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HELEN DEFENDED.

MISS EDGEWORTH'S HELEN—AGAIN.

A writer, whose taste cultivation appears to have rendered more fastidious, than correct or discriminating, makes, in the last Messenger, an attack upon this novel and its authoress, characterized by at least as much boldness and spirit, as justice. He discovers in "Helen" innumerable "vulgarisms of language," and a *plot* exceedingly defective,—though he favors the public with a specification of but one particular, wherein

this deficiency of plot consists. Miss Edgeworth's former novels, written in her father's lifetime, being all free (as her assailant thinks) from similar faults, he infers that they were indebted to Mr. Edgeworth for their merits; and that his daughter, deprived of the guardian influence of his judgment and taste, fell immediately to that humble level, whence his aid alone had raised her.

We might, plausibly, except to the competency of the judge who has passed this sentence. He inveighs against "the slip-slopperiness that pervades" the style of "this literary bantling" of Miss Edgeworth!—and talks of "such careless, slip-slop, vulgar phraseology!"—His first sentence, construed according to its natural import, would convey the idea—exactly opposite to his meaning—that in the case of *Helen*, a woman was not the author. And all these specimens of decency, refined taste, elegance and accuracy, occur in a composition not half a page long!—Now, if it is just that only

Those should "teach others, who themselves excel,
And censure freely, who have written well,"—

we might justly ask, where is the present critic's commission for sitting in judgment?

But a plea to the jurisdiction often implies a want of substantial merit in the cause: and recrimination is usually the defence of those who feel the assault to have been just. Both are wholly unsuitable to the case of Miss Edgeworth. We are therefore willing to suppose, that the assailant here used the language we have quoted, merely to exemplify, and hold up visibly to censure, the vulgarisms he meant to rebuke: as Longinus "is himself the great Sublime he draws;"—or, as one lecturing the 'ladies of the British fishery' upon their excessive freedom of speech, would naturally borrow a few phrases of their own Billingsgate, to make himself the better understood.

Long ago, while her father yet lived, and with reference to some of her most admired works, the Quarterly Review pronounced Miss E. "remarkably deficient in" the art of "framing a story." The plot of "*Helen*" may safely be compared with that of "*Patronage*," or of "*Belinda*," or of "*Harrington*," or of "*Emmui*,"—for probability, and freedom from unnatural intricacy. That element in it—namely, General Clarendon's insisting that he should be the first love of his wife—which our Charleston critic deems so monstrous, is full likely to be positive fact; as truth so often surpasses fiction in strangeness,—and as, in the infinitely varying capriciousness of human nature (especially, *English* nature) no freak can ever be incredible. In this comparison then, of her former productions with her last, there is no support found for the supposition that it was to her father Miss E. owed her former success.

Let us see whether, on a comparison of the phraseology used in "*Helen*" with that in its more honored predecessors, these have any superiority to boast of.

Let us take "*Patronage*"—the most admired, perhaps, of all this admirable novelist's works,—and to which Mr. Edgeworth prefixed his paternal approval, written, as the book had been, under his roof: let us take *Patronage*; and see if, in a few pages, we cannot find many parallels to the "vulgarisms" (as the Charleston critic calls them) which have been quoted from *Helen*.

"Wildfire, quite in wind"—"Highblood was blown, beyond the power of whip or spur"—"Squire B. won the match hollow." [Description of a horse-race. Harpers' edition of E's works; vol. 14. p. 35.]

"None that ever sarved man or beast"—*ib.* (said by a stable boy.)

"Percy is not curious, especially about jobbing. He will ask no questions; or if he should, I can easily put him upon a wrong scent." (Comm'r. Falconer speaks.)

"Remember, you cannot get on in the diplomatic line without," &c. (*id. ib.*)

The same expression, "*diplomatic line*," used twice, vol. 15. p. 192—by Lord Oldborough, and by Mr. Temple!

