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Hogarth moralized

Hogarth, William

London, 1831

Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION.

IT is now exactly a century since the first work which proved the decided superiority of Hogarth's genius, came forth, to the delight of all the world—but to the peculiar satisfaction of one particular individual—to wit, Sir James Thornhill, whose amiable daughter Jane, Hogarth having privately married, the usual decree of inexorableness was pronounced by the Knight—until a specimen of the “ Harlots' Progress” being placed in his way, he exclaimed, with an extacy in which no other connoisseur could have participated—“ The man who can make works like this, can maintain a wife without a portion.” This important fact, once established—with that perverseness of age, so well and so often ridiculed—the “ old father” became perfectly reconciled—assisted the young couple and was proud of having such a man for his son-in-law.

The author of the ensuing descriptions of this inimitable artist's after productions was a clergyman of the Church of England, yet he has thought it necessary to enter upon a modest vindication of the deliberate opinion upon which he founded his title, that of Hogarth Moralized :—abundance of evidence, therefore, both lay and clerical, will be adduced on the present occasion, to prove—that the materials which he was the first to conceive the elegant idea of comprising in a compendious form, suited for general circulation—really contain the means of exciting in young persons, a just dread of the rocks and quicksands of life ; free from

the dear-bought experience of those who have ignorantly embarked upon its fearful ocean. It has been objected to Dr. Trusler, that he has perhaps exhibited "more piety than taste" in his commentary. Doubtless he had his professional bias* which may have proved a recommendation to parents and guardians, who saw the work modestly put forth as "calculated to improve the minds of youth, and convey instruction under the mask of entertainment;" at the same time there is much attention paid in regard to information suited to those of riper years. The Doctor was a person remarkably fond of minuteness of inquiry, and in handing forward, from the best possible source,—that of the artist's amiable widow—so many important, historical, personal, and local illustrations, he

* It was as natural for him to dwell upon the moral and sentimental beauties, as for the eminent antiquaries, Messrs. Nichols and Steevens to feel at home in those "fleeting customs, and past occurrences," that could throw any new light upon their author. Mr. John Ireland, in like manner, more feelingly alive to the department of ART, gently throws his "hair line," a-la Walpole, over the Hogarthian stream, and complains of the "Antiquarian drag-net" of Mr. Nichols, which he imagines to have brought too much of heterogeneous matter from the "great deep." Mr. Steevens defends his coadjutor from this sweeping censure, saying "Mr. Ireland appears to have gone and done likewise." It is curious that he did not bring to his aid the following "confession" from Mr. I's Introduction, from which it should seem, that men are sometimes conscious of riding their hobby "a little too far."

"Though the notes may not always have an immediate relation to the engravings, I hope they will seldom be found wholly unconnected with the subjects!"

Again we have, also, Mr. S. Ireland—he too has a gentle "fling" at his namesake (no relation) for having founded—which he did—his entertaining volumes upon the "worn out plates" of our still triumphant Doctor! To the curious collector, nevertheless, all these works are indispensable.

performed a real and valuable public service; and it has been acknowledged, though with too much reluctance by his successors. The public, however, have fully vindicated their own patronage by fixing a high value upon his concise, yet comprehensive performance, which would have been of at least double the bulk, but for the modest type dictated by the tasteful conception of the whole work. The moral tendency of Hogarth's works is so striking, that it has made preachers, and eloquent ones too, of such as were never suspected of cant or hypocrisy. Every ingenuous writer upon Hogarth dwells more or less upon it; Mr. Nichols, to whose "Anecdotes" we are indebted for the striking quotation in our title-page, speaking of the excellent series, "Industry and Idleness," tells us that "a Sermon has been preached from this set of prints."

Even the scenes of humour from Hogarth's pencil often convey the most salutary admonitions, while those of guilt must have saved many a thoughtless being from the extremes of human wretchedness.*

"Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As to be hated needs but to be seen."

But we can only agree with this assertion of our great Poet, except in so far as the monster shall be seen through the intervention of such a moralist as Hogarth!

