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## MISCELLANEOUS.

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### A LECTURE

On the English Language—Its History—Its Excellence and Defects—Its Curiousities and Colloquialisms—And its Future Destiny. Delivered at the Theatre in Newbern, North Carolina, May, 1854.

BY REV. WILLIAM HOOPER.

THAT saying of Hobbes, one of the greatest metaphysicians of England: "That words are the counters of wise men, but the money of fools," has been often quoted, and is much celebrated for its wisdom. It is indeed true, and deserving of fame, in a certain sense. For we do find that the weaker in mind people are, the more easily they are deceived by handsome language, and thus often admire and praise speeches and arguments which have very little force in them, while wiser and more judicious heads see thro' this gaudy but flimsy disguise, and pronounce those lauded effusions to be merely "sound and fury signifying nothing."—And it must be admitted that many compositions which delighted us in our youth, sink in our estimation as we grow older, for this very reason: that as judgment and good sense assume the ascendancy over ignorance and false taste, we care more for sound thought and severe truth than for an ornamental dress. But notwithstanding this, he would be a shallow philosopher who should deny the importance of language because it is often made the instrument of passing off nonsense for sense, and captivating thousands by melodious sounds and rhetorical decorations. That is the very reason why the wise should pay attention to language: to prevent folly and sophistry from having the monopoly of so powerful an auxiliary. For it is undeniable that it is the nature of man to be much affected by the arts of speech—to "be moved with the concord of sweet sounds"—to be much alive to the beauties of composition, to the embellishments of fancy, to striking picturesque illustrations of moral truth, drawn from natural objects around us. And it is the part of wisdom therefore, to watch, to seize upon, and use efficiently, whatever is found to operate powerfully on the human mind. For the power of language may be employed just as successfully to make truth attractive and victorious as to palm off error and conceal folly. So in architecture a man might be foolish enough to adorn the facade of a wooden building with a costly display of statues and alto-reliefs, cut out of the perishable wood. This would not prevent such costly and elaborate figures from being very appropriate ornaments of an edifice of solid stone. And there is no stronger evidence of the importance of cultivating style than the fact, that a large number of English writers of the 17th century are now scarcely known, and are read by very few, because their style is homely, and their sentences ill-constructed; tho' they contain mines of precious thought and valuable sentiment. To single out but one instance from a thousand: Sir Harry Vane, who made such a figure in the times of Cromwell; not one of us, perhaps, ever saw or read a line he wrote. Many of us never heard that he wrote at all; and yet it is said by the best judges that his writings display an astonishing degree of acuteness and mental power; and that great man, Sir James McIntosh, places him almost on a level with Lord Bacon. Yet, all this rich magazine of thought is buried under an unthoughtful phraseology—known only to antiquaries. All of you who have read Washington Irving's amusing account of the art of book-making as he saw it in the British museum, well know that much of what is now current and fashionable literature, is nothing but the solid masses of these old sages, ground down, and sharpened, and polished to suit the modern taste. So much by way of introduction to the subject of language generally; and by way of apology for inviting you to study the genius and characteristics and powers of your own vernacular tongue, that you may learn to use it with more intelligence and precision, and to wield it with skill and success in the cause of truth and virtue.

### HISTORY.

The English language, you know, is built upon the foundation of the Anglo-Saxon, upon which, after the Norman conquest, was reared the large superstructure of the Norman French. These two compose the main body of our words. Britain was originally peopled by colonies from Gaul, who spoke the Celtic language. But when the Saxons invaded England, about the middle of the fifth century, the original Celts (or Keltas as it has become fashionable to spell and pronounce it)—they were either destroyed or driven by the invaders into the mountains of Wales; and we find the ancient British language still a living tongue in the mouths of the Welsh, the Highlanders of Scotland, and the native Catholic Irish. I have compared the translations of the Bible in those several languages, and been struck with the similitude and almost identity of two of them. But besides the two great parent stocks of our language, the Saxon and Norman French, as soon as the revival of letters and commerce brought on a frequent intercourse of Britain with the other nations of Europe, rapid additions were made to her vocabulary from the learned tongues of Greece and Rome, as well as from the modern languages. And by these various contributions from the literary wealth of all the world, our English Dictionary

now sums up the amount of 38,000 words, enough in all conscience to satisfy the demands of sober folk; though sometimes an *exquisite* or a *belle* will complain grievously of the insufficiency of our vocabulary, exclaiming: "I want words to express my admiration, my delight, my indignation, my scorn and contempt, my horror," &c.

