

## The British College of Nurses, Ltd.

### Satire in Comedy.

A Lecture delivered by Francis Edwards

I AM GOING TO TALK TO YOU this afternoon about satire in comedy.

Satire is irony which seeks to deflate the subject on which it is focussed. Its method varies to a great extent, but its most popular form in any art is the form known to us as caricature. I propose to deal with two examples of stage caricature this afternoon, and I shall try to tell you something of the effect of the laughter which they produce in the audience.

The first example is an ancient one from a comedy written by Aristophanes, that great dramatist of ancient Greece of whom I have spoken in a previous lecture. The comedy is *The Clouds*, and the subject of the caricature is the philosopher Socrates.

Now we all know that Socrates was a very great man, and we might well wonder how it came about that Aristophanes who, in his own sphere, was equally great should have wished to make people laugh at him. Let us see if the play itself offers any clue to the reason.

The comedy of *The Clouds* begins with the not uncommon spectacle of an aged father complaining against the thoughtlessness of a spendthrift son. Too much attention given by the son to racehorses and chariots has landed the father seriously in debt, and as there is no money in hand the old man has to think of some other means to save himself from ruin. He has heard reports of a "talking shop" in which men are taught to argue so cunningly that they are able to prove a wrong case to be a right one, and he tries to persuade his son to attend as a student and so learn to argue his way out of debt. The son refuses to go and the father decides to become a student at the "talking shop" himself.

Well here we already have an example of satire in the conception of a "talking shop" and the kind of argument which can turn right into wrong. The whole idea is so extreme that we are immediately inclined to laugh at it. But at the same time one feels that there is an element of truth behind it all. In society brilliant argument is widely admired, particularly if it is "professional," and we are apt to become dazzled by brilliancy of argument without reference to the truth of the premises upon which it is based. By taking these tendencies to extremes Aristophanes produces laughter that acts as a wholesome corrective. But to continue with the play.

The father, whose name is Strepsiades, presents himself at the door of the "talking shop" where he is met by one of the disciples of Socrates. They enter into conversation and the disciple begins to boast of the wonders of his master's mind which he believes to be capable of solving all problems. He tells Strepsiades of a cunning experiment by which it was discovered how many times the length of its own feet a flea jumped, and he relates how Socrates solved a remarkable problem concerning the buzz of a gnat:—

*Disciple* : Chaerophon the Sphettian asked him whether he thought gnats buzzed through the mouth or the breech.

*Strepsiades* : What, then, did he say about the gnat?

*Disciple* : He said the intestine of the gnat was narrow, and that the wind went forcibly through it, being slender, straight to the breech; and then that the rump being hollow where it is adjacent to the narrow part, resounded through the violence of the wind.

There are two things in this passage of dialogue that I particularly want you to observe. The first is that Aristophanes makes his characters talk in a ponderous way about the most insignificant insect he can think of. The second is that the humour is what we should nowadays describe as broad.

Now both these points are of the utmost importance so we will examine each one to find if possible what functions they perform in the general scheme of the satire.

In the first place we have to deal with a humorous irony, for there is no doubt that to the majority of people the idea of a great mind talking in a large way about something very common and insignificant is funny. It is a common enough irony frequently used by satirists in all the arts. Swift used it when he wrote about a scientist who spent years experimenting with cucumbers trying to extract the rays of the sun from them. But again, what is the function of such irony in society? What happens when an audience laughs at it? Well, once more the purpose is to make an audience laugh at an extreme form of a fairly common human folly. For do scientists always pause to consider the significance of their experiments? Do they always choose to turn their minds to matters of true importance? Or are they sometimes the slaves of blind curiosity? We should not, of course, all of us answer these questions in the same way, but there is no doubt concerning the way Aristophanes thought about it. He really did think that scientists (for in his day scientists and philosophers were one and the same) were prone to blindness in this way and he sought to correct, or as we say, deflate the folly by presenting an extreme case.

The second point is really complementary to the first, but before we can understand how this is so we must first understand something of the nature and the effect of broad humour.

I think we will all agree that broad or coarse humour, whatever our personal tastes in the matter, is usually regarded as somewhat anti-social. But it is not necessarily unwholesome therefore. What is unwholesome is pornography, and it will be as well perhaps if I lay some stress upon the difference between pornography and broad humour. Pornography is based upon fear of bodily functions and is, in consequence, degrading. Broad humour is irreverence and in no way associated with fear.

Now irreverence is frequently an important element in satire, and although it is possible to be irreverent without being coarse, satirists frequently make use of broad humour just as Aristophanes does in the passage I have read to you. I think you will perceive without very much difficulty the extra pungency that it gives to the satire.

But why be irreverent about a great man? Well, I think the reasons are briefly these: That great men are sometimes fallible and if they are taken too seriously and if they take themselves too seriously, as they not infrequently do, both they and we are open to the danger of forgetting their fallibility. If you understand this you will see why Aristophanes satirised Socrates.

And now I am going to turn to a play that satirises not a great person, but a hypocrite. The play I have chosen is *Bartholomew Fair* written by that eminent friend of Shakespeare's, Ben Jonson.

Jonson was a great hater of the Puritans of his day, or perhaps I should say certain sects of Puritans. I should not advise you to confuse the Puritan of Jonson's day with the present day Puritan. There were certain important points of difference which I have not the space here to dwell upon. All Jonson's Puritans were hypocrites however and the value of his satire, as well as the fun of it, lies in the deflation of hypocrisy. The set of circumstances in the play that I want you to consider are these:—

A man names Littlewit wishes to take his wife, Win, to Bartholomew Fair to enjoy the fun and to taste all the good things to be had there, particularly roast pork which was one of the great features of the fair. They are afraid to do so however because of the Puritan views of Win's mother, Dame Purecraft, with whom the couple live. Dame Purecraft is a rich widow and a member of an extreme Puritan sect led by a man named Zeal of the Land Busy. Note the names of these people for they are little satires in themselves.

On this particular morning of St. Bartholomew's Day, Zeal of the Land is in the Littlewits' house, a not uncommon occurrence for he is in reality a sponger who wishes to

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