

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Byron Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Hall
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Twain
Darwin Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato
Potter Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Scott
Kant London Descartes Cervantes Burton Hesse Harte
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Cooke
Hale James Hastings Shakespeare Irving
Bunner Richter Chekhov Chambers Alcott
Doré Dante Shaw Wodehouse
Swift Pushkin Newton



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History of English Humour, Vol. 2

Alfred Guy Kingan L'Estrange

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HISTORY OF ENGLISH HUMOUR.

CHAPTER I.

Burlesque – Parody – The "Splendid Shilling" – Prior – Pope –
Ambrose Philips – Parodies of Gray's Elegy – Gay.

Burlesque, that is comic imitation, comprises parody and caricature. The latter is a valuable addition to humorous narrative, as we see in the sketches of Gillray, Cruikshank and others. By itself it is not sufficiently suggestive and affords no story or conversation. Hence in the old caricatures the speeches of the characters were written in balloons over their heads, and in the modern an explanation is added underneath. For want of such assistance we lose the greater part of the humour in Hogarth's paintings.

We may date the revival of Parody from the fifteenth century, although Dr. Johnson speaks as though it originated with Philips. Notwithstanding the great scope it affords for humorous invention, it has never become popular, nor formed an important branch of [Pg 2] literature; perhaps, because the talent of the parodist always suffered from juxtaposition with that of his original. In its widest sense parody is little more than imitation, but as we should not recognise any resemblance without the use of the same form, it always implies a similarity in words or style. Sometimes the thoughts are also reproduced, but this is not sufficient, and might merely constitute a summary or translation. The closer the copy the better the parody, as where Pope's lines

"Here shall the spring its earliest sweets bestow
Here the first roses of the year shall blow,"

were applied by Catherine Fanshawe to the Regent's Park with a very slight change –

"Here shall the spring its earliest coughs bestow,
Here the first noses of the year shall blow."

But all parody is not travesty, for a writing may be parodied without being ridiculed. This was notably the case in the Centones, [1] Scripture histories in the phraseology of Homer and Virgil,

which were written by the Christians in the fourth century, in order that they might be able to teach at once classics and religion. From the pious object for which they were first designed, they degenerated into fashionable exercises of ingenuity, and thus we find the [Pg 3] Emperor Valentinian composing some on marriage, and requesting, or rather commanding Ausonius to contend with him in such compositions. They were regarded as works of fancy—a sort of literary embroidery.

It may be questioned whether any of these parodies were intended to possess humour; but wherever we find such as have any traces of it, we may conclude that the imitation has been adopted to increase it. This does not necessarily amount to travesty, for the object is not always to throw contempt on the original. Thus, we cannot suppose "The Battle of the Frogs and Mice," or "The Banquet of Matron," [2] although written in imitation of the heroic poetry of Homer, was intended to make "The Iliad" appear ridiculous, but rather that the authors thought to make their conceits more amusing, by comparing what was most insignificant with something of unsurpassable grandeur. The desire to gain influence from the prescriptive forms of great writings was the first incentive to parody. We cannot suppose that Luther intended to be profane when he imitated the first psalm—

[Pg 4]

"Blessed is the man that hath not walked in the way of the Sacramentarians, not sat in the seat of the Zuinglians, or followed the counsel of the Zurichers."

Probably Ben Jonson saw nothing objectionable in the quaintly whimsical lines in Cynthia's Revels—

Amo. From Spanish shrugs, French faces, smirks, irps,
and all affected humours.

Chorus. Good Mercury defend us.

Pha. From secret friends, sweet servants, loves, doves,
and such fantastique humours.

Chorus. Good Mercury defend us.

The same charitable allowance may be conceded to the songs composed by the Cavaliers in the Civil War. We should not be surprised to find a tone of levity in them, but they were certainly not intended to throw any discredit on our Church. In "The Rump, or an exact collection of the choicest poems and songs relating to the late times from 1639" we have "A Litany for the New Year," of which the following will serve as a specimen—

"From Rumps, that do rule against customes and laws
From a fardle of fancies stiled a good old cause,
From wives that have nails that are sharper than claws,
Good Jove deliver us."