There cannot be a doubt but that Hogarth's graphic lessons were as much intended for the good of his fellow

* The following is extracted from the Dedication of a Work to Hogarth, by the Rev. John Clubbe. "We cannot, perhaps, point to the very men or women who have been saved from ruin by them; yet we may fairly conclude from their general tendency that many have, for such cautionary exhibitions correct without the harshness of reproof, and are felt and remembered when rigid dogmatizings are rejected and forgotten."—*Nichols's Anecdotes*, 4to. Vol. I. 377.

mortals as the written ones of Addison and Steele ; indeed it seems undeniable that he owed his earliest fame, as a Moral and Dramatic Painter, to a hint taken from the noblest of moral works, the Spectator ! a work, the very name of which is fraught with so many delightful recollections, that it is quite refreshing to see a revival of its title in a spirited and manly periodical of the present day. Our author was precisely the sort of man whom those elegant authors would have termed, one of the heroes of domestic life !—he married earlier than a cold prudence would have permitted, but when he had thriven upon the industrious exertion of his own talents, he exhibited that “ golden mean” of liberality so strongly inculcated in his works—works, the efficacy of which are so much increased by the knowledge that he was himself a good master, and an affectionate son, brother and husband.

To return to the Spectator, whose views as a reformer of manners, and a penetrating reader of mankind, were exactly suited to our painter’s turn of mind. Can there be a doubt but that the following passage suggested the Harlot’s Progress, to the mind of the painter, while the Rake’s Progress followed of course. The author is pleading the cause of betrayed innocence with his usual enlightened humanity, and continues thus :—

“ But the compassionate case of very many is, that they are taken into such hands without any the least suspicion, previous temptation, or admonition to what place they are going. The last week I went to an Inn in the city to inquire for some provisions which were sent by a waggon out of the country, and as I waited in one of the boxes till the chamberlain had looked over his parcels, I heard an old and a young voice repeating the questions and responses of the

Church Catechism, I thought it no breach of good manners to peep at a crevice, and look in at people so well employed; but who should I see there but the most artful procuress in the town examining a most beautiful country girl, who had come up in the same waggon with my things. "Whether she was well educated, could forbear playing the wanton with servants and idle fellows, of which this town," says she, "is too full:" at the same time, "whether she knew enough of breeding, as that if a squire, or a gentleman, or one that was her betters, should give her a civil salute, she should curtsie, and be humble nevertheless?" Her innocent "forsooths yes's and't please you's, and she would do her endeavour," moved the good old lady to take her out of the care of a country bumkin, her brother, and hire her for her own maid. I stood till I saw them all marched out to take coach; the brother loaded with a great cheese, he prevailed on her to take for her civilities to his sister!"—*Spectator*, No. 266.

From so excellent a prototype it is only to be wondered at that Hogarth should have at all varied; as it would have been more "in keeping," as artists say, for the booby-brother, rather than the anxious father, to forward the views of the procuress.

Such, however is the close coincidence between these rival classics of the pen and the palette. We will not arrogate the merit of pointing out, at this time of day, a novel illustration of Hogarth!—Surely some one must have brought it forward, although we have not met with it, where it was most likely to be found, in the work of Mr. John Ireland. Stranger still will it be if the "watchful vigils" of Mr. Steevens, as well as of that gentleman, should not have sup-

plied all that the *Drama* could do in the way of illustration for the great painter of "Comedies upon canvass!"—yet his most capital work, "Marriage-a-la-Mode," seems really to have been discussed and commented upon without a thought of one of Dryden's most successful plays; the mere title of which, in Hogarth's fertile mind, must have given him ample materials to work upon. What, though the poet, "knew of no law that prescribed morality to a comic writer,"—it was not so with Hogarth, who at a mere glance upon affected ladies singing, dancing, gadding—and holding it right for man and wife to meet only in the drawing room—a gallant ready to marry a woman he has never seen at the bidding of a covetous father—at the same time determined to enter upon intrigues in full contempt of the "little inconveniences of jealousies, duels, death and so forth"*—had every thing in his mind for that noble composition which Mr. Ireland has so excellently described as follows:

"The drama of Shakspeare† has been said to be the mirror of life, which to-day we see lighted up with gaiety, and to-morrow clouded with sorrow. Shakspeare had the power of exciting laughter or grief, not only in one mind, but in one composition. That Hogarth had the same power, and exerted it with the same disdain of the little cavils of little minds, is evinced in this series of prints; from the study of which a peasant, who had never strayed beyond the pre-

* Vide, Act 1, Scene 1.

† Mr. Charles Lamb relates an anecdote which points out the dramatic talent of our author in the strongest possible light. A gentleman being asked what book in his library he most liked to read: replied, "Shakspeare." And what the next best? "Hogarth!" The original prints are doubtless readable things—indeed, there are many who go so far as to say that, "if Hogarth did not explain himself, they would not give a pin for him!"

cincts of his own cottage, may calculate the consequences of dissipation; and he who has lived secluded from society, may form an estimate of the value of riches and high birth, when abused by prodigality, or degraded by vice."

