



The Paradox of the Fortunate Foible: Thomas Love Peacock's Literary Vision

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THOMAS LOVE PEACOCK'S VIRTUOSITY AS A WRITER HAS, CURIOUSLY enough, frequently prevented readers from fully appreciating his fiction. The many unusual and delightful features of his style and technique—his Hellenic-Latinate-Cambric diction, intricate word games, impish pedantry, passion for odd theories, and topically satiric portrait of his age, for example—have proved so intriguing to readers and scholars that his esthetic accomplishment as a fiction writer has gone largely unnoticed and unexamined. The great bulk of Peacock scholarship and criticism has consisted of broadly appreciative encomiums, speculation about his affinities with classical and medieval comic writers, and attempts to trace and catalogue the real-life sources of his caricatures and parodies. While these efforts have borne fruit and contributed significantly to our knowledge, a mystique has grown up concerning the "unapproachability" of Peacock's writing via the more ordinary avenues of prose fiction analysis.

Peacock's appreciators once strenuously resisted this kind of analysis. George Saintsbury argues that "of books so simple in one way, and so complex in others, it is impossible and unnecessary to give any detailed analysis."¹ J. B. Priestley, though he contributed materially to a general appreciation of Peacock's fiction, nevertheless labeled it "a treacherous subject for criticism," and claimed that "the simplifications of criticism have continually allowed his spirit to escape."² Since the appearance in 1948 of David Garnett's collected edition of the novels, a small chorus of articles and reviews, ignoring (sensibly enough) those earlier prescriptions, has added to our understanding as well as our appreciation.³

¹ George Saintsbury, "Peacock," in *The Collected Essays and Papers of George Saintsbury* (London and Toronto: Dent, 1923), II, 89.

² J. B. Priestley, *Thomas Love Peacock* (London: Macmillan, 1927), p. 195.

³ Some of the more useful of these are: Kingsley Amis, "Laugh When You Can," *Spectator*, 194 (1955), 402–04; Sidney J. Black, "The Peacockian Essence," *BUSE*, 3 (1957), 241–42; A. E. Dyson, "Peacock: The Want of Enchantment," in *The Crazy Fabric, Essays in Irony* (London: Macmillan, 1965); Ian Jack, "Peacock," in *English Literature 1815–1832* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964); Edmund

And recent book-length studies by Carl Dawson and Howard Mills have initiated a substantial change of attitude.⁴ Dawson's *His Fine Wit* is an especially solid critical discussion which shows how Peacock's fiction fits into the larger pattern of his literary career. Yet somehow Peacock studies have not come entirely into their own; it is as if the warnings of Saintsbury and Priestley still haunt us. Must we, for fear of "allowing his spirit to escape," limit ourselves to writing about miscellaneous and fragmentary aspects of Peacock's accomplishment which only rarely touch upon the unity of vision and form which lies at the core of his art of fiction? Indeed we must not. Peacock's stylistic virtuositities are eternally enjoyable; but he will not discover the essential and inimitable "spirit" of his fiction until we find it empirically in the substance of Peacock's characters and action. The novels' *events* bring to life a distinctive tone and attitude. And if we search for repeated patterns of action which define the Peacockian spirit, one such pattern which emerges unmistakably is the paradox of the fortunate foible.

This paradox is a mechanism by which the author fuses comedy and satire into a coherent and esthetically satisfying literary vision. As satire, Peacock's novels present for our inspection intellectually flawed characters, eccentric figures who rigidly cling to their own single preoccupations. As comedy, the novels present dynamic motion toward happy endings which challenge mutability, time, and death through success, marriage, and social integration. Peacock's method of reconciling and combining the satiric and comic elements is unusual. His characters succeed *because* of their weaknesses rather than in spite of them. This unorthodox route to comic celebration, operating through the very flaw which makes the characters objects of satire, is the paradox of the fortunate foible, a key to Peacock's literary vision.

Prince Siethenyn of *The Misfortunes of Elphin* perfectly demonstrates this paradox. Siethenyn, one of "the three immortal drunkards of the isle of Britain," is in charge of the Royal Embankment, a great sea-wall which is the Welsh kingdom's only defense against permanent inundation. Siethenyn, however, totally dedicated to drinking and feasting, "drank the profits, and left the embankment to his deputies, who

Wilson, "The Musical Glasses of Thomas Love Peacock," in *Classics and Commercials* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1950); and Raymond Wright, Introduction to *Nightmare Abbey and Crotchet Castle* (Harmondsworth, England and Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969).