It is easy for a scholar to trace our present words to their parent source.—Almost all our short words and monosyllables are Saxon. So are those with harsh combinations of consonants. This is what we would expect. Barbaric nations won't take the trouble to form or use long words for the common occasions of life. The various languages of which ours is composed, have given our language, in some measure, the excellencies of them all. We combine the strength of the Northern Dialects with the soft voluptuous sounds of the South of Europe. It is true our language retains much of the harshness of its Teutonic origin, but not near so much as it would possess, had it been more coy and jealous of those foreign admixtures. Let me detain you then, a moment, on the sound of our language.

### SOUND OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

The euphony or agreeable sound of a language depends on the judicious intermixture of vowels and consonants. If the consonants predominate, it makes a language harsh and difficult of utterance; if the vowels superabound, it degenerates into languid effeminacy and unconnected laxity. If you compare the tongues of Northern with those of Southern Europe, and still more with those of the South-Sea Islands, you will be struck with these characteristic peculiarities. The very looks of a Russian or Polish word is enough to make even us rudemouthed Saxons shrug our shoulders, and the utterance of it would cause, I should think, the musical Italian to stop his ears, lest it should reach the tympanum. Even the best German tongue, rich as it is in literature and philosophy, is as formidable to our ears as its strange looking type is to our eyes. But we must confess that we have little to brag of in melody, over our German ancestors. We have got rid to be sure of the guttural sounds which render the pronunciation of that tongue so grating and cacophonous to our organs; but there are still harsh syllables enough to remind us of our Gothic origin. Take, for instance, a verse in one of the Psalms, in our common version: "In the day when I cried thou answeredst me, and strengthenedst me with strength in my soul."—It would be difficult to find a word more torturing to mouth or ear than that 2d persons singular of the past tense of *ur verb strengthened*. We have all heard of words that are called *jaw-breakers* and if any jaw ever suffered fracture, or teeth were ever loosened in enunciating harsh sounds, surely it must have been in the passage of such words through the organs of speech. Indeed that same 2d person of our verbs in general, is so unmusical, and so intractable to the Poets that they are obliged to mutilate it of its last letters. For example, even Pope, that great master of melodious versification (if there ever was one)—see what a scrape he got into when he attempted to bring under the laws of his art, one of those monsters of our language, the 2d person singular of the verb, *touch*.

—Oh thou my voice inspire  
Now to get out, unharmed by teeth or lips, the word *touch*, in one syllable, was no small achievement; but to send it forth with all its skirts sticking to it *touchest* was beyond the reach of art, and therefore the unfortunate word lost its tail in its passage. He might, to be sure, have let the word retain its extremities, had he been at liberty to say *touchest*, in two syllables, but the misery was, his verse required a monosyllable, and gentlemen and ladies, if any of you will utter those four consonants *chdest* together, without the interposition of a vowel, your jaws are sore from ever being cracked by any word that has come down from the tower of Babel, or from being hurt even by the forceps of the dentist. And yet this is a difficulty which lies perpetually in the way of our poets; for as long as the pronoun *thou* is used in addresses to the Deity, and apostrophes and elevated strains of composition, the corresponding 2d pers. of the verb will be required. Poor Pollok! in his "Course of Time," did not pretend to struggle with the difficulty, but has every where cut off the *st* from the 2d pers. of his verbs, and sacrificed his grammar to his melody. But this harshness of our language fits it admirably for the purposes of awful rebuke, fierce vituperation, indignant menace, and terrible denunciation; as well as for expressive imitation of all the loud, blustering, roaring, crashing, whistling, shattering, rustling, hissing sounds of natural objects. Certainly if old Homer had had our language at command, he would have put all Juno's scoldings of Jupiter in good Anglo-Saxon; and we, of the present age, know with what beautiful success Mrs. Cautle has employed it in her "Curtain Lectures." "A word to the wise," &c. Pope, so dexterous an artist in adapting words to express the sounds of things, has applied the resources of his mother tongue in both ways: to convey ideas of smoothness and softness as well as of roughness and storminess. It is easy to see that he has succeeded better in the harsh than in the soft. Judge for yourselves:

"Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,  
And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;  
But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,  
The hoarse, rough verse, should like the torrent roar;  
When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,  
The line, too, labors, and the rocks move slow."

The reader will perceive how easily the poet can muster together hosts of loud sounding vowels, and a bristling phalanx of harsh consonants, to stun your ears and to retard and impede the utterance, when he wishes to imitate rough-sounding objects or to express laborious effort. But perhaps my youthful hearers will think our language sufficiently soft and melodious in the plastic hands of the same marvellous artist when, at the soft age of 16, he wrote his pastorals and thus describes the soft charms of Delia:

"Go, gentle gales and bear my sighs away,  
To Delia's ear the tender notes convey;  
As some soft north wind his low diphones,  
And with deep murmurs fills the sounding shores;  
Thus far from Delia to the winds I mourn,  
Alike unheard, unnoted, and forlorn!  
Go gentle gales and bear my sighs away—  
\* \* \* \* \*  
Let spring attend and sudden flowers arise!  
Let opening roses knotted snakes adorn,  
And liquid amber drop from every thorn."

But doubtless the worst feature in our language, as regards its sound, and what detracts most from its euphony in the ears of foreigners, is the perpetual recurrence of the sibilant sound of *s* not only when that letter occurs but when the same sound is given in soft *c* and in *sh, ch, &c.*—so that the English has got the name with the continentals of the *hissing language*. I hope this does not imply that we are the descendants of the dragon, whose teeth were sown by Cadmus, in old times, and produced a crop of men? To let your ears judge of this hissing character of our spoken tongue, I have only to repeat over some of the verses I have quoted, and notice how often the sibilant surmuration recurs.

Again: among the defects of our language, so far as regards its sound, may be mentioned the want of euphonic links, or artifices to soften the junction of words. Now the French excel us far in this; for they prevent hiatus constantly, by sounding their mute consonants at the end of words when the next word begins with a vowel sound, and sometimes by even inserting a consonant as *y at il &c.*—and again by softening the sound of their *s* into *z* between vowels; as *champs Elyses, &c.* Contrivances like these may be compared to the oil in wheels to prevent friction. Our language however, is not altogether destitute of contrivances for sweetening sound, by little soft letters interjected between the main syllables. There is a delicate beauty of this kind of which our poets avail themselves—a beauty felt by our ears, but perhaps few of us have attended to the art and taste which have directed the poet to the use of one word rather than another. Thus Gray, a poet remarkably studious of euphony:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
So Milton a still mightier master of music:  
"O'er many a frozen many a fiery Alp."

In each of these lines, the last syllable of *many* is over and above the complement of the measure; but that letter *y* slides so gracefully into the next word, and so easily coalesces with it, that the ear is rather pleased than offended with the supererogatory syllable. I will quote another example of this melodious nicety from Pope's description of a lady's toilet:

From each she nicely curls with curious toil,  
And decks the goddess with the glittering spoil.

Notice those beautiful words *curious, glittering*, and observe how the voice slides over the middle syllable. Take that away, and the line is as legitimate as ever, but the ear has been cheated of some portion of melody.