We cannot forbear also extracting a part of Mr. Christie's animated description of these six celebrated pictures—on the occasion of their being sold for one thousand three hundred and eighty-one pounds in 1797.

"These pictures may be considered as a fine Dramatic Poem,* where originality of character, variety of incident, and the most enlivening wit, are continued through a course of scenes, and worked up into a regular fable, which concludes with a most impressive moral. To speak of their excellence were almost needless. They appeal to every judgment—they are to be understood by every capacity. The immortal artist executed them with this intent. He proposed that every one should be a connoisseur in his works, because every one was to be improved by them. Suffice it to say, that these pictures are the chef-d'œuvres of the master. They possess all that can be wished in composition, expression, finishing, and perspective."

Yet with testimonies to his unrivalled talents—like the foregoing—and a volume might be filled with others—there have been some who have grudged the great master, the moderate degree of self complacency with which he surveyed his own productions. Mr. Steevens, who, as observed by

* All this is quite true, although it is impossible to deny that the first hint was taken from the source to which we have ascribed it—in order to believe which, there is no necessity that the plot, incidents, and characters should coincide so closely as they are pointed out by Mr. Ireland to do, between "Industry and Idleness" and "Eastward Hoe," a play by Ben Jonson, Chapman, and Marston, 1605.

Mr. Cunningham, was fond of mingling his own gall with the milk of his coadjutor, Mr. Nichols, accuses him of the most egregious vanity—yet in the endeavour to substantiate the charge, is content rather to prove in its stead that our artist was liberal even to the degree of abstinence from professional reward. He is indebted for, as he owns, the possession of one of his rarest proof prints “to the success of a compliment to [Hogarth] that would have stuck in the throat of Vandyke.” From such an abuser of unsuspecting liberality one is not surprised that another defamatory accusation should have issued—that of Hogarth’s having envied the rising popularity of Sir Joshua Reynolds. “The same” observes Mr. Ireland, “was said of Rubens with regard to Vandyke! Neither the Englishman nor the Fleming were capable of so mean a passion. I can conceive that Hogarth might have been pleased if he could have united the elegance of Sir Joshua to his own humour, and that the knight might be proud of adding the powers of Hogarth to his own taste, without either of them possessing a particle of the diabolical passion alluded to.”

Last of all comes the more specious, but ill, or rather maliciously founded charge that he introduced indelicate incidents into some of his subjects. There is certainly no possibility of preventing a prurient imagination withdrawing its attention from the noble aims of a whole composition to dwell on that which is unobtrusive and intended to be subordinate; but that Hogarth ever took a wanton advantage of the good humour he could inspire, to insinuate an incident not calculated to reprove or reform, we flatly deny.

“The sensible and accurate estimate of Walpole” says Mr. Cunningham, “displeased Steevens, who sought to dissect rather than to criticise. He was obliged to set up sin in its

high place, before he could crown it with infamy. He shews depravity for the sake of amending it. The Flemings exhibited indecency for our amusement ; and it was Mr. Steevens's own fault that he could not see the distinction."

Again, with what industry are we informed that our graphic author was a bad orthographer and a worse grammarian. The truth is, that he was absorbed in his art, in like manner as we are told of an eminent linguist, who, at times, was at a loss how to give orders for his dinner in his native language ! But Hogarth "had a club" all "dragons to drub," and he could "write down an ass," and more formidable things, with his pencil alone ! witness his off-hand punishments of Wilkes and Churchill, who in a moment were held up to "grinning infamy !"

It is a mere vulgar error to suppose that those spirited retorts were the unconsoling efforts of his expiring days ; he was neither "killed" by Wilkes or Churchill ; but he had lived on terms of intimacy with them both, and regretted like an honest man the cancelling of friendships, on his own part, sincere and generous.

"To raise esteem," says Johnson, "we must discover abilities ; to excite love, we must impart pleasure." According to the high degree in which Hogarth must have felt conscious of doing both, he appears to have enjoyed life as fully as any man, not absolutely bred up in the lap of ease and affluence.

A word only before presenting the reader with a few additional testimonies to the high moral and intellectual worth of our inimitable artist.

May it be said,—and welcome,—that we have lent a *magnifying glass* to the BEAUTIES of Hogarth ; and, for faults, if he have them, they *lessen themselves* in this *Miniature Edition* !

