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Hogarth moralized

Hogarth, William

London, 1831

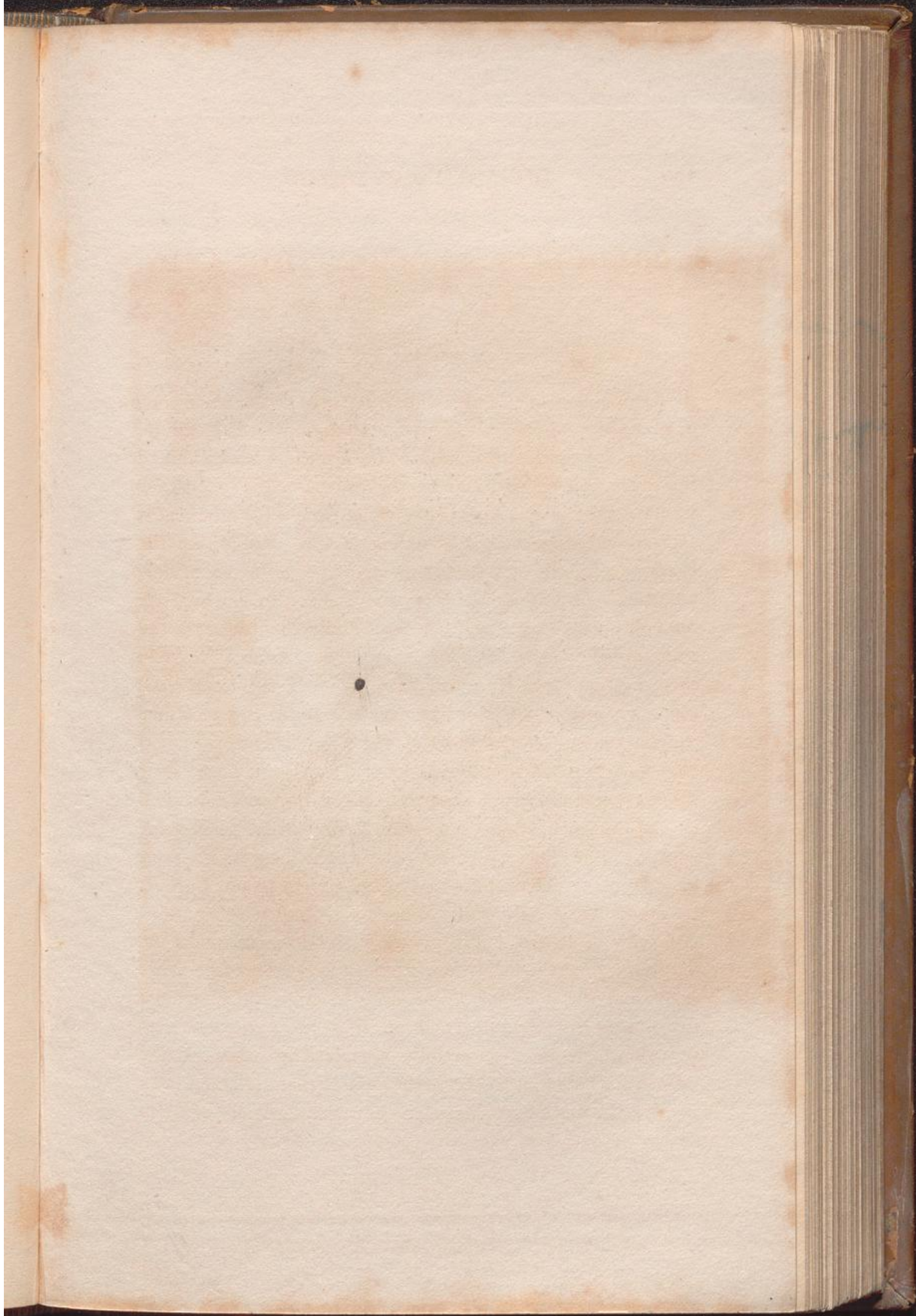
A Medley.