### STYLES.

But I must pass over the sound of our language—from its euphony and its cacophony, to its other excellencies and defects. The power of adaptation to all subjects, high and low, grave and gay, tragic and comic, is a distinguishing excellence of the English tongue. In what department of composition has not our language its great masters, who have wielded this weapon with such might and dexterity that it seems as if no other could have suited them better?—What language could have suited Milton so well, to describe the sublime horrors of hell and the sublime glories of heaven and the soft charms of Eden, as the one he learned on his mother's lap? And when we read one of Shakespeare's deep tragedies, it seems as if no other language could have answered better to express the strong emotions of love, hatred, revenge, remorse, jealousy, courage, pity, despair! And on the other hand, when we read one of his comedies, where Sir John Falstaff, the fat knight, provides such a fund of entertainment for the English nation, as it is said, all other writers have not equaled—why, it seems as if Sir John would not have been *himself*, in any other speech than his own racy Anglo-Saxon. It is true Shakespeare's humor is often low and vulgar, and consists too often in a quibble upon words. This, however, was not the fault of his mother tongue, but of the bad taste of his age, and some one has said, that his fondness for quibble or pun, was the cleopatra for which he lost the dominion of the world. I will presently mention some of these puns, among the *curiosities* of our language.

The variety of styles of which the English tongue is susceptible in the same department of literature, is remarkable. Take, for instance, the department of history. What a vast difference between the attic simplicity of Hume, and the Asiatic pomp and luxuriance of Gibbon!—Robertson tried the middle ground—more ornamental than Hume, less turgid and grandiloquent than Gibbon. Each of these several styles has its admirers. I for one, think, that the

increase of ornament in historical style is in bad taste, and foreign to the severe genius of the historic muse. The object in history is to give us naked truth and to fix attention upon the facts and the matter not upon the writer. If you introduce much coloring you disguise and misrepresent the matters of fact, and draw off the reader's mind from them to the beauties of the composition, and this is too often the manifest object of the historian: to exhibit himself. Besides, the employment of poetry and rhetoric immediately begets a suspicion of fiction—that the historian is not elevated to that high seat and clear atmosphere of judicial dignity, which would qualify him to decide fairly on the merits of historic facts. That is just the suspicion you feel, upon taking up Walter Scott's life of Napoleon. When the then unknown author of the "Waverley novels," first announced that he had undertaken the biography of the greatest warrior of the world, the public were on the tip-toe of expectation: the foremost in arms portrayed by the foremost in letters! They could scarcely wait for its completion, and as soon as it appeared, seized upon and devoured it with the greatest avidity. But the sober reader immediately discerns the hand of the poet. The profusion of similes and metaphors awaken a feeling that you are on fairy and enchanted ground, and you withhold your confidence—to say nothing of the caution you think necessary against the national prejudices of a Briton. These remarks apply with still more force to a history (shall I call it) or a historical declamation, in praise of Napoleon by the Reverend J. C. Abbott, now beguiling the American public in the pages of a fashionable periodical. This military person, with cocked hat on his head and epaulettes on his shoulders and spurs on his heels, who thinks it his mission to whitewash the character of a man who destroyed about five millions of his fellow-creatures, may figure for a year or two, with readers whose historical knowledge goes no deeper than the pages of a magazine; but after having flourished his short day upon the stage, and done his best (under the banner of the Prince of Peace) to make "young America" admire and burn to imitate the bloody race of conquerors, we can safely predict a speedy descent of his undervalued production, "to the family vault of all the epaulets." I make these remarks on Abbott's work merely in passing, to caution my young hearers against forming their historical opinions merely from the hired writers for periodicals, who know that their contributions will be more noticed the more they may startle by their audacity and paradox.

Rising to a higher grade of historical productions, the histories of Bancroft, Prescott and Irving, who have done so much honor to their country, we may still be allowed to doubt whether they have not pushed ornament too far.—You see the landscape (in their pages) not through plain, clear glass, but through a painted window—the objects are not seen merely in the common transparent light of the atmosphere, but gilded by the beams of the sun.—The best illustration of a good style that was ever given was that of Robert Hall, applied to Miss Edgeworth. He said that a good style ought to resemble a transparent medium, through which you see the writer's thoughts clearly, without thinking of the medium itself; and such he said was Miss Edgeworth's style. If this be a just remark on style in general, it holds with especial accuracy in regard to the style of history. But the subject is so expansive, and the time so short that I must contract my excursions and hurry on to other proposed topics. Let me just remark here, however, that having praised Hume's style, I must not be considered as praising his history, for the main qualities of a good historian: fairness and fidelity. In that respect the decision of the world has accorded, I believe, with the sentence of Archbishop Magee of Dublin, that, besides his too apparent prejudices against religion, his celebrated history is a labored apology for tyranny and arbitrary power.

