
The Social Satires of Thomas Love Peacock

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of his translations of Bion and Moschus we should expect him to make this kind of false rime 5 times. Dryden, on the other hand, would use no voiced-voiceless rimes; and *MacFlecknoe* has none. If Oldham wrote it, it is the only piece of his writing, early or late, in which he managed to get thru as many as 200 lines without falling into his favorite kind of false rime. If he wrote it in 1678, before the *Satyrs upon the Jesuits*, the absence in it of any trace of this apparently native defect of Oldham's ear, which he could not correct even when he set himself to write melodiously, is still more remarkable.

Certainly if Dryden *did* make up his mind, after Oldham was beyond the bourne from which no contestants return, to take to himself the credit for his young friend's greatest work, it was fortunate for him not only that that work was originally published as "by the author of *Absalom and Achitophel*," but also that in a quite definite point of verse technique it was like *Absalom and Achitophel* and unlike Oldham's acknowledged work. Otherwise his own lines to Oldham's memory might have betrayed him.

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THE SOCIAL SATIRES OF THOMAS LOVE PEACOCK

PART I

All but the last of the satiric novels of Thomas Love Peacock are compassed within the sixteen years from 1815 to 1831, a time when—although Europe was outwardly given over to reaction—the social ideas, rationalistic and sentimental, of the French Revolution were still smoldering issues, and when most serious writers felt, at least distantly, the tidal waves of the great cataclysm. Born in 1785, twelve years after Coleridge and seven before Shelley, and living on until 1866, Peacock stands between the older generation of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Southey, and the younger generation of Shelley and Keats. During the French Revolution, he was, like his friend Shelley, too young to understand and sympathize with the revulsion against radicalism during the Terror and Napoleon's conquest of Switzerland. This might lead one to suppose Peacock, like Shelley, a radical; but he seems scarcely more in accord with

the "isms" of the day than with the Tory conservatives. Somewhat older than his friend, and of more incisive, analytic temper, he saw many flaws in the doctrines which Shelley and his fellow-radicals championed. Thus is Thomas Love Peacock at once arch-critic of things-as-they-are, and arch-critic of reforms-as-they-are-proposed. This was, perhaps, the thought of Richard Garnett when, in the *Encycl. Brit.*, he wrote of Peacock's "skeptical liberalism," a liberalism skeptical even of itself.

This was sometime a paradox, but criticism gives it proof. Indeed, a brief summary of opinions shows strange contrasts. Saintsbury, in his introduction to *Maid Marian*, finds in Peacock "evidence of that latent conservatism" which turns one into a "stout reactionary." Ingpen, in his edition of Shelley's letters (p. 37) notes: "What views, political and social, Peacock possessed were the very reverse of Shelley's [which were radical]." And Gummere, in *Democracy and Poetry* (p. 12), speaks of "a whole literary life devoted to reactionary prose and verse." Some criticisms, in direct contradiction, term him a radical; among them Van Doren's biography, which speaks of "a reputation for Toryism which cannot be properly said to have characterized his intellect" (p. 275). Freeman, moreover, refers to his contributions to the *Westminster* as "distinctly radical," and characterizes Peacock himself as "notoriously an exposé of abuses and implicitly a reformer" (p. 283). Some writers, however, take neither stand definitely. Hartley thinks that "Peacock has no scheme of regeneration save his own object lesson that he laughingly puts before us" (p. 283-4). And Paul asserts: "Peacock held at the same time, and in reference to the same subject-matter, opinions which the utmost ingenuity cannot reconcile" (p. 654). Thus, satirist of liberal and conservative alike, he has been put now in one camp, now in the other, now adjudged a freebooter.

