

**RICH AND POOR:
A COMIC OPERA**

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Rich and Poor: A Comic Opera by M. G. Lewis

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M. G. LEWIS

**RICH AND POOR:
A COMIC OPERA**

Over

Oxberry's Edition.

RICH AND POOR.

A COMIC OPERA;

By H. G. Lewis, Esq.

WITH PREFATORY REMARKS.

THE ONLY EDITION EXISTING WHICH IS FAITHFULLY MARKED
WITH THE STAGE BUSINESS, AND STAGE DIRECTIONS,

AS IT IS PERFORMED AT THE

Theatres Royal.

BY W. OXBERRY, Comedian.

London.

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Horace W. O'Connor

From the Press of W. Oxberry,
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Remarks.

RICH AND POOR.

The very different sensations which every person must experience while reading this opera, and while seeing it performed, furnish one more striking proof of the actor's power to refute the old adage by producing something from nothing, and to impart animation and interest to scenes, in themselves devoid of both. He who sits coolly at home to peruse the piece, and exercise his judgment upon its value, meets with little to remind him that it proceeded from the pen of a richly-gifted individual, one of our finest romance-writers. Perceiving that the characters are but paltry copies of brilliant originals, that the language is weak, the incidents stolen, and the plot destitute of ingenuity, he feels inclined to doubt whether it can ever have contributed to the gratification of an audience; but he who has once been present at its performance, even if the effect of the comic portions has escaped his recollection, cannot possibly have forgotten the vivid impression which the concluding scene of pathos invariably produces. We never witnessed more intense interest or more powerful emotion awakened by any picture of misery in the higher walks of the Drama, than we have seen called forth by this simple picture of domestic distress: yet read it, and how perfectly frigid, common-place a piece of business the whole affair seems to be. The truth is, paradoxical as the assertion may appear, that the players often produce the finest effect when they have the scantiest materials to work with, and erect some of their most masterly structures upon the least solid and substantial foundations. We scarcely need pause to enumerate proofs of this.

"Rich and Poor" was written ere the author had attained his sixteenth year, and the recollection of this circumstance may serve to diminish our surprise at the glaring plagiarisms it displays, which committed by a practised author would be regarded with sterner sen-

sations than when regarded as the work of a raw unpractised lad. Lewis, we suppose, had been so fascinated with "The School for Scandal," that he transferred—half unconsciously, perhaps—some of its most prominent features to his own production; but, to imitate its brilliant wit and satire surpassed his capacity. Hence the sarcasms and railery of his factious characters often degenerate into downright abuse. Sheridan's scandalous coterie inflict their wounds with a keen and polished razor: those of Lewis lacerate one another with the coarse teeth of a rusty saw. The language, moreover, is not free from vulgarisms; and frequently when the author stumbles upon a good idea, he totally mars its effect by his clumsy or tawdry mode of expressing it.

If his characters, however, are open to the charge of plagiarism, his incidents are doubly so, for there is not one that can justly be called his own. In his Preface he slightly admits his obligations to the Novels of "Sidney Biddulph" and "Cecilia," but he might have extended the avowal to every incident in the piece. The subject is not of sufficient importance to warrant our swelling this preface with a list of his thefts, but we cannot pass over unnoticed that palpable one in the first act,—the expedient resorted to by *Medish* to rid himself of his importunate creditors. The idea we believe may be traced to one of Moliere's productions, and perhaps occurs in half-a-score dramas beside, but when this piece was first performed, a precisely similar incident had so recently been made use of by O'Keefe in one of his most successful farces, ("The Farmer") that Lewis must absolutely have thought the town destitute of all sense and recollection, if he imagined that his roguery would escape undetected. It must, however, be admitted that when he does pilfer an incident, he steals with some taste: the scene just noticed has a highly comic effect, and the equivocal between *Rivers* and *Miss Chatterall* is delightfully droll. The closing interview of the father and daughter is clumsily brought about, but we are content to overlook all improbabilities, in consideration of the stage-effect it produces. Lewis has been accused of stealing this portion of his plot from Miss Lee's "Chapter of Accidents," but let him not be made answerable for more literary larcenies, than he was really guilty of. There is no foundation whatever for the charge. 'Tis true that, in both plays, seduction forms the groundwork of the story, but the circumstances of the cases, and the consequences resulting from

them, have too little in common to warrant the slightest suspicion that Lewis was in any way indebted to Miss Lee in the construction of his drama.

The piece was originally performed, as a Comedy, under the title of "The East Indian," in April 1798, for the benefit of Mrs. Jordan; and being well liked, was re-produced in the following December. The cause of its being soon after laid aside shall be told in the author's own words:—"It was at first received with applause, for which I thank the Public; the succeeding representations did not prove attractive, for which I here make my acknowledgments to Mr. Sheridan, who blocked up my road, mounted on his great tragic war-horse 'Pizarro,' and trampled my humble pad-nag of a Comedy under foot, without the least compunction. My readers must decide whether my Play merited so transient an existence; it is unnecessary to say that I am quite of the contrary opinion."