### PERSONIFICATION.

It is always a beauty and excellency in any language when it can elevate itself at pleasure above its ordinary level—just as it is a great evidence of man's superiority to the animal tribes, that he has been able to add to his natural faculty of walking, the power of mounting on horseback; thus giving to his motives a force and celerity far beyond the capacities of his own body. Now, poetry may be said to be *prose on horseback*. Hence the ancients gave the Muses the winged horse Pegasus, on which to mount their votaries. Well, our language possesses several characteristics fitting it for the purposes of poetry. One is, a store of poetical words, which are considered the *peculium*—the professional property, of the tuneful nine, and whose adoption by prose writers would be as bare-faced a use of stolen goods, as if you were to see a young gentleman with tortoise shell combs, and wreaths of flowers in his hair.—Such words are *mount, fount, for mountain, fountain; stole for robe, lore for learning, fast for close by, theatrical for theatrical, rill for rivulet, pale for make pale; such contractions as 'scape for escape, 'gin and 'gan for begin and beyond; o'er, e'er, e'en, oft, and various such like; and especially the revival of antique words; as *nothless for nevertheless, whilome for formerly, aye for always, mote for might, help for help, &c.* This resuscitation of old words, covered with the rust and mould of antiquity, is a very politic artifice of the poets; because it falls in with our passion for the antique, which is seen in our fondness for Gothic edifices, castellated palaces,*

old ruins, and in our alarming imitations of mother Eve's toilet. This resort to old forms was common in the choruses of the Greek tragedies. It was there the Poet wished to display his full poetical talent, and there he introduced the old Doric dialect, with fine effect.—Milton, with similar art, uses the antique forms *Rhene, and the Danave, for Rhine and Danube*. So we can immediately give a solemn elevation to our style, by dropping our familiar you and your, and talking up *thou, thee and thine*. This is what gives a venerable grandeur to our common Bible, which we should be sorry to see lost in a modern version; and this air of antiquity and solemnity is an argument for rendering the Bible so as to make a distinct syllable of the *ed* in the termination of our verbs. If we say: "His mercy endureth for ever," because it is so solemn and antique, why not: "His mercy endureth for ever," for the very same reason? Walker tells us that in England the reading of the Bible is thus distinguished from the reading of every other book and it is a seemingly distinction, that the spoken antique may accord with the written antique. Under this head of a power to elevate the style at will, must be mentioned a peculiarity of our English tongue in which it has the advantage of almost all others. Dr. Blair remarks that the English is perhaps the only language in the known world (except the Chinese which is said to resemble it in this particular) where the distinction of gender is confined, as it ought to be, to mark the real distinction of male and female." Since Dr. Blair wrote, Sir Wm. Jones, that great oriental scholar, has told us that the *Persic* language resembles the English in this; that in it, all inanimate things are neuter." Now, see the advantage of this in raising the tone of composition immediately. Who can read, without a chill of horror, those awful words of the Bible where God confronts Cain with the crime of murdering his brother: "The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.—And now art thou cursed from the Earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand." How would the style here sink immediately, if we substitute *it* for *her*? Yet this personification is not preserved in the Hebrew original, nor in the other modern versions of it, because in these, the Earth is always feminine, and therefore you cannot endow it, when you please, with new dignity and vivacity by calling it *she*. So when you say in English: "Virtue charms us by her loveliness," we feel the beauty of the personification, and we picture to our minds a lovely woman, winning all hearts by her charms; but in French, Italian, German, and the rest, the goddess drops her divinity, and is transformed into a thing; and "virtue charms us by its loveliness,"—just as a tree might!