"Another line of life." (Mr. Percy.) 46.

"We must push her in the line for which she is fit—the fashionable line." 164. (Mrs. Falconer.) [This use of the word "*line*," is selected by our Charleston critic for animadversion, in *Helen*.]

"Come, come, Maria, what the d—— are you about?" (Col. Hauton, a nephew of Lord Oldborough, speaking to his sister, in Lord O.'s crowded drawing-room. vol. 14. p. 64.)

Presently after, he says again—"come, come, Maria, what the deuce are you at?" (attempting to make her sing. *ib.*)

"She" (Miss Hauton) "cleared her throat, and began again—worse still, she was out of tune." (*ib.*)

"D...d agreeable, you two seem," cried the Colonel, (to his sister and Capt. Percy) "without a word to throw to a dog." 66.

"She is hipped this morning"—(Col. Hauton, p. 68, speaking of his sister, to her face, and in the same presence!)

"I do not agree with the general principle, that," &c. (p. 57—Godfrey Percy.)

"Buckhurst thought and thought." 41.

"Oh hang it! hang it, John! what the devil shall I do? My father won't pay a farthing for me, unless I go into the church!" p. 42. (said by Buckhurst Falconer—a young gentleman about to enter into holy orders.)

"Would dance divinely, if she would but let herself out." (Buckhurst F. says it, of Miss Caroline Percy!) 43.

"The terror of his voice and lightning of his eye." (vol. 15. p. 103—misquotation of Gray.)

Alfred Percy (a young lawyer of talents) quotes Burke as saying that "Law has a contractile power on the mind." Now Burke indeed says, that law is not so apt to open and liberalize the mind, as it is to quicken and invigorate it. But contractile does not express his meaning. Contractile is intransitive in its signification. It means "having the power of self-contraction,"—not the power to contract another thing.

Lady Angelina Haddingham, a beauty and *bel-esprit*, is made to cry out, in a roomfull of company, "O! cramp! cramp!—horrid cramp! in my foot—in my leg!"

Mr. Edgeworth had studied law, if not practised. Had *Patronage* been written either by him, or under the "guardian influence" of his "taste and judgment," he never would have committed or suffered the blunders it contains, in points connected with that profession.

He never would have coupled "Coke and Selden" [Selden] as representatives of the profession in a lawyer's mind; or have talked of a "decree" in an action at law.

He never would have mentioned the drawing of a replication, as a task likely to absorb all a lawyer's powers; nor the drawing of rejoinders, as one of his common toils: it being very rarely that a replication, and still more rarely that a rejoinder, presents the slightest difficulty,—or indeed is drawn out in form, at all—by an advocate, too!

He never would have represented Lady Jane Granville, (defendant in a law-suit) as putting in a replication; nor the same party as filing a replication, and a plea of *nil-debet*!—and all under the eye and without the correction of her counsel!—(vol. 15, p. 32): nor, in the very next page, as being in danger of *nonsuit*!

He never would have made a lawyer say, that the inquiry "was he rich, or poor?"—is "a leading question," since Mr. E. could not but have known that a leading question is one which prompts such answer as the propounder wishes; which *this* question does not.

Opening "Ennui" at random, we see Lord Glenthorn saying "I thought him a mighty clever man:" and further on, the sensible, witty, and noble Lady Geraldine uses one (as "one does not like," &c.) thrice, in three lines.

Harrington, Ormond, Vivian, Belinda, The Absentee—in short all the Edgeworth novels, without exception, contain innumerable expressions at which a precisian might cavil, as being ungrammatical, inelegant, inappropriate or vulgar: and though, when they come to be scrutinized with liberality and justice, they for the most part prove to be warranted by the occasion, or suitable to the persons who are made to utter them, or sanctioned by high precedent, or at least accordant with idiom,—still there remain some to be pardoned; some few blemishes, the almost unavoidable result of human weakness, and which enlightened criticism should always pardon, in consideration of the numberless excellences that overshadow and efface them.