Zorayda was then personated by Mrs. Jordan, and *Rivers* by Kemble, who, says the author, "acted the part admirably well, from beginning to end; indeed (he adds) to call his performance *acting* is doing it injustice: it was nature throughout." The Prologue and Epilogue were both from the pen of Lewis, and the latter was spoken by J. Bannister, habited as the Ghost of Queen Elizabeth, entering through a trap-door, in a flash of fire: an idea smacking strongly of the extravagance of the author's early notions. Of the former composition, spoken by C. Kemble, we venture to transcribe the whole, because it possesses not only some poetical merit, but a degree of touching interest, from its allusion to her who after long contributing by her fascinations to the enjoyment of thousands, now lies low in a foreign grave, and from its containing the author's portrait of himself, since in depicting the feelings of an ardent aspiring mind, the youthful writer but described his own:

PROLOGUE.

In life's gay spring, while yet the careless hours
Dance light on blooming beds of early flowers,
Ere knowledge of the world has taught the mind
To sorrow for itself and shun mankind,
In sweet vain dreams still Fancy bids the boy
Doat on fair prospects of ideal joy:

Life's choicest fruits then court his eager hand ;
 Each eye is gentle, and each voice is bland ;
 False friendship prompts no sigh, and draws no tear,
 And love seems scarce more beautiful than sincere !

Ere sixteen years had wing'd their wanton flight,
 While yet his head was young, and heart was light,
 Our author plann'd these scenes ; and while he drew,
 How bright each colour seem'd, each line how true.
 Gods ! with what rapture every speech he spoke !
 Gods ! how he chuckled as he penn'd each joke !
 And when at length his ravish'd eyes survey
 That wondrous work complete—a Five Act Play,
 His youthful heart how self-applauds swell !
 —“ It isn't perfect, but 'tis vastly well !”——

Since then, with many a pang, our Bard has bought
 More just decision, and less partial thought :
 Kind vanity no longer blinds his sight,
 His fillet falls, and lets in odious light.
 Time bids the darling work its leaves expand,
 Each flower Parnassian withers in his hand ;
 Stern judgment every latent fault detects,
 And all its fancied beauties prove defects.

Yet, for she thinks some scenes possess an art
 To please the fancy, and to melt the heart,
 Thalia bids his play to-night appear,
 Thalia call'd in heaven, but Jordan here.
 So frail his hope, so weak he thinks his cause,
 Our author says he dares not ask applause ;
 He only begs that with indulgence new,
 You'll bear him patiently, and bear him through .
 Then, if his piece proves worthless, never sham it ;
 But damn it, gentle friends—Oh ! damn it ! damn it !

Under its present form and title, the piece was brought forward at the English Opera House in the summer of 1812, but there occur scarcely any variations between “Rich and Poor” and the “East-Indian,” save one or two transpositions of the scenes, and the omission of a few portions of the dialogue, which have been supplied by songs.

Strong objections, we remember, were urged against the tendency of the Opera; and, questionless, the criminal intercourse of a female with the husband of another does seem to be regarded in a very lenient point of view, but as it luckily comes not within our province to examine closely into these detailed points of morality, we shall waive all discussion of the question here. The author's opinions upon the subject of female frailty, appear to have increased in laxity as he advanced in years, for the play originally terminated with the following "great moral lesson," which in the altered piece is omitted: this, however, might arise from an impression that it was of too serious a character for the close of a Comic Opera, and calculated to cast an unpleasant damp upon the feelings of an audience:

Rivers. "How is this? when every other face wears a smile, why hangs a cloud on the brow of my Zorayda?"

Zorayda. "Ah, my father! 'tis a cloud which must never be removed; for, 'tis the gloom of self-reproach! I have erred, and been forgiven; but am I therefore less culpable?—Your indulgence has been great; but is my fault therefore less enormous? Oh, no, no, no! The calm of innocence has for ever left me, the courage of conscious virtue must be mine no more! Still must the memory of errors past torment me, and embitter every joy:—still must I blush to read scorn in the world's eye, suspicion in my husband's:—and still must feel this painful truth most keenly, that she who deviates from the paths of virtue, though she may obtain the forgiveness of others, never can obtain her own!"

Whatever may be the thought of the errors of *Zorayda* by the reader, no sentiment but pity can ever be felt for her in the theatre, when the character is personated by Miss Kelly. The terrible energy of her appeals to her father's heart, the fearful workings of her half-frenzied spirit, the "fine madness" of her despair, thrill the spectator to the core, and set description at defiance. "Long years—long, though not very many,"—have elapsed since we witnessed this inimitable, this faultless display of scenic art, but the feelings it excited in our minds were too vivid ever to be effaced. Many early impressions are blotted out, many recollections destroyed, by intercourse with the world,—

"And from surrounding things, the hues wherewith fancy adorn'd them

Fade like the hopes of youth, till the beauty of earth has departed,"