I will give you another specimen from a poet who is, or ought to be, a favorite with you all: the author of the "Pleasures of Hope"—a quotation the more appropriate now as brought to mind by the present portentous state of the world. And while I recite it, let me just remark the juvenile part of my audience, that *Sarmatia* is the ancient name of modern Poland:

"Oh bloodless picture in the book of time,  
Sarmatia fell, unwept, without a crime;  
Found not a generous friend, a pitying foe,  
Strength in her arms, nor mercy in her wo;  
Dropt down her nerveless grasp the shatter'd spear,  
Closed her bright eye and curbed her high career."

What reader of taste would not feel a sensible fall in the thermometer of style if we here substitute *it* for *her*?

### CURIOSITIES OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

I must now briefly touch upon some of the curiosities of our language. And the first that I will mention is our *surnames*. The word *surname* is spelled two ways. Formerly it was often written *surname* on the supposition that it denoted the name we derive from our sire.—But now it is always spelled *surname*—a more correct etymology informing us that the word is from the French preposition *sur* over; because men had at first but one name, and afterwards the name of their estates was written over the Christian name. For example of *La Fayette* was written over *Gilbert Motier*, the first name, and was therefore the *surname* of that family. Thus we can trace back one of the oldest family names of this town, to the days of Julius Caesar. In Caesar's Commentaries there is mention of a tribe of Gauls named *Encaevices*, settled in what is now Normandy, the northern part of France. This name was corrupted into the modern *Everez*, a town of which name now stands a little south of the Seine and serves to certify and locate its ancient inhabitants. From this place doubtless came over with William the Conqueror the ancestor of Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, once the greatest favorite of Queen Elizabeth, who wrote his name *Robert d'Everez*, that is: *Robert of Everez*. In a similar manner we may gratify our curiosity by tracing back the modern *Orleans*, to the Roman emperor *Aurelian*, *Essex* and *Sussex* to *Est-Sexia, Sud-Sexia*; that is, *East-Saxons, South-Saxons*.

A great many of our names are *patronymics*, formed by adding the word *son*, to the father's name, or prefixing in Scotch names the word *mac*, or in Irish names the letter *O'* which are equivalent to *son*. Thus a man whose father was named *Neill*, would in Scotland be called *McNeill*, in Ireland *O'Neal*, and in England, *Neilson* or *Nelson*. It is sufficient just to mention the names of *Johnson, Williamson, Davidson, Thomson*, and a hundred others, to see how plainly they indicate some *John, William, &c.*, as the patriarch of the family. The name

*Thompson* has acquired the *p* evidently by the necessary formation of that sound in opening the lips after closing them in forming the *m*. Thus *James-town weed* is corrupted into *Jim-son-weed*.

Many of these patronymics are shortened: thus *Davidson* is abridged into *Davis*, *Dickson* into *Dix*, *Walterson* into *Watson* and *Watts*, *Johnson* into *Johns* or *Jones*. But enough and more than enough of this.

Among the curiosities of our language may be mentioned that numerous tribe of words ending in *-ery* as *millinery, jewelry, saddlery, confectionery, &c.*, without end. All these words owe their origin to the Greek and Latin terminations—*erion* and *arium* meaning at first the place where things are kept; but afterwards transferred to the articles kept or sold there. Thus *herbary, apinary, aviary*, the places where herbs, bees, birds are kept—one of the most beautiful of these words is *coenotery* [*coenotery* meaning a sleeping place. How scriptural the idea! how profitable the train of thought suggested by the term! Have you friends in your cemetery? They are only in their bed-chamber—they are going to arise in the morning.

That large and increasing class of words ending in *-age* are something of a curiosity. They are all formed after the analogy of the French passive participle; thus *oblige* is the person to whom another is bound. Add an *e* to accommodate it to English ears, and you have *oblige*; and by analogy *promise, legate, assigner*, and others innumerable.