Among the curious tracts collected by Lord Somers we find a "New Testament of our Lords and Saviours, the House of our Lords and Saviours, the House of Commons, and the Supreme Council at Windsor." It gives "The Genealogy of the Parliament" from the year[Pg 5] 1640 to 1648, and commences "The Book of the Generation of Charles Pim, the son of Judas, the son of Beelzebub," and goes on to state in the thirteenth verse that "King Charles being a just man, and not willing to have the people ruined, was minded to dissolve them, (the Parliament), but while he thought on these things. &c."

Of the same kind was the parody of Charles Hanbury Williams at the commencement of the last century, "Old England's Te Deum"—the character of which may be conjectured from the first line

"We complain of Thee, O King, we acknowledge thee to be a Hanoverian."

Sometimes parodies of this kind had even a religious object, as when Dr. John Boys, Dean of Canterbury in the reign of James I., in his zeal, untempered with wisdom, attacked the Romanists by delivering a form of prayer from the pulpit commencing—

"Our Pope which art in Rome, cursed be thy name,"
and ending,

"For thine is the infernal pitch and sulphur for ever and ever.
Amen."

"The Religious Recruiting Bill" was written with a pious intention, as was also the Catechism[Pg 6] by Mr. Toplady, a clergyman, aimed at throwing contempt upon Lord Chesterfield's code of morality. It is almost impossible to draw a hard and fast line between travesty and harmless parody—the feelings of the public being the safest guide. But to associate Religion with anything low is offensive, even if the object in view be commendable.

Some parodies of Scripture are evidently not intended to detract from its sanctity, as, for instance, the attack upon sceptical philosophy which lately appeared in an American paper, pretending to be the commencement of a new Bible "suited to the enlightenment of the age," and beginning—

"Primarily the unknowable moved upon kosmos and evolved protoplasm.

"And protoplasm was inorganic and undifferentiated, containing all things in potential energy: and a spirit of evolution moved upon the fluid mass.

"And atoms caused other atoms to attract: and their contact begat light, heat, and electricity.

"And the unconditioned differentiated the atoms, each after its kind and their combination begat rocks, air, and water.

"And there went out a spirit of evolution and working in protoplasm by accretion and absorption produced the organic cell.

"And the cell by nutrition evolved primordial germ, and germ devolved protogene, and protogene begat eozoon and eozoon begat monad and monad begot animalcule ..."

We are at first somewhat at a loss to understand what made the "Splendid Shilling" so celebrated: it is called by Steele the finest burlesque in the English language. Although[Pg 7] far from being, as Dr. Johnson asserts, the first parody, it is undoubtedly a work of talent, and was more appreciated in 1703 than it can be now, being recognised as an imitation of Milton's poems which were then becoming celebrated.[3] Reading it at the present day, we should scarcely recognise any parody; but blank verse was at that time uncommon, although the Italians were beginning to protest against

the gothic barbarity of rhyme, and Surrey had given in his translation of the first and fourth books of Virgil a specimen of the freer versification.

Meres says that "Piers Plowman was the first that observed the true quality of our verse without the curiositie of rime" but he was not followed.

The new character of the "Splendid Shilling" caused it to bring more fame to its author than has been gained by any other work so short and simple. It was no doubt an inspiration of the moment, and was written by John Philips at the age of twenty. There is considerable freshness and strength in the poem, which commences —

"Happy the man, who void of cares and strife
[Pg 8]In silken or in leathern purse retains
A splendid shilling; he nor hears with pain
New oysters cried, nor sighs for cheerful ale;
But with his friends, when nightly mists arise
To Juniper's Magpie or Town Hall[4] repairs.
Meanwhile he smokes and laughs at merry tale,
Or pun ambiguous or conumdrum quaint;
But I, whom griping penury surrounds,
And hunger sure attendant upon want,
With scanty offals, and small acid tiff
(Wretched repast!) my meagre corps sustain:
Then solitary walk or doze at home
In garret vile, and with a warming puff.
Regale chilled fingers, or from tube as black
As winter chimney, or well polished jet
Exhale mundungus, ill-perfuming scent."

He goes on to relate how he is besieged by duns, and what a chasm there is in his "galligaskins." He wrote very little altogether, but produced a piece called "Blenheim," and a sort of Georgic entitled "Cyder."