—"Ubi plura nitent in carmine, non ego paucis
Offendar maculis, quas, aut incuria fudit,
Aut humana parum cavit natura."

But it is not impossible, that even the small *residuum* of faults which seem thus to sue for pardon—the confessed vulgarisms and slovenlinesses—constitute, imperceptibly, a part of the charm by which Miss Edgeworth captivates every grade of intellect. It may be, that they stamp the verisimilitude of her characters more clearly; assimilate them more exactly to those whom our daily walks and daily tasks present to our view; and give to her dramatic page that air of real life, which when it accompanies well conceived incidents and an engaging style, comes the most unerringly home to our bosoms. Instead of imitating Dr. Johnson, whose prince and princess, poet, philosopher, and waiting maid, all deliver themselves in periods strutting with right Johnsonian stateliness and rotundity,—she gives to each person his or her natural diction. Her men-servants and maid-servants, Lords and Ladies, silly colonels, slipshod wits, belles, dandies, toad-eating parsons, and men of sense and virtue, have their respective, appropriate dialects. But as in actual life, so in her books, the dialect

of the same person sometimes varies. Her Telephus and Peleus, on suitable occasions, lay aside their wonted *stills* of style.* Lord Oldborough, in confidential intercourse with a tried friend, can stoop to *relish* if not to *utter* a jest; or in talking with an official inferior, can adopt such cant as "diplomatic line." Lord Davenant (like many grave Lords, probably owning race-horses, and in his youth a practised coachman) talks of a *strong-pulling fancy, thrown upon its haunches*. Lady Davenant, the lofty and the sage, wishing by ridicule to prevent her young female friend from adopting a certain error, warns her not to satisfy herself with a "common *namby-pamby, little-missy* phrase." Nay, statesmen, wits, and scholars, utter vulgarisms and violate grammar,—as we hear them do every day in conversation and in their public speeches: as one of Virginia's greatest living sons asks for a *chaw* of tobacco, and invites a friend to the *quate* club: and as the mightiest mind in South Carolina, if not in this Union, nullifies a rule of grammar with even far less ceremony than an unconstitutional law.—Miss Edgeworth shows her love for truth, in not making even her personages talk as if a stenographer were by, to write down every word for the press: and she is rewarded for it, by the well nigh universal admiration attending her rapid and careless, but faithful copies of human life and human conversation.

Many of the phrases quoted by the Charleston correspondent of the Messenger as censurable,—are uttered by persons or at junctures that suit them, perfectly. For instance, Lady Cecilia, a lively, rattling young woman, of loose speech and almost as loose principles, is the utterer of some dozen of them. Several others are chargeable to Horace Churchill, a profligate man of wit and pleasure. Several to other ladies whose characters, or the occasions on which they speak, render it quite *natural* and proper for them to use such language—as, when Helen says that Lady Davenant's is "a *deep, high* character"—or when Lady Katrine begs "a *thousand million of pardons*"—or when Lady Davenant says of her daughter, "*Cecilia righted herself*."

Many others of the censured phrases appear to us absolutely defensible and proper.

Thus, Lady Davenant, preparing to tell a part of her history to Helen, says—"Give me my embroidery frame; I never can *tell* well without having something to do with my hands." Our critic would substitute *relate* for *tell*, in this passage! We only ask any impartial judge, to try it!

Again, when Lady D. says "whatever I may have been on the *great squares* of politics,"—she obviously alludes to the *chess-board*—that most frequent subject of comparison to the arena of politics.

"*A leash of languages at once*," is a line from the first canto of Hudibras; employed, with perfect aptness, both in Helen and in Miss E.'s "Thoughts on Bores."

"*Tripod sentences*," means "three-footed sentences:" and expresses very happily the structure of the Rambler's pompous periods. Sir Walter Scott as happily speaks of Sir Robert Hazlewood's *triads* and *quaternads*.