The derivation of some of our words is deep historic interest. The word *rival*, contains in it volumes of painful history. The Latin term *rivales*, from which our term *rivals* comes down, merely meant *River men, dwellers on different sides of a river*. Rivers have been, from time immemorial the boundaries of nations; and how naturally and even necessarily *River men* were rivals, I need not tell you. The banks of the Tweed, of the Rhine, of the Rubicon, have been fattened and their streams crimsoned with the blood of *rivals*. Oh may Heaven long postpone the day when the same story shall be told of the fraternal rivals on the shores of the Ohio and the Potomac. \* \* \* \* \* Many of our words are curious fragments of longer words. For example; *mob* is a word of only three letters, but what force is in that little monosyllable! It presents to the imagination a tremendous engine to destroy men's lives or property. All this is, of right, condensed into those three letters, when you learn that the word comes from *mobile vulgus*—the fickle crowd—the easily-agitated multitude. When you learn this, the little word *mob* puts you in mind of a little heap of fulminating powder, which needs only to be inflamed, to burst a house into atoms.

So the word *Zounds!* or *By Zounds!* is a kind of soft oath or emphatic affirmation, which many people feel no scruple in using. Perhaps they would not take it so freely in their mouths if they knew it was shortened from *God's Wounds*, meaning the wounds of Christ on the Cross. This was a favorite oath of Queen Elizabeth and made many of her boldest courtiers tremble.

Another curiosity: We say "one thing is not a whit better than another." A *whit* is contracted from a *white*, that is, the white speck or eye in a colored bean; so that it came to be used proverbially for the smallest particle. Our Translators have introduced this expression into the Bible. "Are you angry at me because I have made a man *every whit* whole on the Sabbath day?" The original merely has it "*allogether-whole*." It is remarkable that this expression has come down to us from the Latins. The word *annihilate* is derived from Latin words expressive of this same idea. *Hilum* is the eye of a bean; *admi-hilum*, to a size not as large as a speck—to a mere nothing—hence *annihilate*.

### FAIUSOMASEA OR PUN.

This is a species of wit generally considered undignified and low; yet such a play upon words has been resorted to even by our greatest authors and therefore may be worthy of mention among the curiosities of language. We quote examples from the prince of epic and the prince of dramatic poetry. In the "Paradise Lost" when the bad angels had surprised and discomfited the good angels, for the moment, by the discharge of their cannon, they amuse themselves by an abundance of puns on the effects of their artillery.

Belial thus addresses Satan:  
Leader! the terms we sent were terms of weight  
Of hard contents and full of force urged home,  
Such as we might perceive amused them all,  
And stumbled many; who receive them right,  
Had need from head to foot well understand;  
Not understood, this gift they have besides:  
They show us when our friends walk not upright.

I promised some specimens from Shakespeare, and I told you that this trifling play upon words was said to be the Cleopatra for which he had lost the world. With whatever justice this may be said in his tragedies, we may fairly claim that his puns often give zest to his comic parts. I will just notice two instances. All readers of the immortal Dramatist will remember the ridiculous night-adventure of Falstaff, from which he came in, all puffing and blowing, cursing all cowards, and declaring that he and his companion had taken great spoil, but that three rogues, dressed in Kendal green had stolen up behind, surprised and robbed them; for the night was so dark he could not see his hand. "Why, Jack," exclaimed prince

Hal, "how could you tell that the men were dressed in Kendal green if the night was so dark? Come, give your reasons, Sir, your reasons!" Falstaff was confounded; but with ready wit responds: "What! give reasons upon compulsion! If *raisins* [reasons] were as plenty as *blackberries*, I would give no man a reason upon compulsion. Now, in Shakespeare's time, *raisins* were pronounced *reasons*. Of course, to contrast them with *blackberries*, made a capital pun, which having fired off, the old bragadocio escaped under the smoke—but the change of pronunciation has spoiled the pun and now parlays few notice that a pun is intended.

Another pun of Shakespeare's has been ruined by change of pronunciation. It occurs in the tragedy of Julius Caesar and of course is a blamish rather than a beauty—Cassius is instigating Brutus to join the conspiracy against Caesar. He exclaims:

"When could they say, till now, that talked of Rome,  
That her wide walks encompassed but one man?  
Now is it Rome indeed, and room enough,  
When there is in it but one only man."