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CREDULITY, SUPERSTITION AND
FANATICISM,

A MEDLEY.

As there is nothing in this world but what has at one time or other been abused, so it is the unhappy case of Religion, to share the same fate. Some of its ministers have suffered the cause of God to grow languid in the minds of men, as we have seen in the last plate, while others have carried it even to enthusiasm, as it is evident in this, working up the passions of weak and credulous people to a degree of desperation. As I would be extremely tender in passing my opinion upon these men, I shall not divine any cause for the measures they take, but hope they proceed from principle; then, however misled they may be, they will still deserve the character of upright. But whatever favourable constructions may at present be put upon them, it must be allowed that they have been universally condemned; the conduct of their disciples, and the extraordinary effects of their doctrine, such as lust, melancholy, and madness, having great reason for censure. The credulity of this country has long been matter of triumph to our enemies and astonishment to all Europe, to think that a nation where literature and learning flourish, should so frequently betray such excessive weakness. To make good this assertion, we need look but a few years back, and we shall see, from time to time, what strange impostures have been carried on to serve particular purposes; which were so artfully contrived as to work the wished-for effect on the ignorant part of mankind, and even deceive the more knowing. To shew the absurdity of these





T. E. Nicholson, sc.

THE MEDLEY,

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things, to laugh the notions of them out of countenance, and expose the amazing credulity, superstition, and fanaticism of the age, Mr. Hogarth published this plate in the year 1762. Wherein he has collected variety of materials, and though it was impossible to preserve consistency, has given us a group of very laughable characters, and entered into the different subjects with great spirit and humour.

By the thermometer on the right, fixed in the heart of man, our author would teach us, that lukewarmness in religion is the foundation of all this excess. He has set it upright on two books, viz. WESTLEY'S * Sermons, and Glanvil† on Witches, to shew us that superstition and credulity is the ground-work of fanaticism. The blood in this tube, in its ascending state, rises from lukewarm to love, which he would have understood to be heat of constitution; from love to lust, which by placing a glory round the word, he would have considered as the enthusiast's greatest good below. But as the heat encreases, it proceeds from lust to ecstasy; from ecstasy to convulsion fits; from convulsion fits to madness; and thence to raving, which is represented in the clouds, attended with two cherubs sounding the trump of joy; as when once the unhappy mortal is got to that pitch he is arrived at his ultimate end, and the completion of his teacher's wishes. In its descending state, when the blood looses its power of acting, it falls from lukewarm to lowness of spirits; thence to sorrow; from sorrow to agony, the utmost stretch of the senses; from agony to settled grief; thence to despair; from despair to madness; and from madness to suicide; one of these two extremes being the general consequence of enthusiasm. The upper

* A leader of a sect called Methodists.

† An author, who wrote some years since in favour of witchcraft.

part of this thermometer is decorated with a representation of the appearance of the Cock-lane ghost,* knocking to the girl in bed, (one of the many instances of the credulity of the English,) and the drummer of Tedworth, another well-known story.† The power of a spell was once universally believed, and is generally so in country places to this day. This is excellently set forth by the poor bewitched shoe-black vomiting up hob-nails, crooked pins, and other things.‡ In this woman's hands is put a bottle, in which she is represented as having attempted to confine the spirit, which being of an aerial nature has found its way out by forcing

* At the time this plate was published, the town was greatly amused by a family in Cock-lane, Smithfield; a child of which, a girl about twelve years old, pretended to be continually haunted, while in bed, with the knocking and scratching of some invisible agent against the wainscot of whatever room she was in, resembling the noise a living person could make with his fingers. An imposture so artfully contrived, and carried on for such a length of time as attracted, among the rest, the notice of several of the clergy, who fondly imagined it to be something supernatural, and busied themselves a long time in asking it questions, which they supposed it answered by determinate knocks, in the affirmative, or negative.