⁴ Carl Dawson, *His Fine Wit* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1970); and Howard Mills, *Peacock, His Circle and His Age* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969).

left it to their assistants, who left it to itself" (IV, i, 5).⁵ When the predictable collapse of the wall and flooding of the kingdom occurs, Siethenyn disappears, drunk and presumably drowned when his castle collapsed into the sea.

But Siethenyn miraculously reappears later in the story and explains his escape.

"When I saw the sea sapping the tower, I jumped into the water, and just in the nick of time. It was well for me that I had been so provident as to empty so many barrels, and that somebody, I don't know who, but I suppose it was my daughter, had been so provident as to put the bungs into them, to keep them sweet; for the beauty of it was that, when there was so much water in the case, it kept them empty; and when I jumped into the sea, the sea was just making a great hole in the cellar, and they were floating out by dozens. I don't know how I managed it, but I got one arm over one, and the other arm over another: I nipped them pretty tight; and, though my legs were under water, the good liquor I had in me kept me warm. I could not help thinking, as I had nothing else to think of just then that touched me so nearly, that if I had left them full, and myself empty, as a sober man would have done, we should all three, that is, I and the two barrels, have gone to the bottom together." (IV, 94-95)

Siethenyn makes the irony of his salvation explicit; he only survived because he was full of wine and the barrels empty. Temperance in this case would have been fatal. This irony reveals the essence of the fortunate foible: Siethenyn owes his life to the flaw in his character.

The situation will, of course, not bear heavy casuistry. Siethenyn's guilt remains, and if he had led a sober life his castle would never have tumbled into the sea in the first place, and the plain of Gwaelod would never have been flooded. This guilt is part of the satiric component of Peacock's form. Siethenyn's negligence functions in Peacock's attack on bureaucracy; and his rhetorical nonsense defending the rotting sea-wall functions in Peacock's attack on the conservatism of Canning's administration. But Peacock redeems Siethenyn ultimately by having him contribute to the happy ending, the rescue of King Arthur's wife Gwenyvar and of Siethenyn's own prince Elphin.

The comic aspect of Siethenyn's adventure is equally clear. If comedy is imaginative literature's way of overcoming mutability and cheating death, the episode is a fine example. Siethenyn has ironically avoided death by indulging in his weakness for drink, and furthermore he lives

⁵ *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, The Halliford Edition, ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C. E. Jones (London: Constable, 1924-34) IV, i, 5; hereafter cited by volume and page number only.

to help rescue Elphin and Gwenyvar from mortal danger. Social harmony is served by the restoration of Elphin to his kingdom; and comedy's interest in fertility emerges through the return of both Elphin and Gwenyvar to their anxious spouses. Through it all, Siethenyn proceeds with cup in hand, repeating his maxim, "GWIN O EUR: Wine from gold." Though overindulgence is the prince's vice, wine remains a comic emblem of societal joy.

Priestley was probably the first to recognize the importance of Siethenyn by placing him along with Falstaff in *The English Comic Characters*.⁶ Priestley does recognize that Siethenyn represents "the quintessential Peacock"; yet he treats the prince mainly as one of those immense comic figures who seems able to exist independently of the story in which he was created. While Priestley's treatment is essentially valid, it ignores the extent to which *Elphin's* structure depends on Siethenyn. Within the work Siethenyn embodies a crucial aspect of Peacock's political satire and also functions pivotally in the comic action. Siethenyn is responsible for the catastrophe which produces the plot complications, and he is the catalyst in Taliesin's rescue mission which resolves the plot. With his wine, Siethenyn lubricates the workings of the crucial peace conference, generating the conviviality and the comic spirit which together bring *Elphin* to its happy conclusion. The positive comic force of his essential weakness determines the progress of the novel.

Even Peacock's first novel, *Headlong Hall*, begins to develop the fortunate foible motif almost immediately. Mr. Escot, a deteriorationist and a vegetarian, inflexibly argues that all change is for the worse and that primitive man, who never ate meat, was far better off. Yet by the second chapter we find Mr. Escot "helping himself to a hearty slice of beef," and thus revealing an inability to match his words with deeds—an inability for which (in this case) his author considers *him* far better off.⁷ And though Escot never stops talking of eating vegetables and resisting change, he in fact engineers the major change which completes

⁶ J. B. Priestley, "Prince Siethenyn," *The English Comic Characters* (1925; rpt. New York: Dutton, 1966), pp. 156–72.

