Shakespearian Burlesques

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HE practice of burlesquing Shakespeare began in his own day: in The Knight of the Burning Pestle, the misquotation of Hotspur’s lines beginning “By heaven, methinks it were an easy leap To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon” clearly has some burlesque intention. But the first substantial burlesques do not come until 1674; they are by Thomas Duffett. The first was appended to The Empress of Morocco, which was produced at Drury Lane and printed in 1674. This skit on Elkanah Settle’s play of the same name had an Epilogue aimed principally at burlesquing the elaborate productions of the witch scenes in the Davenant version of Macbeth at Dorset Garden. Duffett also wrote The Mock-Tempest, or The Enchanted Castle; produced in the same year at Drury Lane. “The Design of this Play”, says Langbaine, “was to draw the Town from the Duke’s Theatre, who for a considerable time had frequented that admirable reviv’d Comedy call’d The Tempest.” It burlesqued the production at the other house, which was not of Shakespeare’s play but of Shadwell’s opera based on the Dryden-Davenant adaptation of the original. The Mock-Tempest is vigorous, amusing and obscene: it begins with a riotous scene in a besieged brothel and throughout is, as Langbaine put it, “intermixt with so much Scurrility” as to “offend the modest Mind.” Essentially topical and theatrical, it was probably very effective in its own day. These two pieces stand alone; after them we find little in the way of Shakespearian burlesque for over a century. The burlesque instinct was there, but it found non-Shakespearian targets, most notably in Buckingham’s The Rehearsal (which in fact was performed before The Mock-Tempest but remained popular for a long time), in Fielding’s Tom Thumb, and in Sheridan’s The Critic. Occasionally a scene or a speech from Shakespeare was parodied; and it is on record that the young Garrick, along with the painter Hogarth, played in a private performance of a parody of the ghost scene from Julius Caesar written by John Hoadly, the stage-struck son of a Bishop of Winchester, and himself a clergyman; but no full burlesque version of a Shakespeare play in England is known between 1674 and 1810. The reason may be that the Eighteenth Century got its Shakespeare as it liked it, and so felt no need to mock. The scholars worked hard, if often misguidedly, at establishing the true text of the plays; and the actors took no notice of them whatever, but went on

1 For bibliographical information I am indebted to the article “Travesties of Shakespeare’s Plays” by R. F. Sharp (The Library, June 1920). The other principal treatments of the topic in general are a chapter in A Book of Burlesque by W. Davenport Adams (London, 1891), and a few pages in Harley Granville-Barker’s essay “Exit Planché, Enter Gilbert” (The Eighteen-Sixties, Cambridge, 1932).


playing the old adaptations and making new ones of their own. They tended to look upon the plays as repositories of effective passages which could be selected and rearranged at their whim. Perhaps this is why the plays were not burlesqued: no-one was being stuffy about them. At any rate, it was about the time that people began to care more about the restoration of the original texts, and about historical accuracy in the costumes and scenery, that the burlesques began to appear; and some of them seem actually to have been suggested by pretentious productions of Shakespeare. But though the rise of the Shakespearian burlesque may be seen as a manifestation of public taste, it was one man—John Poole—who revived this genre of humorous writing, which was to continue and develop for about eighty years.

I should make it clear that I use the word “burlesque” in no very precise sense. There are several terms that would equally well describe this sort of entertainment. Those used most commonly by the authors themselves are “burlesque”, “travestie”, and “burletta”—the last term being generally applicable to pieces that could legally be played in the minor theaters before the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843. The typical Shakespearian burlesque takes a Shakespearian play as its point of departure and creates from it a mainly comic entertainment, often in ways that bear no relation to the original play. As Professor Nicoll has written, what made pieces such as this popular was “the love of the fantastic, the impossibly exaggerated and the patently absurd . . . they have little thought of follies inherent in the original play travestied.”