Peacock could scarcely have chosen a vehicle more exasperating to the expositor of his theories. He invents a puppet to typify each current social theory, packs them all into the geographical confines of one house-party, and lets them talk 'about it and about'; but, unfortunately, the whole discussion merely comes out at the same door 'wherein it went,' having progressed nowhere in particular. Often the reader is puzzled to know where—if anywhere—Peacock's preferences lie; for he often sets the puppets dallying, and then stands aside to watch for broken heads, with the genially

malicious unconcern of the innocent bystander. At times, by comments in his own person, he makes known his point of view; at times, an unwonted partiality for one character betrays a preference; but, even so, one commonly finishes a volume with the wish that Peacock would, like Bernard Shaw, prefix a preface to make certain just what he wants the whole thing to mean. With some pains, however, a fairly accurate interpretation can be attained. In the present study, I propose to discuss his general attitude toward current practices in education, marriage, religion and government; and in a paper to follow, to discuss his criticism of reforms and reformers.

Peacock believed that neither sex was being properly educated. In almost every novel, he rails at the great universities where England's youth had for centuries imbibed its Latin, Greek, and mathematics. In *Nightmare Abbey* (p. 140), he says of Scythrop that college cured him "of the love of reading in all its shapes." And in *Crotchet Castle* (p. 228), when the house-party makes a pilgrimage in a body to Oxford, Peacock tells us: "The Rev. Dr. Folliott laid a wager with Mr. Crotchet that in all their perustrations, they would not find a single man reading, and won it." The professors, according to Peacock, are quite as bad as the students; for, when Squire Headlong went to Oxford to look for "men of taste and philosophers," he was "assured by a learned professor that there were no such things in the University" (p. 6). If one remember that Peacock had learned his own Greek—which he always wrote in an unorthodox fashion without accents—sans aid or comfort of any university education; and, when one adds to this consequent feeling of independence, the satirist's natural sympathy for the collegiate martyrdom of his friend Shelley, one can, I think, understand the subconscious motives behind his censure of university education.

In the case of woman, however, he finds the situation even worse. In *Melincourt*, he describes Sir Henry as "one of those who maintained the heretical notion that women are, or at least may be, rational beings; though, from the great pains usually taken in what is called education to make them otherwise, there are unfortunately few examples to warrant the truth of the theory" (p. 9). In *Nightmare Abbey*, Scythrop, a humorous caricature of Shelley, declares: "The fault is in their [women's] artificial education, which studiously models them into mere musical dolls, to be set

out for sale in the great toy-shop of society" (p. 131). In a later novel, Peacock describes his heroine as having received "an expensive and complicated education, complete in all the elements of superficial display" (p. 148). In *Maid Marian*, moreover, he ridicules even the household virtues, preferring above them learning and determination. One of the characters ventures to query: "'Has she not . . . learning and valor?' 'Learning!' exclaimed the little friar, 'what has a woman to do with learning? And valor! who ever heard a woman commended for valor? Meekness . . . and obedience to her husband, and faith in her confessor, and domesticity, or, as learned doctors call it, the faculty of stay-at-homeitiveness, and embroidery, and music, and pickling, and preserving, and the whole complex and multiplex detail of the noble science of dinner . . . these are the female virtues'" (p. 10). Mary Wollstonecraft, who married the philosopher Godwin, had earlier raised the question of woman's education in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). She saw the inconsistency in Rousseau's *Emile*, that gave Sophie a mere Oriental, sex-education, with submission to father and husband as its final goal, whereas it endowed Emile with individualized selfhood. She demanded equal education for women, and declared them endowed with minds capable of a rational training. Peacock unquestionably knew of her work; for not only was it widely read, but also his friend Shelley, son-in-law to the authoress, was interested in the problems it raised.

Holding so pessimistic a view of the education of both men and women, Peacock could scarcely hope much for their union in marriage. The very attitude of his characters toward it is unhealthy. Two, at least, of his heroes, like so many young radicals of the day, victims of the *Weltschmerz*, are nympholepts: "Scythrop's romantic dreams," says Peacock, "had indeed given him many *pure anticipated cognitions* of combinations of beauty and intelligence" (p. 148); and Forester also is searching for a soul-mate through the purlieus of this degenerate but perfectable universe—a somewhat hazy and impractical concept of marriage! The women, on the other hand, are nothing if not practical; and fare even worse in the satirist's esteem. "Musical dolls to be set out for sale in the great toy-shop of society," most of them can only degrade the married state, and are fit to raise their children to no higher ethical ideal than money for its own sake and for the