⁷ One of the better-known Peacock-Shelley anecdotes, related by Peacock himself in his "Memoirs of Shelley," tells of his prescription for the ailing Shelley, who was at the time (1815) a vegetarian. "He had been living chiefly on tea and bread and butter, drinking occasionally a sort of spurious lemonade." After consulting a doctor, with little success, Shelley turned to Peacock, who recommended "three mutton chops, well peppered." Peacock reports that "the success was obvious and immediate. He lived in my way for the rest of our expedition, rowed vigorously, was cheerful, merry, overflowing with animal spirits, and had certainly one week of thorough enjoyment of life" (*Works*, VIII, 99).

the novel's comic plot, a quadruple wedding, including his own marriage to the beautiful Cephalis. Escot brings about this remarkable change by sacrificing a precious deteriorationist artifact. In order to obtain the consent of Cephalis' father, Escot offers him the skull of Cadwallader, the monumental size of which proves (to Escot at least) the superiority of ancient races of men. Even at the wedding celebration itself, Mr. Escot cannot bring his words into line with his deeds. He responds to hearty congratulations with a tirade against the evils and abuses of modern marriage. Escot's theory, observes the statu-quo-ite Jenkison, "forms an admirable counterpoise to his example" (I, 154).

Mr. Escot, like Prince Siethenyn, succeeds because of his weakness, making possible the happy and fertile comic plot resolution because he cannot follow his own precepts. A more rigidly satiric world than Peacock's would revile Mr. Escot for his Pecksniffian hypocrisy. But Peacock's vision controls our view of Escot, rendering him a sympathetic comic figure who succeeds *because* he cannot act according to his own maxims.

Mr. Escot thus establishes a pattern for lovers which may be traced throughout Peacock's novels. Consider Lady Clarinda and Mr. Chainmail of *Crochet Castle*. Lady Clarinda has resolved to marry for money. "I have made up my mind," she declares to her lover, Captain Fitzchrome, "not to give away my heart when I can sell it" (IV, 41). Mr. Chainmail, who relishes medieval culture, is equally firm in his resolution to marry only a lady whose position by birth qualifies her to be lady of the manor. But like Mr. Escot, Clarinda and Chainmail are incapable of following their own precepts. Clarinda finally consents to marry the artist Fitzchrome, and Chainmail falls in love with and marries the beautiful nymph Susannah Touchandgo, even though she confesses herself the daughter of a fugitive embezzler. These marriages again form the comic plot resolution Peacock seeks, and they again are accomplished because of, rather than in spite of, the characters' weaknesses. Mr. Falconer of *Gryll Grange*, following this pattern, fails to hold his rigid resolution to remain single, devote himself to the spirit of Saint Catherine, and maintain his seven housekeepers as vestal virgins. The failure of his resolve opens the way for eight happy weddings. If any of Peacock's novels does not develop this pattern of marriage through fortunate foible, it is *Melincourt*, where Sylvan Forester and Anthelia are disgustingly virtuous in their determination to boycott sugar and inundate the countryside with acts of charity. It is significant that *Melincourt* generates little comic and satiric punch through these central characters who are too strong and virtuous to suit

the Peacockian ethos. *Melincourt's* rustic wedding of Robin and Zukey, who marry though they cannot afford to, embodies the comic spirit of the work far more certainly than the anticlimactic nuptials of Forester and Anthelia. And as a silent but efficient hero, Forester's ape Sir Oran Haut-ton overshadows his antisaccharine master.

Other characters throughout Peacock's novels reinforce the fortunate foible motif in various ways. Mr. Cranium, though convinced that phrenology is the key to social utopia, fortunately fails to insist on examining the lumps on his daughter's head before allowing her to marry Mr. Escot. The skull of Cadwallader is sufficient payment for his daughter's hand in marriage. *Melincourt's* Humphry Hippy plays the role of dejected and sedentary hypochondriac until a summons from Anthelia to come and act as "lord seneschal to receive and entertain visitors" sends him bounding from his sickbed in a flurry of delighted activity. The licentiousness of Maid Marian's confessor, Friar Tuck, also epitomizes the fortunate foible. When Marian and Robin Hood discover the secret of the friar's mysterious absences, Marian announces her discovery through a song, "The Friar of Rubygill." Though Tuck's blushing response confirms his guilt, once again it is a guilt which moves the novel closer to life, fertility, and celebration.

In every case, Peacock's use of the fortunate foible bridges and unites the comic and satiric aspects of the work. The character's weakness—hypocrisy, pride, intemperance, narrow adherence to a foolish theory—provides a valid satiric target. Yet the weakness also contributes to the comic progress of the action, yielding success, marriage, social harmony, happiness, and affirmation of life.