The first, Poole’s burlesque of *Hamlet*, published in 1810, is literary rather than theatrical. It is described as “Hamlet Travestie in Three Acts with Burlesque Annotations, after the manner of Dr. Johnson and Geo. Steevens, Esq., and the Various Commentators.” Poole, who later became a prolific and successful minor playwright, was at this time about twenty-four years old. In the Preface to his first edition he apologises for, but defends, the project he has undertaken. *Homer and Virgil*, he writes, “have both been the subjects of strong burlesques, but they are still read with unabated admiration; the bay that adorns them still flourishes, and its verdure remains undiminished: and it would be an insult to the high character of our poet, were it supposed that the wreath is so loosely twined around his brows as to be endangered by so mere a trifle as that which gives rise to these remarks.” He is, however, with the arder of youth, severer on the Commentators: “it had been well if some able satirist had exposed and punished their folly, their affectation, and their arrogance, at the time when the rage for editing, and commenting on, Shakspeare was at its height, and every pedant in Black-letter lore assumed the prerogative of an authorised polluter of his text.” Only Dr. Johnson is excluded from these strictures.

Poole’s *Hamlet Travestie* contains features which recur in many of its successors. It introduces, for instance, what is perhaps the commonest comic device in all these works: this consists in replacing the word “father” wherever it occurs in the original by “dad”. Poole follows a simplified version of the original story and structure, with few radical changes. He proceeds largely by parody or familiar paraphrase in rhymed couplets. The soliloquies, and some of the

other big speeches, are turned into songs set to popular tunes of the time. Poole is often closely dependent on the original wording. Here for instance is the Queen in the first scene:

Come, Hamlet, leave off crying; ’tis in vain,
Since crying will not bring him back again.
Besides, ’tis common: all that live must die—
So blow your nose, my dear, and do not cry.

It is clearly not on a high level; and the method breaks down badly when the original is witty in itself. For instance, Hamlet’s reply to the King’s question “Where’s Polonius?” runs in the original: “In Heaven; send thither to see; if your messenger find him not there, seek him ’th’other place yourself. But if, indeed, you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby” (IV. iii. 35-39). Poole enfeebs this into:

He’s in heaven;
But if you think that I’m to lying giv’n,
Send there to see; if there your man don’t nick him,
E’en to the devil go yourself to seek him.
If in a month you find not where he’s closeted,
Your nose will hint ’t’h’d hole he’s deposited.

Poole’s version of Ophelia’s mad scene is particularly devoid of wit. Ophelia presents cabbage, carrots and turnip instead of flowers, and adds:

To bring a rope of onions, too, I tried,
But father ate them all before he died.

This is one of the passages on which Poole adds burlesque annotations. Pope suggests that the true reading is “a robe of onions”. Dr. Johnson counters with:

Rope is undoubtedly the true reading. A rope of onions is a certain number of onions, which, for the convenience of portability, are, by the market-women, suspended from a rope: not, as the Oxford editor ingeniously, but improperly, supposes, in a bunch at the end, but in a perpendicular arrangement.

For the hints afforded me in the formation of this note, and for those contained in the note upon pickled mutton, I am indebted to a lady celebrated at once for her literary acquisitions, and for her culinary accomplishments.\(^5\)

At the end of the play, Hamlet and Laertes do not fence, but box. Hamlet’s last words are:

If e’er you lov’d me—live—my tale to tell—
And then—I care not if you go—to h-l.l.—
That last cross-buttock dish’d me—Oh!—I can’t get on—
Here goes, Horatio,—(p) going—(p) going—(p) gone.

The curtain falls after a dead march.

This somewhat deplorable piece was remarkably successful with its readers. It went into six editions, including an American one, within ten years, and was reprinted twice more later in the century. The fourth edition, of 1812, has

\(^5\) This note was added in the edition of 1811.
an extra Preface in which the author congratulates "those who, on its first appearance, were apprehensive for the reputation of Shakespeare, that . . . he is neither expelled from our libraries, nor banished from our stage."