† This was a remarkable affair that happened in the year 1661, at Tedworth, in Wiltshire, at one Mr. Mompesson's. The story was as follows. An idle fellow of a drummer had been up and down the country, by the authority of a feigned pass of some neighbouring magistrate, which pass Mr. Mompesson discovered to be false; in consequence of this he punished the fellow, and took away his drum, which he lodged in his own house; after this, his house was beset for two or three years with a continual drumming, and the whole family was tormented: nay, things grew to such a pitch as to draw several clergymen, and some people from the king to enquire into it. The drummer was taken up tried for a wizzard at the assizes at Salisbury, and transported.

‡ Bewitched persons are said to fall frequently into violent fits, and vomit needles, pins, stones, nails, stubbs, wool, and straw.

the cork.* Her basket stands upon a book of demonology, written by king James the first; a proof that these idle notions existed as well among the great and learned as among the poor and illiterate. Within her basket, we observe one of Mr. Whitfield's Journals; by this we are taught that she is a blind follower of that teacher.† But the most astonishing thing of all is, that of the noted rabbit-woman,‡ who some years since made the people believe that she brought forth rabbits instead of children; and so far imposed upon their credulity, as to bring even some of the physical tribe to espouse her cause. We see her, here, lying in the foreground of this plate, in all the seeming throes of labour, with some friendly hand giving her a glass of comfort which she has broken with her teeth. Mr. Hogarth would give us to understand, by the general tenor of this print, that the chief principle of these teachers whom he here satyrizes, is interest; this we may learn from the checquered habit of the preacher, who he supposes to change his outside form as

* It was a supposed remedy against witchcraft to put some of the bewitched person's water with a quantity of pins, needles, and nails into a bottle, cork them up, and set them before the fire, in order to confine the spirit; but this sometimes did not prove sufficient, as it would often force the cork out with a loud noise like that of a pistol, and cast the contents of the bottle to a considerable height.

† Another methodistic leader, differing from Mr. Westly in some tenets, but holding with him the doctrine of inspiration.

‡ One Mary Tofts, of Godalming in Surrey, who in the year 1726, pretended that she bred rabbits within her, and so far imposed on Mr. John Howard, surgeon at Guildford, and Mr. André, surgeon to the king, as to prevail on them to espouse her cause. Nay, to such lengths did she carry the matter, as to draw the attention of his majesty himself, who sent down Sir Richard Manningham, one of his physicians, to enquire into it, when he presently discovered it to be an imposture.

ready and often as the Proteus* of pantomime. From the person of the clerk, (who by his squinting, will be readily known) represented as a voracious harpy, with eager wings and griping talons, and from the descending cherub, which our author has humourously painted with a post-boy's cap upon his head, as a messenger express from the other regions, bearing in his mouth a letter addressed to Money-trap, he would teach us, that lucre is their only object; but if from nothing else, we might gather it from his representing the poor's box as a mouse-trap, intimating their collecting of money, under the notion of charity, which when they have once in possession, they take care to secure. In order to this (says he, in colours, which are equally as expressive as words) they preach up excess of love, establish love-feasts, and recommend holy kisses among the faithful brethren, hold up the rod of terror, and thunder out damnation with the utmost vociferation. The first of these things he has set forth by an extract of one of Mr. Whitfield's hymns, from page 130, hanging from the clerk's desk, which contains these words,

Only love to us be giv'n,
Lord! we ask no other heav'n.

By painting a glory round the word love, as round that of lust, in the thermometer, he would have it understood, that they mean one and the same thing, and that this thing is the ultimate end of all the enthusiast's desire; farther confirmed by the male and female votaries beneath the pulpit. The second is described by his holding out in one hand the figure of a witch giving suck to a cat, † flying on a broom-

* Harlequin.