Shakespeare and his contemporaries called the mistress of the world *Rome* and this tempted to the *epitrophe*, which suited the taste both of the author and his age. We will just notice another instance of our author's unlucky propensity this way, and pass on. It occurs in the same play. Anthony is lamenting over the newly slain body of Caesar, and compares him to a stag or hart laid low by the hunters; and then plays upon the two words *hart* and *heart*, one in sound but diverse in meaning.

"Pardon me Julius. Where wast thou *hark*, brave hart!  
O'ward! thou wast the first to this *hark*!  
And the indeed O'ward! the heart of thee."

It is no small part of the glory of Shakespeare, that his transcendent genius has been able to lift him up unharmed by such blemishes; as the Sun's splendor conceals from the unassisted eye enormous caverns on his disk, large enough to swallow up one or more of such globes as this, our dwelling place. His fame, too, has grown and is growing in an age whose taste strongly revolts against such verbal quibbles, in serious composition. Who would believe that even no farther back than Dryden's time. Ben Jonson, the contemporary and rival of Shakespeare, had so nearly succeeded him in the general favor, that Dryden, in his Essay on dramatic poetry, hardly ventured to claim even an equality for his beloved Shakespeare. Yet now, hardly any body hears of Ben Jonson, but a learned pedant, while the wide world is still reaching Milton's praises of "sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child!"

### EUPHEMISM.

Among the curiosities of our language may be ranked our *Euphemisms*. This is a mode of speech by which we soften anything that is bad, painful, or indecorous, by giving it a more favorable name. Some euphemisms are common to all nations; such as to *depart*, to *decease*, to *fall asleep*, for the more sad word to *die*.—Others are peculiar to different nations. The nice taste of the French renders euphemism a favorite figure with them. They call the hangman whose office it is to suspend criminals on high: "Master of the high works; le maître des hautes œuvres. Among us, when a young lady performs the cruel operation of hanging a young man, we try to soften the act by borrowing a euphemism from the proceedings of diplomacy. "A's says: "She has given him his papers." But alas! the poor fellow does not find his sentence any easier to bear under a gentle name than a rough one, for hanging is a cruel death, whether inflicted by a cord of silk or one of hemp.

Euphemism is a favorite figure of speech with young men, when they wish to soften the character of their vices. They then are fruitful in the most ingenious euphemisms. Is a youth riotous and dissipated? He is only a *little wild*, sometimes. Does he drink freely? He is only *disguised, boozey, half-shaved*—has too much steam aboard, &c. I believe the fashionable phrase now is: "he is *tight*." This last epithet is of all others the least appropriate; for a drunken man is no *limber* that if he falls from a horse he is like a bag of wool—he comes down all in a heap, and seldom gets hurt. An excellent use of euphemism is when we speak of the faults of our friends or our enemies. Then gentle terms are safest and keep under instead of gratifying the malevolent affections. When a lady is not handsome we need not say she is a *perfect fright*—when a man is rather economical we need not say he is a *perfect skin-flint*—when a companion is not very interesting, we need not say: he is an *insufferable bore*.

### ALLITERATION.

Another curiosity of language is what is called *alliteration*; that is the stringing together of words beginning with the same letter or composed of similar sounds. Thus: "for weal or for wo"—"neck or nothing"—"rule or ruin"—"sink or swim"—"no pains no gains"—"many men many minds"—"doubly damned"—"is it fiction or is it fact"—"fat fair and forty"; and a thousand others. This is not a mere trifle or puerility, but founded in nature and therefore some of our best writers (both prose and poetical) have not disdained to employ it. It is found that expressions, so constructed, make a pleasing impression, and are better remembered; and therefore are the very kind of vehicle in which short aphorisms and maxims ought to be couched. The majestic Milton has not deemed this figure unworthy of his muse in some of his loftiest strains.—Satan thus salutes his new home in which *eight* initial *A's* are introduced in two lines: