

GEORGE MEREDITH

AN ESSAY ON COMEDY
AND THE USES OF THE
COMIC SPIRIT

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George Meredith

An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit

ON THE IDEA OF COMEDY AND OF THE USES OF THE COMIC SPIRIT ¹

Good Comedies are such rare productions, that notwithstanding the wealth of our literature in the Comic element, it would not occupy us long to run over the English list. If they are brought to the test I shall propose, very reputable Comedies will be found unworthy of their station, like the ladies of Arthur's Court when they were reduced to the ordeal of the mantle.

There are plain reasons why the Comic poet is not a frequent apparition; and why the great Comic poet remains without a fellow. A society of cultivated men and women is required, wherein ideas are current and the perceptions quick, that he may be supplied with matter and an audience.

The semi-barbarism of merely giddy communities, and feverish emotional periods, repel him; and also a state of marked social inequality of the sexes; nor can he whose business is to address the mind be understood where there is not a moderate degree of intellectual activity.

Moreover, to touch and kindle the mind through laughter, demands more than sprightliness, a most subtle delicacy. That must be a natal gift in the Comic poet. The substance he deals with will show him a startling exhibition of the dyer's hand, if he is without it. People are ready to surrender themselves to witty thumps on the back, breast, and sides; all except the head: and it is there that he aims. He must be subtle to penetrate. A corresponding acuteness must exist to welcome him.

The necessity for the two conditions will explain how it is that we count him during centuries in the singular number.

'C'est une étrange entreprise que celle de faire rire les honnêtes gens,' Molière says; and the difficulty of the undertaking cannot be over-estimated.

Then again, he is beset with foes to right and left, of a character unknown to the tragic and the lyric poet, or even to philosophers.

We have in this world men whom Rabelais would call agelasts; that is to say, non-laughers; men who are in that respect as dead bodies, which if you prick them do not bleed. The old grey boulder-stone that has finished its peregrination from the rock to the valley, is as easily to be set rolling up again as these men laughing. No collision of circumstances in our mortal career strikes a light for them. It is but one step from being agelastic to misogelastic, and the *μισογελως*, the laughter-hating, soon learns to dignify his dislike as an objection in morality.

We have another class of men, who are pleased to consider themselves antagonists of the foregoing, and whom we may term hypergelasts; the excessive laughers, ever-laughing, who are as clappers of a bell, that may be rung by a breeze, a grimace; who are so loosely put together that a wink will shake them.

'... C'est n'estimer rien qu'estimer tout le monde,'

and to laugh at everything is to have no appreciation of the Comic of Comedy.

Neither of these distinct divisions of non-laughers and over-laughers would be entertained by reading *The Rape of the Lock*, or seeing a performance of *Le Tartuffe*. In relation to the stage, they have taken in our land the form and title of Puritan and Bacchanalian. For though the stage is no

¹ A lecture delivered at the London Institution, February 1st, 1877.

longer a public offender, and Shakespeare has been revived on it, to give it nobility, we have not yet entirely raised it above the contention of these two parties. Our speaking on the theme of Comedy will appear almost a libertine proceeding to one, while the other will think that the speaking of it seriously brings us into violent contrast with the subject.

Comedy, we have to admit, was never one of the most honoured of the Muses. She was in her origin, short of slaughter, the loudest expression of the little civilization of men. The light of Athene over the head of Achilles illuminates the birth of Greek Tragedy. But Comedy rolled in shouting under the divine protection of the Son of the Wine-jar, as Dionysus is made to proclaim himself by Aristophanes. Our second Charles was the patron, of like benignity, of our Comedy of Manners, which began similarly as a combative performance, under a licence to deride and outrage the Puritan, and was here and there Bacchanalian beyond the Aristophanic example: worse, inasmuch as a cynical licentiousness is more abominable than frank filth. An eminent Frenchman judges from the quality of some of the stuff dredged up for the laughter of men and women who sat through an Athenian Comic play, that they could have had small delicacy in other affairs when they had so little in their choice of entertainment. Perhaps he does not make sufficient allowance for the regulated licence of plain speaking proper to the festival of the god, and claimed by the Comic poet as his inalienable right, or for the fact that it was a festival in a season of licence, in a city accustomed to give ear to the boldest utterance of both sides of a case. However that may be, there can be no question that the men and women who sat through the acting of Wycherley's *Country Wife* were past blushing. Our tenacity of national impressions has caused the word theatre since then to prod the Puritan nervous system like a satanic instrument; just as one has known Anti-Papists, for whom Smithfield was redolent of a sinister smoke, as though they had a later recollection of the place than the lowing herds. Hereditary Puritanism, regarding the stage, is met, to this day, in many families quite undistinguished by arrogant piety. It has subsided altogether as a power in the profession of morality; but it is an error to suppose it extinct, and unjust also to forget that it had once good reason to hate, shun, and rebuke our public shows.

