those old friends. The "Odyssey," for example, might be shown to contain almost all the material of the romance that is accepted as outside of ordinary experience. For instance, in "She" we find a wondrous woman, who holds a man in her hollow caves (note the *caves*, there are caves in Homer), and offers him the gift of immortality. Obviously this is the position of Odysseus and Calypso. Rousseau remarked that the whole plot of the "Odyssey" would have been ruined by a letter from Odysseus to Penelope. Rousseau had not studied Wolf; but had letters been commonly written in Homer's time, the poet would have bribed one of Penelope's women to intercept them. Homer did not use that incident, because he did not need it; but all his incidents were of primeval antiquity, even in his own time; he plagiarised them from popular stories; he stole the Cyclops almost ready-made.†

A few instances may be given from personal experience. A novelist once visited the writer in high spirits. Certain events of a most extraordinary nature had just occurred to him, events which would appear incredible if I ventured to narrate them. My visitor meant to make them the subject of a story, which he sketched. "But you can't," I said; "that's the plot of 'Ferdinand's Folly,'" and I named a book which had just arrived *sub luminis oras*. He had not heard of "Ferdinand's Folly," but he went away sad, for he was a young man that had been robbed of a great opportunity. But he was presently consoled by receiving a letter from another author, a gentleman of repute in more than one branch of literature. "I have just read your 'Daisy's Dream,'" said this author, "and I find that there is a scene in it which is also in my unpublished work, 'Psamathœ.'" He then described the scene, which certainly did appear of glaring originality—if anything could be original. "Nobody will believe two people could have invented this; and what am I to do?" said the second unfortunate author; and, indeed, I do not know what he did, or whether "Psamathœ" was punished by an early doom for her unconscious plagiarism. The study of the diffusion of popular tales seems to show that there is no incident which may not be invented over and over again—in Siberia or Samoa. These coincidences will also occur in civilised literature; but some examples are so astonishing that the small fry of moralists are certain to shout "Stop thief." On the whole, an author thus anticipated had better stop before they shout, but it was the merest accident that gave pause to the two novelists of these anecdotes. Alas! unconscious of their doom, the little victims might have published.

Thus it appears that, though plagiarism is hardly a possible offence, it is more discreet not to use situations which have either made one very definite impression on the world of readers, or which have been very recently brought out. For example: it is distinctly daring to make a

* "How Charles Reade Worked;" *St. James's Gazette*, May 3, 1887.

† Gerland: "Alt-Griechische Märchen in der Odyssee."