Rebate, means to *blunt*, to *beat back*: and *regrate* means to *shock*, or *offend*. When, therefore, the abrupt, rude

* Telephus et Peleus, quum pauper et exsul, uterque
Proicit ampullas et sesquipedalia verba.

Miss Clarendon's conversation with her volatile sister-in-law, is said to have been "a perpetual *rebating* and *regrating*," we cannot perceive the passage to be either vulgar or unintelligible.

"They rode or *boated*." *To boat*, is a verb, better established by usage, and certainly more needed, than our American verb "*to progress*," which is now fairly adopted into the English language.

"*Delightful* enjoyment" is not objectionable. Enjoyment may be of various degrees,—from that which is barely appreciable, to that which inspires a thrilling ecstasy. "*Delightful* enjoyment" approaches this latter degree.

A passage from page 141 (or 160, of Harper's edition) is misquoted—no doubt undesignedly. It reads "whether the fault is *most* in *modern* books, or in our *ancient* *selvcs*;" &c. Whoever will turn to the passage, and read it with the context, will find it plainly proper.

We need not carry this examination further. It has gone far enough to prove—1. That some things cited as faults, are not so in any respect. 2. That others which, taken by themselves, *appear* to be faults, are justified by the context, or by a consideration of the persons *by*, or *to*, or *of* whom they are spoken. 3. That if any remain unjustified, they are pardonable because of their immense disproportion to the excellences around them: excellences amid which, indeed, they are *lost*, except to

"The critic's eye—that microscope of wit."

4. That whatever blame attaches after all to Helen, attaches equally to the novels published in Mr. E.'s lifetime: so that *these* may as well have been written without his help, as Helen; and whatever merit they possess, is undividedly her's.

A confirmation of this last point is to be found in "Practical Education;" avowedly, in its title page, the joint work of father and daughter. The preface tells us, that out of 25 chapters which compose the work, five, and part of a sixth, were written by Mr. Edgeworth: *all the rest*, by his daughter. Now, we ask any candid and intelligent reader to peruse the nineteen chapters which are thus undeniably *hers*; and say, if they do not possess in a higher degree than the other five or six, the sprightliness, grace, just thought, and acute remark, which distinguish the Edgeworth Novels?

We would fain strengthen our vindication of Helen and its author, by an analysis and extracts; but twice the time and space we designed, has been filled; so we forbear. It is impossible however not to say, that the character of LADY DAVENANT, as it stands in her latter years, chastened by adversity and exercised in exalted pursuits, is one of the noblest that any page, of history or of fiction, has ever presented. She is the counterpart of Lord Oldborough—only wiser and better. Nor is it a superhuman wisdom; which, like the beauty and goodness of angels, is contemplated by men with admiration, but at the same time without hope of equaling it, and without any distinct sense of its connexion with their interests or destinies. Her wisdom and goodness *come down* from the skies, dwell in human abodes, busy themselves with the daily concerns of human life, and devote all their energies to the heighten-

ing of human happiness.* Meanwhile, she evidently has (or once had) human weaknesses; and she works by human means: so that she has our sympathies, and does not appal our emulation. He who can contemplate her without feeling more intense wishes and stronger resolutions *to do good*,—'is more or less than man.' If writing in letters of gold had not now become so trite and stale a distinction, it ought to be awarded to Lady Davenant's exclamation, when her corporeal nature was failing under the beneficent labors of her untiring mind: "BETTER WEAR OUT THAN *be st out*!" said she.

Such a *moral* creation is more salutary, and gives its author a better title to the gratitude of her race, than the hundred choicest wonders of Grecian art would have done, even had they been all the work of a single hand. The latter could only sublimate and refine the current ideas of physical beauty: the former awakens the heart to a sense of every duty,—brightens and strengthens domestic ties,—kindles the sacred flame of patriotism,—and prompts the generous resolve to "do or die" in behalf of mankind.