Though Poole's play was intended mainly to be read, he presented it in an actable form, and probably was far from displeased when it was presented at a minor theatre in 1811, and at Covent Garden in 1813 with a distinguished cast including the elder Charles Mathews, and with John Liston, who was taking his benefit, as Ophelia. Fortunately Liston, according to a critic, could "set the audience in a roar without opening his lips." It does not seem to have been a great success; nevertheless it was revived twice some sixty years later to give two actors the chance to make fun of the performances of Hamlet then being given by that highly imitable actor, Henry Irving. Several later burlesquers of Hamlet borrowed from Poole, with and without acknowledgement, and other writers followed his methods in burlesquing other plays. There are, for instance, a burlesque of Romeo and Juliet in 1812, one of Othello in 1813, and a particularly dreary one of Macbeth in the Accepted Addresses of the same year. There are two different travesties of Richard III, in 1816 and 1823, prompted perhaps by the performances of Edmund Kean, on which, however, they do not seem to have any bearing.

The little spate of imitations of Poole's Hamlet was obviously dwindling; there was nothing between 1816 and 1823, and then for another eleven years. The next move came, significantly, from within the theater and initiates the second important stage in the nineteenth-century development of Shakespearian burlesque. In 1834 one Maurice Dowling produced at Liverpool a "burlesque burletta" on Othello; it met with some success and was performed at the Strand Theatre in London in 1836. Charles Rice, who went to its seventy-seventh consecutive performance there, found that it was still attracting the crowds at half-price time. In his opinion it was "unquestionably the best burlesque [i.e. Shakespearian or not] that has ever appeared." Its modern critics describe it variously as "dull", "dull and vulgar", and "really too nauseatingly vulgar for quotation". Dowling's only other play is a travesty of Romeo and Juliet which, says Sharp, is "of the same kidney".

There was a great demand at this time for light-weight, relatively short shows with plenty of musical numbers, mainly to serve as after-pieces in the lengthy bills of fare offered in the Victorian theaters. What we find before long is that the burlesquing of Shakespeare ceases to be the result of a bright idea on the part of someone who does not normally write for the theater and becomes instead a recognized means by which the professional authors can concoct their entertainments; convenient, of course, because the basic structure is already laid down for them, and when invention fails they can always fall back upon the simple trick of vulgarizing their original. Between 1840 and 1870 there are roughly twice as many Shakespearian burlesques as in the preceding thirty years. As previously, the plays most often chosen are, for obvious reasons, the

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6 Quoted by Nicoll, p. 121.
8 Adams; Sharp; Granville-Barker.
9 The practice was not confined to Shakespeare.
great tragedies, excluding *King Lear*; the only comedy that was done more than twice in the whole period is *The Merchant of Venice*—mainly for the Shylock plot. There are several notable developments in technique: the pieces are conceived primarily for the theater, so visual jokes and effects are highly developed; the pun comes to be used as a major comic weapon; and the authors exploit more fully the comic possibilities of topical reference, in ways very similar to those adopted by present-day writers of revues and radio shows. They learn, too, a new flexibility in the handling of their material; the most successful burlesques are those that are least slavish in their following of the originals. From the burlesques written during Queen Victoria’s reign, I have tried to select for special comment some that illustrate the most significant features of this type of entertainment.

The first is by Charles Selby, a professional dramatist, author or part-author of over eighty plays. In 1844 his burlesque of *Richard III*, described as “A Merrie Mysterie in One Act”, was produced at the Strand Theatre in London. Like all the burlesques of this play that I have seen, it is based on Colley Cibber’s adaptation; the *Times*, in its review of this production, found that this fact “in some measure palliates the sacrilege.” Duncombe’s acting edition is remarkably full of information about its staging, and clearly illustrates how much could be done in the theater to embellish a relatively uninspired text. It also has an illustration done “from a Drawing taken expressly in the Theatre”, which shows Richard kneeling before Lady Anne. The author has in his Preface a double-edged dig at the theater-going public and at Cibber’s adaptation: “Many of the original passages by the Gentleman from Stratford, although no doubt abounding in beauties, being beyond the comprehension of the Adaptor, he naturally supposes (like Colley Cibber) that the Public must be as ignorant as himself, and will prefer the Drama of Effect to the Drama of Literature.” Scenic extravagances, too, are glanced at: “Mr. Nathan . . . has passed several sleepless nights in ransacking illuminated manuscripts for authorities to eclipse all his former triumphs”; the armor, however, “to encourage local talent, has been manufactured at Birmingham.” Detailed notes are given on costumes; Richard was a colorful figure with, as his first costume, a “very short scarlet shirt, trimmed with gold lace, over it, a white Taglioni, with a silk handkerchief in one pocket, and a lace one in the other—blue pantaloons, high yellow morocco boots, long spurs with red leathers, long rolled black wig, an immense Count d’Orsay shaped broad brimmed white hat, with a large white rose, and a plume of red feathers, long cross hilted sword, with gold lace belt, a very large jewelled collar and badge of the Black Boar to be worn over the Taglioni.” Lady Anne was dressed elegantly, but with a symbolical “moveable weather arrow with N.S.E.W., made of paste-board and gold-paper, fastened on the top of her head.” She wears this in the illustration.

The staging was fairly elaborate. One scene presents a “Gigantic Equestrian Pageant”, burlesquing the equestrian spectacles popular at this time especially, but by no means exclusively, at Astley’s Amphitheatre. These sometimes used plays as a framework, though their real intention is summed up in the phrase originated by their most famous exponent, Andrew Ducrow: “Cut the cackle”, he said, “and come to the ‘osses.’” In the burlesque, the principal characters gallop around the stage on horseback; Richard is the star performer; as he
enters "all shout. He gallops round the Stage à la Ducrow, makes his horse curvette, etc. . . . The whole scene is kept in motion by the Knights, Squires, Pages, Heralds, etc. running off and on, bringing and carrying messages. Catesby enters at full gallop, bawling 'Way—way—way.' His horse is very restive." The spoken scene that follows, too, is played on horseback, but no real comic use seems to have been made of the horses—inentionally, at any rate.

In the last scene, Richard's and Richmond's tents are seen in openings in the flats, and at the back of each is a symbolical transparency, with a figure of Victory and Cupids for Richmond, but for Richard "Lucifer and Demons, with a gridiron, red hot pincers, sledge hammers etc." A chorus of ghosts arranged in descending order of height and directed by Henry VI sings blessings and curses on them alternately. Finally, Richard and Richmond have "an unapproachably terrific combat" with "extravagant pantomime". Richard comes to life and begs the audience's favor during the musical finale, set to the tune of "Yankee Doodle". Music is used freely throughout; besides about twenty set numbers to popular tunes and operatic airs, there are frequent directions such as "discord in orchestra" and "discordant flourish", as well as drums and penny trumpets for the battle scenes.

The dialogue is less interesting. The general effect is of a good-humored charade, facetious rather than witty. There is some effective colloquialism, as in Richard's aside referring to the young Duke of York:

Oh you dear—pretty—merry-downy—chick!  
"Tis pity you'll so soon the bucket kick!

When Lady Anne first enters, the coffin is imagined off-stage. Richard calls out:

Villains! set down that bier, and draw it mild,  
Or by Barclay and Perkins, Bass and Childse,  
To India ale I'll turn your mongrel blood,  
And lay you sprawling in your native mud.

Generally, in spite of this passage, the pun is not much in evidence. One piece of interpretation is of interest. The boy Prince says to Richard: "Bear me, you mean, as the bear does the monkey, On his shoulder!" This is chosen for special emphasis; Richard "makes a furious grimace, then suddenly checks himself and smiles." It will be remembered that in his film, Sir Laurence Olivier made a climax of this point; it may be that Selby was remembering a similar theatrical emphasis.

The piece was very well received, and the Times critic tells us what we should not have learned from the printed text: that part of the fun was at the expense of famous actors. Hammond, playing Richard, "made a great deal of laugh in the fight at the end by an imitation of Charles Kean", and the actor playing Henry VI imitated W. C. Macready "very effectively." The same critic mentions that the young Duke of York (wearing Field Marshal's costume) was played by a little girl who "lisped forth her part with a most comical aplomb, eliciting, for so little a body, a very large share of the roars of laughter which the burlesque met with." The Illustrated London News gives us a comment on burlesques in general: "Time was when Shakespearian burlesque was a hazardous experiment; but such things are now safer game; and in this case
the jokes were so thick that the hearers had not time to reflect on the worth of one before the wit of another flashed forth. The costumes were a tissue of ludicrous anachronisms."

Four years later, in 1848, the Brough brothers had a great success with a burlesque of The Tempest called The Enchanted Isle; and about this time Francis Talfourd, son of the August author of Ion and The Athenian Captive, was frivolously penning Shakespearian travesties. They seem originally to have been intended for semi-private performance, but some, at least, reached the London stage. The first, written while the author was at Eton, was Macbeth, originally performed at Henley Regatta in 1847, then at the Strand in 1848, and at the Olympic in 1853. By this time the pun was flourishing. Sometimes it was visually assisted. Macbeth and Banquo make their first entrance under an umbrella; the witches greet them with "Hail! hail! hail!": Macbeth asks Banquo "What mean these salutations, noble thane?" and is told "These showers of 'Hail' anticipate your 'reign'". Some of the puns are quite esoteric, as when Lady Macbeth says to her husband:

If it's not from cowardice you keep aloof, 
Strike off the prince, and let me have a proof.

Talfourd followed this lively piece with another of the same kind, "Shylock, or The Merchant of Venice Preserved. An entirely new reading of Shakespeare, From an edition hitherto undiscovered by modern authorities, and which it is hoped may be received as the stray leaves of a Jerusalem Hearty-Joke." Presumably the jokes printed as preliminary matter to the acting edition were conveyed to the audience by means of their programs; we hear for instance that "The music will be well treated by Mr. Barnard, although he intends to handle it with his usual but by no means ordinary violins." Truly the pun is rampant here. Launcelot Gobbo knows that he is to Lorenzo as "a poor serf" to "a heavy swell"; at the party, Shylock says, "[I] Went the whole hog, and though with faith unshaken, Attempted my first essay—upon Bacon"; and action is introduced solely for the sake of a pun: Jessica says as she is eloping, "I scruple if e'en now I ought to go", whereupon Lorenzo produces a flask and replies: "This dram will soon remove those scruples, though." There is no wonder that the critic of the Times felt that the puns were "sometimes too recondite for the needless auditor". But the pun is not Talfourd's only comic device. He has some fun with absurdities inherent in the original. Portia's suitors enter together, and after Morocco and Aragon have failed with the gold and silver caskets, Portia points out to Bassanio:

By their discomfitures you're clearly told, 
It isn't in the silver or the gold.

Bassanio, after some meditation, begins to make the necessary deduction:

Yet, as it seems, the caskets are but three, 
Two must be wrong—those two are found to be 
The silver and the gold—why then, instead, 
I shouldn't wonder if it's in the lead.

All "express signs of astonishment" at his ratiocinatory powers, and Portia says:
Like much of this piece, the scene in which Shylock returns home from the party "slightly intoxicated" and falls into a trough of water has little relation to The Merchant of Venice proper. However, it includes a song which one may imagine would give an excellent opportunity to a comic actor, though it is not comic in itself:

Right old fellow—don't mind me—
No, by Jingo! by jingo I'm not drunk!
That gas light's dancing on the wall,
The shadows double seem to fall—
I see it glancing—I see it dancing on the wall,
I see it—not just now at all—
   It's no use dancing on the wall!
Do leave off dancing!
It heeds me not—
But by jingo—I really am not drunk!
I'll go—jolly—so now—steady—
No, by jingo!—I'm sure I am not drunk!

(s spoken)

In passages such as this Talfourd provides material with which an inventive actor could do much; and the real importance of his Shakespearian burlesques is that they were appropriate vehicles for an actor who was a comic genius of a very rare order: Frederick Robson. His genius lay in what Henry Morley called his "rare power of combining tragic passion, and real hints of the terrible, with ludicrous burlesque".10 Reviewing this production, Morley regretted (pp. 60-61) that Robson was not playing Shakespeare's Shylock, and the critic of The Illustrated London News considered that "many of his bursts are truly tragic, and might have done credit to Edmund Kean in his best days". The Times critic wrote:

Mr. Robson makes the part eminently grotesque, but he adheres to the principle—which is exclusively his own—of grounding his eccentricities on a really tragic basis. The mingled rage and exultation which he throws into the scene with Tubal are really strong expressions of feeling; and it is impossible not to admire the singular talent of the man who can turn so much earnestness to such ludicrous account. Hitherto burlesque acting has been, in a great measure, conventional and without character, so that when a good comic actor has been put in an Easter piece, the audience have frequently been disappointed at finding how little he has done. The discovery that an individual expression of feeling may be found even in the region of burlesque belongs to Mr. Robson, and his impersonations belong to the historic phenomena of our day.

Three years later, in 1856, William Brough's Perdita or The Royal Milkmaid...a new and original burlesque, opened at the Lyceum Theatre. Charles Kean's famous production of The Winter's Tale, at the Princess's Theatre in

the same year, was fresh in Brough’s mind. *Perdita* is interesting as an oblique comment on Kean’s production; it is also attractive in its own right. Brough handles his original very freely, sometimes, for instance, parodying passages from other plays. A line from *Othello* is easily adapted to refer to the nagging Paulina: “Silence that dreadful bell[e]”. The discussion between Leontes and Camillo about the possible murder of Polixenes is based on *Macbeth*; Leontes concludes with:

Oh never shall sun that fine day see,
We made him welcome: he’s himself made free
I bid him come to court; but on my life,
I little thought he’d come to court my wife!

Sometimes Brough burlesques the situation but not the wording of the original. Antigonus on a rain-swept coast with a howling baby is a forlorn figure: “Who’d be a nurse”, he sighs, “especially such a wet one?” There is a pleasant skit on the love-at-first-sight convention in the meeting of Florizel and Perdita:

*Flor.* What’s that? My stars!
*Per.* Oh my!
*Flor.* Oh lor!
*Per.* Oh dear!
*Flor.* Smitten completely! Yes I’m done for surely.
*Per.* Oh something’s struck me here, I feel quite poorly.
*Flor.* Fair maid!
*Per.* Fair sir!
*Flor.* I—that is, how d’ye do?
*Per.* Considerably the worse for seeing you.

More than the writers previously mentioned, Brough exploits the possibilities of topical reference, and even introduces an appeal to national and royalist sentiment. This was the year in which the Crimean War had ended, and there had been a great review in Hyde Park at which the Queen had conferred the first sixty-two Victoria Crosses. This is glanced at in the lines in which Polixenes describes the sights he has seen during his visit to Leontes:

But of all the sights I’ve seen, the one most glorious
Was the return of your brave troops victorious
From well-fought battle fields. When, thro’ their ranks
Their sov’reign passed, bestowing well won thanks,
Scarce a dry eye was there in all the crowd.

Clearly, no comic effect was aimed at here; nor was it in the “Grand Ballet” performed before a “brilliantly illuminated scene”. Dancing was increasingly becoming an integral part of these entertainments: it is perhaps a reflection of the growing respectability of Victorian theater audiences that more concern is felt for delicacy and charm, with less straining after broad comedy. Marie Wilton, later Lady Bancroft, made her London début as Brough’s Perdita, and she writes in her memoirs: “I looked very nice, I think, with my hair hanging

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11 This production is studied in W. Moelwyn Merchant’s *Shakespeare and the Artist* (O.U.P., 1959), pp. 208-220. See also this writer’s “Burlesques of Charles Kean’s *Winter’s Tale*, *Theatre Notebook*, XVI (1962), 78-83.
loosely over my shoulders, a pretty wrath of blush roses at my waist, pale pink silk stockings, and the boots"—the boots, which too were of pink silk, had been acquired in the most affecting circumstances for three shillings and sixpence. One of Miss Wilton's songs became so popular that it was played on all the street-organs, and she was a great success.

The *Times*, in its review of *Perdita*, found that "many of the scenes are seriously in want of compression"; but we may agree with Harley Granville-Barker that it is "alive with genuinely comic ideas". Barker even suggested (p. 134) that "when, in the last scene he [Antigonus] re-enters followed by the bear respectably dressed", Brough perhaps had "a better sense of the fitness of things than Shakespeare". It is clear that this was a delightful entertainment, akin to a modern revue in the variety of its appeal, but related also to old fashioned musical comedy.

It is now necessary to pass rapidly over a period of about twenty-five years: a period of gradual decline, though it included Andrew Halliday's *Romeo and Juliet Travestie* of 1859, in which Juliet says:

Rather than marry Paris, I would drink
South Afric sherry—and I really think
I'd leave off crinoline—neglect my supper—
I'd even read a work by Mr. Tupper.

Upon which the Friar gives her a book by the author of *Proverbial Philosophy*, saying:

It is his latest work. When on page you look,
A cold, drowsy humour soon will creep
Over your sense—as more you read, a sleep
Will overtake you, and your pulse will cease.

There was *A Thin Slice of Ham Let!* in the early sixties, in which Hamlet complained:

A few weeks' courtship, even for a court,
Is what I call indelicately short;
And yet my mother, ere the boots were old
(Nay on my soul, before they were half soled)
In which dad's bitter bier she followed slow,
Pale, ailing, and all soppy from her woe . . .

and in which he asked the ghost:

Art thou a spirit of proof, or doctored some?
What must I call thee—whiskey, gin, or rum?
Of one of these a sample you must be,
For as you're dead you can't be *eau de vie*.

There were several rather perfunctory sketches for the Griffin and Christy Minstrels, and some longer pieces by A. C. Burnand, including a burlesque of *Richard III* in 1868 in which the Duchess of York asks Richmond "How are you, Richmond? well? or Richmond 'ill?" In the same piece Catesby and

12 Sir Squire and Lady Bancroft, *Mr. and Mrs. Bancroft*, quoted from the sixth edition (1889,) p. 21.
Tyrrell fall over a coal-scuttle on the stairs to provoke the comment: "Oh! they're more shinned against than shinning." Other plays travestied in these years included Antony and Cleopatra and, inevitably and frequently, Hamlet. It is another version of this that I take as my last main illustration.

If Talfourd's pieces were the most successful as vehicles for a great actor, and Brough's Perdita as a gracefully varied entertainment, the best from a literary point of view is the only one by an author whose name is still a household word: W. S. Gilbert's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Like the earliest burlesques, this was originally written to be read, though it was very well received when it was acted in 1891; like the authors of the later pieces, Gilbert treats his original very freely. There are no songs: unfortunately, considering Gilbert's talents as a lyric-writer.

The guilty secret in this King Claudius' life is that, when young, he wrote a five-act tragedy which was damned. This is discussed between him and the Queen in the first scene:

Queen. And did the play succeed?
King. In one sense, yes.
Queen. Oh, I was sure of it!
King. A farce was given to play the people in—
My tragedy succeeded that. That's all!
Queen. And how long did it run?
King. About ten minutes.
Ere the first act had traced one half its course
The curtain fell, never to rise again.
Queen. And did the people hiss?
King. No—worse than that—
They laughed. Sick with the shame that covered me,
I knelt down, palsied, in my private box,
And prayed the hearsed and catacombed dead
Might quit their vaults, and claim me for their own!
But it was not to be. . . .

So Claudius decreed that anyone sneering at his play was to be executed:

The play was not good—but the punishment
Of those that laughed at it was capital.

Rosencrantz is in love with Ophelia, who has been betrothed against her will to Hamlet. She describes Hamlet in a passage in which Gilbert glances at the oddities of actors and the disagreements of scholars:

Oph. Sometimes he's tall—sometimes he's very short—
Now with black hair—now with a flaxen wig—
Sometimes an English accent—then a French—
Then English with a strong provincial "burr"—
Once an American and once a Jew—
But Danish never, take him how you will!
And strange to say, whate'er his tongue may be,
Whether he's dark or flaxen—English—French—
Though we're in Denmark, A.D., ten—six—two—
He always dresses as King James the First!

Guil. Oh, he is surely mad!
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern want to get Hamlet out of the way, so they decide to try to trick him into putting on the King’s play, and await the consequences. Ophelia mentions that her father “In his capacity as our Lord Chamberlain” (“All bow reverentially at mention of this functionary”) has the only surviving copy, and agrees to take it from his study. After an excellent scene satirizing Hamlet’s soliloquacious tendencies, Ophelia comes with the precious manuscript. As she stole it at midnight from her father’s room, “The mouldy spectres of five thousand plays, All dead and gone—and many of them damned”, appeared to her, “Chattering forth the scenes and parts of scenes which my poor father wisely had cut out.” Hamlet is persuade to put on the play because it offers such a long part for himself, but he soon comes to see how ridiculous it is, and so decides to burlesque it. Nothing, of course, could suit Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s purposes better. The performance of Claudius’ tragedy begins; he soon recognizes it, and is going to kill Hamlet, who however says: “I can’t bear death—I’m a philosopher.” Ophelia suggests that instead he should be exiled:

There is a certain isle beyond the sea
Where dwell a cultured race—compared with whom
We are but poor brain-blind barbarians;
’Tis known as Engle-land. Oh, send him there!
If but the half I’ve heard of them be true,
They will inshrine him in their great good hearts,
And men will rise or shrink in good esteem
According as they worship him or slight him!

Claudius decides that Engle-land is welcome to Hamlet, and in a final tableau Hamlet strikes an attitude, exclaiming “To Engle-land!” while Rosencrantz embraces Ophelia.

This admirable little piece was already some years old when it was first professionally performed in 1891. It is a climax: and it is an end, significantly co-incident with the beginnings of musical comedy. Soon there was no place in the London theater for these entertainments. Burlesquing Shakespeare became the province of amateurs, such as the military men for whom The Merry Merchant of Venice was done at Allahabad in 1895, or the Smith family, who produced The New Hamlet, intermixed and interwoven with a revised version of Romeo and Juliet somewhere near Chicago in 1902. The original cast of this remarkable production “included four generations, the youngest member being only one year old, while the two leading ladies were eighty two and eighty
years of age.” The performance took place “Under the haw tree, at their farm, at the thicket”; and the text was published between wooden covers with the information that it was “done into a book, and bound in boards (No. 2 fencing) by hand, at the barn, on the farm, by farmers.” The back cover is inscribed in a sort of poker-work with the motto: “For wisdom apply to your mothers; and for farm products apply to farmers.” The most recent burlesque that I have read is one by D. Bryce Pitt with which the Nottingham International Friendship League won the Midland Drama Festival of 1951; it is called Spot the Lady, and is based on Macbeth. There is one couplet that recalls the good old style: “I’ll do it”, says Macbeth, “though it taxes my endurance.” “Oh damn the taxes,” his wife replies, “think of the insurance.” But the real thing, the charming, inconsequential, unpretentious family entertainments guying Shakespeare and anything else that came to hand, vanished with the Victorian theater. “Exercises in flippancy”, they have been called; and V. C. Clinton Baddeley has written of the genre to which they belong that it was “burlesque without an object, burlesque weakened into farce, a whimsical entertainment conducted in rhymed couplets or blank verse, garnished with puns. . . . It had no critical purpose. The only burlesque element was the wide contrast between style and subject.”13 Though the Shakespearian burlesques written for the theater do have an ostensible “object”, they often leave it far behind, and Mr. Clinton Baddeley’s criticism might reasonably be applied to them; but it would be a little harsh. They were meant to be read only by the actors who originally performed them; and if we look at them at all, it should be as theatrical scripts; then, with a little imagination, we may hear the far off laughter of their first audiences, and perhaps raise a smile in sympathy.

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