We shall find ourselves about where the Comic spirit would place us, if we stand at middle distance between the inveterate opponents and the drum-and-fife supporters of Comedy: 'Comme un point fixe fait remarquer l'emportement des autres,' as Pascal says. And were there more in this position, Comic genius would flourish.

Our English idea of a Comedy of Manners might be imaged in the person of a blowsy country girl—say Hoyden, the daughter of Sir Tunbelly Clumsy, who, when at home, 'never disobeyed her father except in the eating of green gooseberries'—transforming to a varnished City madam; with a loud laugh and a mincing step; the crazy ancestress of an accountably fallen descendant. She bustles prodigiously and is punctually smart in her speech, always in a fluster to escape from Dulness, as they say the dogs on the Nile-banks drink at the river running to avoid the crocodile. If the monster catches her, as at times he does, she whips him to a froth, so that those who know Dulness only as a thing of ponderousness, shall fail to recognise him in that light and airy shape.

When she has frolicked through her five Acts to surprise you with the information that Mr. Aimwell is converted by a sudden death in the world outside the scenes into Lord Aimwell, and can marry the lady in the light of day, it is to the credit of her vivacious nature that she does not anticipate your calling her *Farce*. Five is dignity with a trailing robe; whereas one, two, or three Acts would be short skirts, and degrading. Advice has been given to householders, that they should follow up the shot at a burglar in the dark by hurling the pistol after it, so that if the bullet misses, the weapon may strike and assure the rascal he has it. The point of her wit is in this fashion supplemented by the rattle of her tongue, and effectively, according to the testimony of her admirers. Her wit is at once, like steam in an engine, the motive force and the warning whistle of her headlong course; and it vanishes like the track of steam when she has reached her terminus, never troubling the brains afterwards; a merit that it shares with good wine, to the joy of the Bacchanalians. As to this wit, it is warlike.

In the neatest hands it is like the sword of the cavalier in the Mall, quick to flash out upon slight provocation, and for a similar office—to wound. Commonly its attitude is entirely pugilistic; two blunt fists rallying and countering. When harmless, as when the word ‘fool’ occurs, or allusions to the state of husband, it has the sound of the smack of harlequin’s wand upon clown, and is to the same extent exhilarating. Believe that idle empty laughter is the most desirable of recreations, and significant Comedy will seem pale and shallow in comparison. Our popular idea would be hit by the sculptured group of Laughter holding both his sides, while Comedy pummels, by way of tickling him.

As to a meaning, she holds that it does not conduce to making merry: you might as well carry cannon on a racing-yacht. Morality is a duenna to be circumvented. This was the view of English Comedy of a sagacious essayist, who said that the end of a Comedy would often be the commencement of a Tragedy, were the curtain to rise again on the performers. In those old days female modesty was protected by a fan, behind which, and it was of a convenient semicircular breadth, the ladies present in the theatre retired at a signal of decorum, to peep, covertly askant, or with the option of so peeping, through a prettily fringed eyelet-hole in the eclipsing arch.

‘Ego limis specto sic per flabellum clanculum.’—

TERENCE.

That fan is the flag and symbol of the society giving us our so-called Comedy of Manners, or Comedy of the manners of South-sea Islanders under city veneer; and as to Comic idea, vacuous as the mask without the face behind it.

Elia, whose humour delighted in floating a galleon paradox and wafting it as far as it would go, bewails the extinction of our artificial Comedy, like a poet sighing over the vanished splendour of Cleopatra’s Nile-barge; and the sedateness of his plea for a cause condemned even in his time to the penitentiary, is a novel effect of the ludicrous. When the realism of those ‘fictitious half-believed personages,’ as he calls them, had ceased to strike, they were objectionable company, uncaressable as puppets. Their artifices are staringly naked, and have now the effect of a painted face viewed, after warm hours of dancing, in the morning light. How could the Lurewells and the Plyants ever have been praised for ingenuity in wickedness? Critics, apparently sober, and of high reputation, held up their shallow knaveries for the world to admire. These Lurewells, Plyants, Pinchwifes, Fondlewifes, Miss Prue, Peggy, Hoyden, all of them save charming Milamant, are dead as last year’s clothes in a fashionable fine lady’s wardrobe, and it must be an exceptionably abandoned Abigail of our period that would look on them with the wish to appear in their likeness. Whether the puppet show of Punch and Judy inspires our street-urchins to have instant recourse to their fists in a dispute, after the fashion of every one of the actors in that public entertainment who gets possession of the cudgel, is open to question: it has been hinted; and angry moralists have traced the national taste for tales of crime to the smell of blood in our nursery-songs. It will at any rate hardly be questioned that it is unwholesome for men and women to see themselves as they are, if they are no better than they should be: and they will not, when they have improved in manners, care much to see themselves as they once were. That comes of realism in the Comic art; and it is not public caprice, but the consequence of a bettering state.² The same of an immoral may be said of realistic exhibitions of a vulgar society.

The French make a critical distinction in *ce qui remue* from *ce qui émeut*—that which agitates from that which touches with emotion. In the realistic comedy it is an incessant *remuage*—no calm, merely bustling figures, and no thought. Excepting Congreve’s *Way of the World*, which failed on the stage, there was nothing to keep our comedy alive on its merits; neither, with all its realism, true portraiture, nor much quotable fun, nor idea; neither salt nor soul.

The French have a school of stately comedy to which they can fly for renovation whenever they have fallen away from it; and their having such a school is mainly the reason why, as John Stuart Mill

² Realism in the writing is carried to such a pitch in *THE OLD BACHELOR*, that husband and wife use imbecile connubial epithets to one another.

pointed out, they know men and women more accurately than we do. Molière followed the Horatian precept, to observe the manners of his age and give his characters the colour befitting them at the time. He did not paint in raw realism. He seized his characters firmly for the central purpose of the play, stamped them in the idea, and by slightly raising and softening the object of study (as in the case of the ex-Huguenot, Duke de Montausier,³ for the study of the Misanthrope, and, according to St. Simon, the Abbe Roquette for Tartuffe), generalized upon it so as to make it permanently human.

Concede that it is natural for human creatures to live in society, and Alceste is an imperishable mark of one, though he is drawn in light outline, without any forcible human colouring. Our English school has not clearly imagined society; and of the mind hovering above congregated men and women, it has imagined nothing. The critics who praise it for its downrightness, and for bringing the situations home to us, as they admiringly say, cannot but disapprove of Molière's comedy, which appeals to the individual mind to perceive and participate in the social. We have splendid tragedies, we have the most beautiful of poetic plays, and we have literary comedies passingly pleasant to read, and occasionally to see acted. By literary comedies, I mean comedies of classic inspiration, drawn chiefly from Menander and the Greek New Comedy through Terence; or else comedies of the poet's personal conception, that have had no model in life, and are humorous exaggerations, happy or otherwise.

These are the comedies of Ben Jonson, Massinger, and Fletcher. Massinger's Justice Greedy we can all of us refer to a type, 'with fat capon lined' that has been and will be; and he would be comic, as Panurge is comic, but only a Rabelais could set him moving with real animation. Probably Justice Greedy would be comic to the audience of a country booth and to some of our friends. If we have lost our youthful relish for the presentation of characters put together to fit a type, we find it hard to put together the mechanism of a civil smile at his enumeration of his dishes. Something of the same is to be said of Bobadil, swearing 'by the foot of Pharaoh'; with a reservation, for he is made to move faster, and to act. The comic of Jonson is a scholar's excogitation of the comic; that of Massinger a moralist's.

Shakespeare is a well-spring of characters which are saturated with the comic spirit; with more of what we will call blood-life than is to be found anywhere out of Shakespeare; and they are of this world, but they are of the world enlarged to our embrace by imagination, and by great poetic imagination. They are, as it were—I put it to suit my present comparison—creatures of the woods and wilds, not in walled towns, not grouped and toned to pursue a comic exhibition of the narrower world of society. Jaques, Falstaff and his regiment, the varied troop of Clowns, Malvolio, Sir Hugh Evans and Fluellen—marvellous Welshmen!—Benedict and Beatrice, Dogberry, and the rest, are subjects of a special study in the poetically comic.

His Comedy of incredible imbroglio belongs to the literary section. One may conceive that there was a natural resemblance between him and Menander, both in the scheme and style of his lighter plays. Had Shakespeare lived in a later and less emotional, less heroic period of our history, he might have turned to the painting of manners as well as humanity. Euripides would probably, in the time of Menander, when Athens was enslaved but prosperous, have lent his hand to the composition of romantic comedy. He certainly inspired that fine genius.

Politically it is accounted a misfortune for France that her nobles thronged to the Court of Louis Quatorze. It was a boon to the comic poet. He had that lively quicksilver world of the animalcule passions, the huge pretensions, the placid absurdities, under his eyes in full activity; vociferous quacks and snapping dupes, hypocrites, posturers, extravagants, pedants, rose-pink ladies and mad grammarians, sonnetting marquises, high-flying mistresses, plain-minded maids, inter-threading as in a loom, noisy as at a fair. A simply bourgeois circle will not furnish it, for the middle class must have the brilliant, flippant, independent upper for a spur and a pattern; otherwise it is likely to be inwardly dull as well as outwardly correct. Yet, though the King was benevolent toward

³ Tallemant des Réaux, in his rough portrait of the Duke, shows the foundation of the character of Alceste.

Molière, it is not to the French Court that we are indebted for his unrivalled studies of mankind in society. For the amusement of the Court the ballets and farces were written, which are dearer to the rabble upper, as to the rabble lower, class than intellectual comedy. The French bourgeoisie of Paris were sufficiently quick-witted and enlightened by education to welcome great works like *Le Tartuffe*, *Les Femmes Savantes*, and *Le Misanthrope*, works that were perilous ventures on the popular intelligence, big vessels to launch on streams running to shallows. The *Tartuffe* hove into view as an enemy's vessel; it offended, not *Dieu mais les dévots*, as the Prince de Condé explained the cabal raised against it to the King.

The *Femmes Savantes* is a capital instance of the uses of comedy in teaching the world to understand what ails it. The farce of the *Précieuses* ridiculed and put a stop to the monstrous romantic jargon made popular by certain famous novels. The comedy of the *Femmes Savantes* exposed the later and less apparent but more finely comic absurdity of an excessive purism in grammar and diction, and the tendency to be idiotic in precision. The French had felt the burden of this new nonsense; but they had to see the comedy several times before they were consoled in their suffering by seeing the cause of it exposed.

The *Misanthrope* was yet more frigidly received. Molière thought it dead. 'I cannot improve on it, and assuredly never shall,' he said. It is one of the French titles to honour that this quintessential comedy of the opposition of *Alceste* and *Célimène* was ultimately understood and applauded. In all countries the middle class presents the public which, fighting the world, and with a good footing in the fight, knows the world best. It may be the most selfish, but that is a question leading us into sophistries. Cultivated men and women, who do not skim the cream of life, and are attached to the duties, yet escape the harsher blows, make acute and balanced observers. Molière is their poet.

Of this class in England, a large body, neither Puritan nor Bacchanalian, have a sentimental objection to face the study of the actual world. They take up disdain of it, when its truths appear humiliating: when the facts are not immediately forced on them, they take up the pride of incredulity.

They live in a hazy atmosphere that they suppose an ideal one. Humorous writing they will endure, perhaps approve, if it mingles with pathos to shake and elevate the feelings. They approve of Satire, because, like the beak of the vulture, it smells of carrion, which they are not. But of Comedy they have a shivering dread, for Comedy enfolds them with the wretched host of the world, huddles them with us all in an ignoble assimilation, and cannot be used by any exalted variety as a scourge and a broom. Nay, to be an exalted variety is to come under the calm curious eye of the Comic spirit, and be probed for what you are. Men are seen among them, and very many cultivated women. You may distinguish them by a favourite phrase: 'Surely we are not so bad!' and the remark: 'If that is human nature, save us from it!' as if it could be done: but in the peculiar Paradise of the wilful people who will not see, the exclamation assumes the saving grace.

Yet should you ask them whether they dislike sound sense, they vow they do not. And question cultivated women whether it pleases them to be shown moving on an intellectual level with men, they will answer that it does; numbers of them claim the situation. Now, Comedy is the fountain of sound sense; not the less perfectly sound on account of the sparkle: and Comedy lifts women to a station offering them free play for their wit, as they usually show it, when they have it, on the side of sound sense. The higher the Comedy, the more prominent the part they enjoy in it. *Dorine* in the *Tartuffe* is common-sense incarnate, though palpably a waiting-maid. *Célimène* is undisputed mistress of the same attribute in the *Misanthrope*; wiser as a woman than *Alceste* as man. In Congreve's *Way of the World*, *Millamant* overshadows *Mirabel*, the sprightliest male figure of English comedy.

But those two ravishing women, so copious and so choice of speech, who fence with men and pass their guard, are heartless! Is it not preferable to be the pretty idiot, the passive beauty, the adorable bundle of caprices, very feminine, very sympathetic, of romantic and sentimental fiction? Our women are taught to think so. The *Agnès* of the *École des Femmes* should be a lesson for men. The heroines of Comedy are like women of the world, not necessarily heartless from being clear-

sighted: they seem so to the sentimentally-reared only for the reason that they use their wits, and are not wandering vessels crying for a captain or a pilot. Comedy is an exhibition of their battle with men, and that of men with them: and as the two, however divergent, both look on one object, namely, Life, the gradual similarity of their impressions must bring them to some resemblance. The Comic poet dares to show us men and women coming to this mutual likeness; he is for saying that when they draw together in social life their minds grow liker; just as the philosopher discerns the similarity of boy and girl, until the girl is marched away to the nursery. Philosopher and Comic poet are of a cousinship in the eye they cast on life: and they are equally unpopular with our wilful English of the hazy region and the ideal that is not to be disturbed.

Thus, for want of instruction in the Comic idea, we lose a large audience among our cultivated middle class that we should expect to support Comedy. The sentimentalist is as averse as the Puritan and as the Bacchanalian.

Our traditions are unfortunate. The public taste is with the idle laughers, and still inclines to follow them. It may be shown by an analysis of Wycherley's *Plain Dealer*, a coarse prose adaption of the *Misanthrope*, stuffed with lumps of realism in a vulgarized theme to hit the mark of English appetite, that we have in it the keynote of the Comedy of our stage. It is Molière travestied, with the hoof to his foot and hair on the pointed tip of his ear. And how difficult it is for writers to disentangle themselves from bad traditions is noticeable when we find Goldsmith, who had grave command of the Comic in narrative, producing an elegant farce for a Comedy; and Fielding, who was a master of the Comic both in narrative and in dialogue, not even approaching to the presentable in farce.

These bad traditions of Comedy affect us not only on the stage, but in our literature, and may be tracked into our social life. They are the ground of the heavy moralizings by which we are outwearied, about Life as a Comedy, and Comedy as a jade,⁴

⁴ See Tom Jones, book viii. chapter I, for Fielding's opinion of our Comedy. But he puts it simply; not as an exercise in the quasi-philosophical bathetic.

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