

Jocular Preachers

THESE preachers, whose works are excessively rare, form a race unknown to the general reader. I shall sketch the characters of these pious buffoons, before I introduce them to his acquaintance. They, as it has been said of Sterne, seemed to have wished, every now and then, to have thrown their wigs into the faces of their auditors.

These preachers flourished in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries; we are therefore to attribute their extravagant mixture of grave admonition with facetious illustration, comic tales which have been adopted by the most licentious writers, and minute and lively descriptions, to the great simplicity of the times, when the grossest indecency was never concealed under a gentle periphrasis, but everything was called by its name. All this was enforced by the most daring personalities, and seasoned by those temporary allusions which neither spared, nor feared even the throne. These ancient sermons therefore are singularly precious, to those whose inquisitive pleasures are gratified by tracing the *manners* of former ages. When Henry Stephens, in his apology for Herodotus, describes the irregularities of the age, and the minutiae of national manners, he effects this chiefly by extracts from these sermons. Their wit is not always the brightest, nor their satire the most

poignant; but there is always that prevailing *naïveté* of the age, running through their rude eloquence, which interests the reflecting mind. In a word, these sermons were addressed to the multitude; and therefore they show good sense and absurdity; fancy and puerility; satire and insipidity; extravagance and truth.

Oliver Maillard, a famous cordelier, died in 1502. This preacher having pointed some keen traits in his sermons at Louis XI., the irritated monarch had our cordelier informed that he would throw him into the river. He replied undaunted, and not forgetting his satire: "The king may do as he chooses; but tell him that I shall sooner get to paradise by water, than he will arrive by all his post-horses." He alluded to travelling by post, which this monarch had lately introduced into France. This bold answer, it is said, intimidated Louis; it is certain that Maillard continued as courageous and satirical as ever in his pulpit.

The following extracts are descriptive of the manners of the times.

In attacking rapine and robbery, under the first head he describes a kind of usury, which was practised in the days of Ben Jonson, and I am told in the present, as well as in the times of Maillard. "This," says he, "is called

a palliated usury. It is thus. When a person is in want of money, he goes to a treasurer (a kind of banker or merchant), on whom he has an order for 1000 crowns; the treasurer tells him that he will pay him in a fortnight's time, when he is to receive the money. The poor man cannot wait. Our good treasurer tells him, I will give you half in money and half in goods. So he passes his goods that are worth 100 crowns for 200." He then touches on the bribes which these treasurers and clerks in office took, excusing themselves by alleging "the little pay they otherwise received. All these practices be sent to the devils!" cries Maillard, in thus addressing himself to the *ladies*; "It is for *you* all this damnation ensues. Yes! yes! you must have rich satins, and girdles of gold out of this accursed money. When any one has anything to receive from the husband, he must first make a present to the wife of some fine gown, or girdle, or ring. If you ladies and gentlemen who are battenning on your pleasures, and wear scarlet clothes, I believe if you were closely put in a good press, we should see the blood of the poor gush out, with which your scarlet is dyed."

Maillard notices the following curious particulars of the mode of *cheating in trade* in his times.

He is violent against the apothecaries for their cheats. They mix ginger with cinnamon, which they sell for real spices; they put their bags of ginger, pepper, saffron, cinnamon, and other drugs in damp cellars, that they may weigh heavier; they mix oil with saffron, to give it a colour, and to make it weightier. He does not forget those tradesmen who put water in their wool, and moisten their cloth that it may stretch; tavern-keepers, who sophisticate and mingle wines; the butchers who blow up their meat, and who mix hog's lard with the fat of their meat. He terribly declaims against those who buy with a great allowance of measure and weight, and then sell with a small measure and weight; and curses those who, when they weigh, press the scales down with their finger. But it is time to conclude with Master Oliver! His catalogue is, however, by no means exhausted; and it may not be amiss to observe, that the present age has retained every one of the sins.

The following extracts are from Menot's sermons, which are written like Maillard's, in a barbarous Latin mixed with old French.

Michael Menot died in 1518. I think he has more wit than Maillard, and occasionally displays a brilliant imagination; with the same singular mixture of grave

declamation and farcical absurdities. He is called in the title-page the *golden tongued*. It runs thus, *Predicatoris qui lingua aurea, sua tempestate nuncupatus est, Sermones quadragesimales, ab ipso olim Turonis declamati. Paris, 1525, 8vo.*

When he compares the church with a vine, he says, "There were once some Britons and Englishmen who would have carried all France into their country because they found our wine better than their beer; but as they well knew that they could not always remain in France, nor carry away France into their country, they would at least carry with them several stocks of vines; they planted some in England; hut these stocks soon degenerated, because the soil was not adapted to them." Notwithstanding what Menot said in 1500, and that we have tried so often, we are still flattering ourselves that if if we plant vineyards we may have English wine.