The development of the fortunate foible motif toward esthetic perfection, from Mr. Escot to Prince Siethenyn, is a process which closely parallels the more complex fabric of Peacock's overall development as a fiction writer. Mr. Escot's inconsistent behavior is ironic in a limited way which lacks artistic resonance, a problem which reflects the general anemia of thematic development in *Headlong Hall*. In *Melincourt* the fortunate foible motif, like most aspects of that second novel, is too diffuse to achieve a resounding impact. Peacock's first generally acknowledged masterpiece is his third novel, *Nightmare Abbey*, which depends in no small way upon characters with fortunate foibles.

There, Christopher Glowry, the epitome of Romantic melancholy, has tried to make his home the complete Gothic castle, even to the extent of hiring servants with long faces and ghastly names.

His butler was Raven; his steward was Crow; his valet was Skellet. Mr. Glow-

ry maintained that the valet was of French extraction, and that his name was Squelette. His grooms were Mattocks and Graves. On one occasion, being in want of a footman, he received a letter from a person signing himself Diggory Deathshead, and lost no time in securing this acquisition; but on Diggory's arrival, Mr. Glowry was horror-struck by the sight of a round ruddy face, and a pair of laughing eyes. Deathshead was always grinning,—not a ghastly smile, but the grin of a comic mask; and disturbed the echoes of the hall with so much unhallowed laughter, that Mr. Glowry gave him his discharge. Diggory, however, had staid long enough to make conquests of all the old gentleman's maids, and left him a flourishing colony of young Deathsheads to join chorus with the owls, that had before been the exclusive choristers of Nightmare Abbey. (III, 8)

Diggory Deathshead establishes a pattern of ironic reversal which reverberates throughout *Nightmare Abbey*. Glowry's inability to distinguish between the appearance and the substance of melancholy contributes to the novel's comic ethos; and Diggory, his face a comic mask, literally embodies that comic spirit. His fertile accomplishments during his brief tenure stand as additional emblems of the comic process which purges the novel of its characters' melancholy intentions.

While Deathshead establishes *Nightmare Abbey*'s comic-satiric paradigm, Glowry's son Scythrop is the central character; and it is his fortunate foible which brings the work to its happy conclusion. Scythrop, his love torn between the flirtatious Marionetta and the emancipated Celinda, loses the former to Mr. Listless, and the latter to Mr. Flosky. Inspired by Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, Scythrop resolves to end his life, along with the novel, in the true spirit of Romantic melancholy. He calls to his servant for "a pint of port and a pistol," implying that he will shoot himself if his father does not return with one or both of the ladies by the appointed hour.

When that hour draws near and his father has not returned, Scythrop again calls his servant.

"Raven," said Scythrop, "the clock is too fast."

"No, indeed," said Raven, who knew nothing of Scythrop's intentions; "if anything, it is too slow."

"Villain!" said Scythrop, pointing the pistol at him; "it is too fast."

"Yes—yes—too fast, I meant," said Raven, in manifest fear.

"How much too fast?" said Scythrop.

"As much as you please," said Raven.

"How much, I say?" said Scythrop, pointing the pistol again.

"An hour, a full hour, sir," said the terrified butler.

"Put back my watch," said Scythrop. (III, 142–43)

Scythrop's inability to follow his morbid resolve not only exemplifies Peacock's use of the fortunate foible, but the circumstances embody the comic spirit in a most explicit way. To the extent that the function of the comic spirit is to cheat time and death in the interest of life and happiness, it is appropriate that Scythrop avoid suicide by literally manipulating the clock. In doing so he becomes his own comic spirit. When his father does return, they notice that "the fatal time is past" and complete the circumvention of Scythrop's melancholy *felo de se*. The hero's concluding words, "Bring some Madeira," reiterate the motif of wine as an embodiment of comic celebration, Peacock's secular communion of joy.

The paradox of the fortunate foible, wherein characters achieve happiness because of their foolishness and weakness, consistently defines Peacock's unique literary vision. When Peacock's characters attempt to transform their absurd and rigid ideas into action, they fail. And when they are in danger, their weakness saves them. Ironically, their weaknesses generally move the plot in comic directions, toward happiness and social harmony. Thus it is in concrete realizations of an ironic pattern—specific realized events which reveal the essential nature of Peacock's world—that we may come to an understanding of this unusual writer and his usual comic-satiric fiction.

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