things that money can buy. In *Melincourt*, Miss Pinmoney—with her own foreknowledge and consent—is being disposed of by her mother “according to the universal practice of this liberal and enlightened generation, in the most commercial of all bargains, marriage” (p. 14). Older generation and younger are alike debased. Peacock agrees with Mary Wollstonecraft in condemning the practical workings of marriage as an institution, but with this difference: in *Mary* and *The Wrongs of Woman*, she looks upon woman as downtrodden by a false, double standard of sex-morality super-imposed upon her from without. To Mary Wollstonecraft, the fault was in the marriage-laws of England; to Peacock, in the basic nature of woman herself. Godwin also attacks the institution of marriage, and indeed suggests its abolition. Peacock sees men and women mis-educated and mis-allied, sees marriage cankered by false ideals and greed of money, made a thing of mockery, and to that mockery, adds his own Juvenalian laughter.

But even though the marriage-tie be corrupt, optimism has still a chance: society has still the Church and the State, two great potentialities of good. The Church, however, shares in his reproach. He pictures the clergy as given over to good living, brainless gluttons in the earlier novels, in the latter novels refined but quite unspiritual hedonists. In *Headlong Hall* (pp. 9 ff.), the Rev. Dr. Gaster, whose name Peacock derives from the Greek γαστήρ, i. e., ‘paunch,’ is discovered anxiously awaiting breakfast; he manages to secure the best place at the inn; when his somewhat hearty refreshment arrives, he wishes to have the time for partaking extended (p. 20); he does his intellectual browsing in the *Almanach des Gourmands* (p. 26)—but no more! The worthy Doctor is but the first in a gallery of Peacockian clerics. Through the bibulous symposia of *Melincourt*, the Reverend Mr. Portpipe swims into the reader’s ken; *Maid Marian* boasts not only a sort of Friar Tuck, but also the whole vinous fraternity of Rubygill; *Crotchet Castle* limns “The Reverend Dr. Folliott, a gentleman endowed with a tolerable stock of learning, an interminable swallow, and an indefatigable pair of lungs” (p. 148). And the very first line of *Gryll Grange* introduces the inimitable Dr. Opimian genially discoursing upon the virtues of Palestine soup.

But what happens when these gentlemen of the cloth engage in their strictly clerical duties? *Maid Marian* contains several unequivocal suggestions: The Reverend Lord Abbot, upon receiving

a thump on the head, indulges in the "pious and consolatory reflection on the goodness of Providence in having blessed him with such a thickness of skull, to which he was now indebted for his temporal preservation, as he had before been for spiritual promotion" (p. 63). Thus "spiritual promotion" is due to "thickness of skull." Furthermore, Peacock explains of the noble heroine's confessor: "he never ventured to find her in the wrong, much less to enjoin anything in the shape of penance, as was the occasional practice of holy confessors with or without cause, for the sake of pious discipline, and what in those days was called social order, namely, the preservation of the privileges of the few who happened to have any, at the expense of the swinish multitude who happened to have none" (p. 68). If, then, the clergy work merely for a selfish class-benefit, what do this "swinish multitude" think of it? After a satirical description of the oppressions of Longchamp, Bishop of Ely, Peacock adds: "The ignorant impatience of the swinish multitude with these fruits of good living, brought forth by one of the meek who had inherited the earth, displayed itself in a general ferment" (p. 72). His iteration of "swinish multitude"—a phrase borrowed from one of Burke's reactionary tirades—is final proof that he intended contemporary satire. The author of *Maid Marian* looks upon the clergy of his day as corrupt worldlings, sunk in luxury, blind mouths, that neither can nor will perform any ecclesiastical function other than the safeguarding of their own petty interests.