“Having despatched the herd of our Painters in oil, I reserved to a class by himself, that great and original genius Hogarth; considering him rather as a writer of comedy with a pencil, than as a painter. He created his art and used colours instead of language. Hogarth resembles Butler, but his subjects are more universal, and amidst all his pleasantry, he observes the true end of comedy, reformation: there is always a moral to his pictures. Sometimes he rose to tragedy, not in the catastrophe of kings and heroes, but in marking how vice conducts insensibly and incidentally to misery and shame. He warns against encouraging cruelty and idleness in young minds, and discerns how the different vices of the great and the vulgar lead by various paths to the same unhappiness.

It is to Hogarth's favour that in so many scenes of satire or ridicule, it is obvious that ill-nature did not guide his pencil. His end is always reformation and his reproofs general.

The scenes of Bedlam and the Gaming-house, are inimitable representations of our serious follies or unavoidable woes; and the concern shewn by the Lord Mayor, when the companion of his childhood is brought before him as a criminal, is a touching picture, and big with humane admonition and reflection. It may appear singular, that of an author whom I call comic, and who is celebrated for his humour, I should speak in general in so serious a style; but it would be suppressing the merits of his heart to consider him only as a promoter of laughter. Mirth coloured his pictures, but benevolence designed them.”

HORACE WALPOLE.

“Hogarth is the peculiar property of our own country. The coarse personal satire which was exhibited, on various

occasions, by Salvator Rosa, and Spagnoletti, and the vulgar representations of scenes and individuals by the Flemish and Dutch Masters, have no analogy, either in their intention or composition, with the works of Hogarth, which were destined to excite moral reflections, and to correct gross and popular abuses, or the absurdities of prevailing fashions. They are admirable moral lessons, and afford a fund of entertainment suited to every circumstance, which shews them to be just copies of nature."

REV. J. DALLAWAY.

"This was painting to the understanding and the heart; none had ever before made the pencil subservient to the purposes of morality and instruction. A book like this is suited to every soil and to every observer, and he that runs may read."

JOHN NICHOLS.

"His subjects generally convey useful lessons of morality, and are calculated to improve the man as well as the artist; and he teaches with effect, because he delights while he instructs. His humour never fails to excite mirth, and it is directed against the fit objects of ridicule or contempt."

R. P. KNIGHT.

"Hogarth may be indisputably regarded as the first moral painter of this or any other country; for to his honour be it recorded, the almost invariable tendency of his dramatic histories is the promotion of virtue, and the diffusion of such a spirit as tends to make man industrious, humane, and happy."

JOHN IRELAND.

Mr. Allan Cunningham, the last, but far from the least of Hogarthian critics, comes forward but to confirm the

opinions of his predecessors : if his zeal be even warmer, and his praise yet louder, no other discrepancies are visible. Nay, he has rescued both the character and the works of Hogarth from many misrepresentations.

“ The public saw with wonder, a series of productions combined into one grand, moral, and satiric story ; exhibiting in truth, a regular drama, neither wholly serious nor wholly comic, in which fashionable follies and moral corruptions had their beginning, their middle, and their end. Painters had been employed hitherto in investing ladies of loose reputation with the hues of heaven, and turning their paramours into Adonises ; here was one who dipt both in the lake of darkness, and held them up together to the scorn and derision of mankind. Here we had portraits of the vicious and the vile—not the idle occupants of their places, but active in their calling, successful in their shame, and marching steadily and wickedly onwards ; while not a porter looked at them in the printseller’s windows without feeling his burthen lighter as he named them. Hogarth’s fellow artists saw with surprise those monitory and sarcastic creations, which refused to owe any of their attractions to the established graces of the schools, or to the works of any artist new or old. The mixture of the satiric with the solemn—the pathetic with the ludicrous—of simplicity with cunning—and virtue with vice, was but an image of London and of human nature. The actors, some of them at least, might be regarded as the evil spirits of the time, which a mighty hand had come to exorcise and lay.

The Harlot’s Progress is no burlesque production nor jesting matter ; it exhibits, in the midst of humour and satire, a moral pathos which saddens the heart.

INTRODUCTION.

xv.

If the subjects which painting embodies could be as clearly described by the pen, there would be less use for the pencil; nothing short of the examination of these varied productions can properly satisfy curiosity."

We cite this new authority in favour of our artist with the greater pleasure, in order to refer the reader to the author's recent *Life of Hogarth*. It forms a part of his "*Lives of the most eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*;" a work which bears the stamp of candid accuracy, though from the author's keen sense of the ludicrous, one often laughs outright, as over a page of Fielding or Smollett.

November 30th, 1830.

J. M.