Prior, like many other celebrated men, partly owed his advancement to an accidental circumstance. He was brought up at his uncle's tavern "The Rummer," situate at Charing Cross — then a kind of country suburb of the city, and adjacent to the riverside mansions and ornamental gardens of the nobility. To this convenient inn the

neighbouring magnates were wont to resort, and one day in accordance with the classic proclivities of the times, a hot dispute, arose among them about the rendering of a passage in Horace. One of those present said[Pg 9] that as they could not settle the question, they had better ask young Prior, who then was attending Westminster School. He had made good use of his opportunities, and answered the question so satisfactorily that Lord Dorset there and then undertook to send him to Cambridge. He became a fellow of St. John's, and Lord Dorset afterwards introduced him at Court, and obtained for him the post of secretary of Legation at the Hague, in which office he gave so much satisfaction to William III. that he made him one of his gentlemen of the bed chamber. He became afterwards Secretary of the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Ambassador in France, and Under Secretary of State.

During his two year's imprisonment by the Whigs on a charge of high treason—from which he was liberated without a trial—he prepared a collection of his works, for which he obtained a large sum of money. He then retired from office, but died shortly afterwards in his fifty-eighth year.

Prior is remarkable for his exquisite lightness and elegance of style, well suited to the pretty classical affectations of the day. He delights in cupids, nymphs, and flowers. In two or three places, perhaps, he verges upon indelicacy, but conceals it so well among feathers and[Pg 10] rose leaves, that we may half pardon it. Although always sprightly he is not often actually humorous, but we may quote the following advice to a husband from the "English Padlock"

"Be to her virtues very kind,
And to her faults a little blind,
Let all her ways be unconfined,
And clap your padlock on her mind."

"Yes; ev'ry poet is a fool;
By demonstration Ned can show it;
Happy could Ned's inverted rule,
Prove ev'ry fool to be a poet."

"How old may Phyllis be, you ask,
Whose beauty thus all hearts engages?
To answer is no easy task,
For she has really two ages.

"Stiff in brocade and pinched in stays,
Her patches, paint, and jewels on:
All day let envy view her face,
And Phyllis is but twenty-one.

"Paint, patches, jewels, laid aside,
At night astronomers agree,
The evening has the day belied,
And Phyllis is some forty-three."

"Helen was just slipt from bed,
Her eyebrows on the toilet lay,
Away the kitten with them fled,
As fees belonging to her prey."

"For this misfortune, careless Jane,
Assure yourself, was soundly rated:
And Madam getting up again,
With her own hand the mouse-trap baited.

"On little things as sages write,
Depends our human joy or sorrow;
If we don't catch a mouse to-night,
Alas! no eyebrows for to-morrow."

He wrote the following impromptu epitaph on himself[Pg 11] –

"Nobles and heralds by your leave,
Here lies what once was Matthew Prior,
The son of Adam and of Eve,
Can Bourbon or Nassau go higher."

But he does not often descend to so much levity as this, his wing is generally in a higher atmosphere. Sir Walter Scott observes that in the powers of approaching and touching the finer feelings of the

heart, he has never been excelled, if indeed he has ever been equalled.

Prior wrote a parody called "Erle Robert's Mice," but Pope is more prolific than any other poet in such productions. His earlier taste seems to have been for imitation, and he wrote good parodies on Waller and Cowley, and a bad travesty on Spencer. "January and May" and "The Wife of Bath" are founded upon Chaucer's Tales. Pope did not generally indulge in travesty, his object was not to ridicule his original, but rather to assist himself by borrowing its style. His productions are the best examples of parodies in this latter and better sense. Thus, he thought to give a classic air to his satires on the foibles of his time by arranging them upon the models of those of Horace. In his imitation of the second Satire of the second Book we have—

"He knows to live who keeps the middle state,
And neither leans on this side nor on that,
Nor stops for one bad cork his butler's pay,
Swears, like Albutius, a good cook away,
Nor lets, like Nævius, every error pass,
The musty wine, foul cloth, or greasy glass."
[Pg 12]

There is a slight amount of humour in these adaptations, and it seems to have been congenial to the poet's mind. Generally he was more turned to philosophy, and the slow measures he adopted were more suited to the dignified and pompous, than to the playful and gay. Occasionally, however, there is some sparkle in his lines, and, we read in "The Rape of the Lock"—

"Now love suspends his golden scales in air,
Weights the men's wits against the lady's hair,
The doubtful beam long nods from side to side,
At length the wits mount up, the hairs subside."

Again, his friend Mrs. Blount found London rather dull than gay—

"She went to plain work and to purling brooks,
Old-fashioned halls, dull aunts, and croaking rooks,
She went from opera, park, assembly, play,