Does no purity reside even in the State? Peacock's answer is a derisive negative. It was the fashion for young intellectual bloods of the day to fulminate against the tyranny of kings and the license of their courts; but George IV had been giving England an especially apt occasion; and Peacock was not slow in borrowing revolutionary thunder of his friend Shelley. *Maid Marian* is full of implied criticisms both of the theory of divine right and of the actual practices of the government; for those were the days before the passage of the Reform Bill, and the country was undergoing a period of domestic upheaval: "'Robin Hood,'" says Friar Tuck, "'is king of the forest both by dignity of birth and by virtue of his standing army: to say nothing of the free choice of his people, which he has indeed, but I pass it by as an illegitimate basis of power. He holds his dominion over the forest, and its horned multitude of citizen-deer, and its swinish multitude or peasantry

of wild boars, by right of conquest and force of arms. He levies contributions among them by free consent of his archers, their virtual representatives' " (p. 82). So much for the very un-divine George IV and his rotten-borough Parliament which ruled England by "virtual representation." In foreign affairs, Peacock is equally caustic against the Holy Alliance which had lately dominated Europe, and satirizes it bitterly in *Maid Marian* (p. 71); and, indeed, the criticism is largely justified. Not only royal policies at home and abroad, but also the immediate court, especially the royal bard, probably Southey, who was laureate at the time, receive castigation in almost every satire: *The Misfortunes of Elphin* speaks of the prince's "bard of all work, who was always willing to go to any court with any character or none" (p. 130).

But not only is royalty decayed, but the great aristocracy of England, the great land-owners, are incompetent and vicious. This class is pictured as being recruited from the successful merchants and bankers who have made fortunes chiefly through the fraudulent manipulation of paper currency. They then spread their wings, and acquire nobility and a coat of arms "after proper ceremony (payment being the principal)" (*Crotchet Castle*, p. 144). They carry the petty tyranny of the counting-house into their estates as far as their tastes permit by "game-bagging, poacher-shooting, trespasser-pounding, footpath-stopping, common-enclosing, rack-renting, and all the other pursuits and pastimes which make a country gentleman an ornament to the world, and a blessing to the poor" (p. 145).

In *The Misfortunes of Elphin* (p. 47), he refers to the squires as "our agrestic kakistocracy." Further quotation seems needless: the country gentlemen, like the clergy, are shown sunk in their own selfish motives, a source only of weakness and discord. Yet by the wretched electoral system, they controlled even the House of Commons; and, in fact, in *Melincourt*, a squire actually returns to Parliament from his borough an Angola monkey.

Society, then, is filled with corruption: family, church, and state. None of the parts function properly; for the individuals composing each class are sunk in selfishness. Such a society is disintegrating into anarchy; and, indeed, the problems caused by the rise of industrialism, were at the time, racking England's vitals. The restoration of economic equilibrium in Europe after Napoleon's fall, aggravated the difficulty; and, in 1819, Parliament found it neces-

sary to pass six acts against industrial and agrarian rioting. This movement for reform later became known as Chartism, and, in spite of the Reform Bill of 1832, lasted down into the fifties. Peacock saw the struggle seething within; and, to him, the great English institutions seemed to have become a mockery: he might have written a philosophy of clothes, had his temperament been such; instead, he has left us a series of argumentative house-parties for which he is not without honor. But Peacock's is not an indictment of society merely, but of humanity, not merely of this or that class, but of the individuals that make up every class: for him, human-nature is gone wrong.

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SHAKESPEARE STUDIES

I. SHAKESPEARE'S SUPPOSED REFERENCES TO HIS MARRIAGE

At the close of November, 1582, or a few days later, William Shakespeare, then eighteen years of age, married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years his senior. Nearly six months later, on May 26, 1583, their first child Susanna was baptized.

The dramatist has been thought to have in mind the disparity in the ages of himself and wife when writing a passage in *Twelfth Night*.

Duke. My life upon't, young though thou art, thine eye
Hath stay'd upon some favour that it loves.
Hath it not, boy?

Viola. A little, by your favour.

Duke. What kind of woman is't?

Viola. Of your complexion.

Duke. She is not worth thee, then. What years, i'faith?

Viola. About your years, my lord.

Duke. Too old, by heaven. Let still the woman take
An elder than herself; so wears she to him,
So sways she level in her husband's heart.
For, boy, however we do praise ourselves,
Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm,
More longing, wavering, sooner lost and worn,
Than women's are.

Viola. I think it well, my lord.