† It being said that the familiar with whom a witch converses sucks

stick, and the devil bearing a gridiron, in the other, as emblematical of the lost sinner broiling on the flames of hell. The third is represented by the crack in the sounding board, occasioned by the loudness of his voice, and the scale of vociferation hanging beside him, the lower note of which resembles the roaring of a bull, greatly distant from the natural tone, and is contiguous to the bawling mouth above, bellowing out Blood, blood, blood, blood. Considered in this light, with great propriety, is that text of scripture written upon his book, "I speak as a fool," it being evidently the height of folly to attempt to convince a weak mind by terror! And such must the congregation be, in general, or they would not hug themselves in their fond conceits; which they apparently do, in setting so much value upon those figures of a ghost, we see up and down among them, and which they are supposed to idolize as much as the roman-catholics do the figure of the cross. Nay, that our author designed to draw a parallel between them is manifest, not only from this, but also from the head of the minister, which he describes as shaven into a circle, in imitation of the heads of some particular orders of priests abroad; so that by his wig falling off he is, as it were, discovered to be a Jesuit in disguise. To inform us that enthusiasm gains most ground among the poor and illiterate, whose credulity is greatest, he has introduced a man (who by the altar and sacrificing knife before him appears to be a Jew, for sects are generally formed of a mixture of other persuasions) killing a louse, strongly characteristic of the state of his congregation; and has decorated the pulpit with three figures, alluding to three known stories of apparitions, (expressive of the people's

her right breast in shape of a little dun cat, smooth as a mole, which when it has sucked, the witch is in a kind of trance.

weakness) Mrs. Veal, Julius Cæsar,* and Sir George Villars.† Those on whom threats and terrors will not make an impression, are often brought over by cant and tears: this, says our author, has often produced wonderful effects; working by sympathy and persuasion; beside it declares the sincerity of the preacher. See then the clerk with piteous face and a crying cherub on either hand, whining out the hymns in dolorous tone! We have here exhibited, in one view, the various effects of superstition; it melting some into tears, winding others into a settled grief, and driving others to madness. Behold then behind a poor despairing wretch, frightened out of his senses by an itinerant lay-preacher beside him, pointing to the branch above, which is here humourously described as a horrid infernal head with horns, whose rotundity serves to represent a globe of hell, as newly drawn by Romaine ‡! The front of this branch is disposed into a face; round one of the eyes is written Molten-lead lake; round the other, Bottomless-pit; down the nose, Pitch and Tar rivers; on the line across the face, Horrid zone; on one cheek, Parts unknown; on the other Brimstone ocean; round the mouth, Eternal damnation gulph; and on the little sphere above, Desarts of New Purgatory. But to shew us that, even amidst all this terror, the hearts of some are so extremely callous, and so far buried in the

* The first of these stories may be found in the preface to a book called Drelincourt upon death; the second, in the roman history.

† Father to the duke of Buckingham, who was stabbed by one Felton, at Portsmouth. It is said Sir George appeared after he was dead to one who had been his servant, charging him to inform his son of the design laid to destroy him, which took place as he foretold it, through the duke's obstinacy in not avoiding it.

‡ A clergyman of the same way of thinking with Mr. Whitfield.

lethargy of sin, as no alarm can awaken, Mr. Hogarth has represented one of this congregation asleep, and the devil taking that opportunity to whisper him in the ear; and to complete the whole, and inform us that it is such schism in the church that brings religion into contempt, he has drawn a Turk looking in at the window, and smiling at their amazing folly. If this be Christianity, says he, GREAT PROPHET! I thank thee that I am a Mahomedan.*

* Beneath this plate is engraved the following text of scripture.

“Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.”

1 John, iv. 1.

[“For useful and deep satire,” Mr. Walpole considers this the “most sublime” of all Hogarth’s works. Mr. Ireland who views it in the same light, observes, that “to check this inundation of absurdity, which deemed carnal reason profane, and was not to be combated by argument, Mr. Hogarth engraved this print; It contains what must ever operate as a complete refutation of those, who because they were his opponents in politics, have impudently asserted, that he lost his talents in the decline of life; for though the delineation was made in his sixty-fourth year, in satire, wit, and imagination, it is superior to any of his preceding works.”]