The following beautiful figure describes those who live neglectful of their aged parents, who had cherished them into prosperity. "See the trees flourish and recover their leaves; it is their root that has produced all; but when the branches are loaded with flowers and with fruit, they yield nothing to the root. This is an image of those children who prefer their own amusements, and

to game away their fortunes, than to give to their old parents the cares which they want."

He acquaints us with the following circumstances of the immorality of that age: "Who has not got a mistress besides his wife? The poor wife eats the fruits of bitterness, and even makes the bed for the mistress." Oaths were not unfashionable in his day. "Since the world has been world, this crime was never greater. There were once pillories for these swearers; but now this crime is so common, that the child of five years can swear; and even the old dotard of eighty, who has only two teeth remaining, can fling out an oath!"

On the power of the fair sex of his day, he observes, "A father says, my son studies; he must have a bishoprick, or an abbey of 500 livres. Then he will have dogs, horses, and mistresses, like others. Another says, I will have my son placed at court, and have many honourable dignities. To succeed well, both employ the mediation of women; unhappily the church and the law are entirely at their disposal. We have artful Dalilahs who shear us close. For twelve crowns and an ell of velvet given to a woman, you gain the worst lawsuit, and the best living."

In his last sermon, Menot recapitulates the various topics he had touched on during Lent. This extract will

present a curious picture, and impress the mind with a just notion of the versatile talents of these preachers.

“I have told *ecclesiastics* how they should conduct themselves; not that they are ignorant of their duties; but I must ever repeat to girls, not to suffer themselves to be duped by them. I have told these ecclesiastics that they should imitate the lark; if she has a grain she does not remain idle, but feels her pleasure in singing, and in singing, always is ascending towards heaven. So they should not amass; but elevate the hearts of all to God; and not do as the frogs who are crying out day and night, and think they have a fine throat, but always remain fixed in the mud.

“I have told the *men of the law* that they should have the qualities of the eagle. The first is, that this bird when it flies fixes its eye on the sun; so all judges, counsellors, and attorneys, in judging, writing, and signing, should always have God before their eyes. And secondly, this bird is never greedy; it willingly shares its prey with others; so all lawyers, who are rich in crowns after having had their bills paid, should distribute some to the poor, particularly when they are conscious that their money arises from their prey.

“I have spoken of the *marriage state*, but all

that I have said has been disregarded. See those wretches who break the hymeneal chains, and abandon their wives! they pass their holidays out of their parishes, because if they remained at home they must have joined their wives at church; they like their prostitutes better; and it will be so every day in the year! I would as well dine with a Jew or a heretic, as with them. What an infected place is this! Mistress Lubricity has taken possession of the whole city; look in every corner, and you’ll be convinced.

“For you *married women*! If you have heard the nightingale’s song, you must know that she sings during three months, and that she is silent when she has young ones. So there is a time in which you may sing and take your pleasures in the marriage state, and another to watch your children. Don’t damn yourselves for them; and remember it would be better to see them drowned than damned.

“As to *widows*, I observe, that the turtle withdraws and sighs in the woods, whenever she has lost her companion; so must they retire into the wood of the cross, and having lost their temporal husband, take no other but Jesus Christ.

“And to close all, I have told *girls* that they must fly from the company of men, and not permit them to embrace, nor even touch them.

Look on the rose, it has a delightful odour; it embalms the place in which it is placed; but if you grasp it underneath, it will prick you till the blood issues. The beauty of the rose is the beauty of the girl. The beauty and perfume of the first invite to smell and to handle it, but when it is touched underneath it pricks sharply; the beauty of a girl likewise invites the hand; but you, my young ladies! you must never suffer this, for I tell you that every man who does this designs to make you harlots.”

These ample extracts will, I hope, convey the same pleasure to the reader, which I have received by collecting them from their scarce originals, little known even to the curious. Menot, it cannot be denied, displays a poetic imagination, and a fertility of conception, which distinguishes him among his rivals. The same taste and popular manner came into our country, and were suited to the simplicity of the age. In 1527, our Bishop Latimer preached a sermon, in which he expresses himself thus:—“Now, ye have heard what is meant by this *first card*, and how ye ought to *play*. I purpose again to *deal* unto you another *card of the same suit*; for they be so nigh affinity, that one cannot be *well played* without the other.” It is curious to observe about a century afterwards, as Fuller informs us, that when a country

clergyman imitated these familiar allusions, the taste of the congregation had so changed that he was interrupted by peals of laughter!

Even in more modern times have Menot and Maillard found an imitator in little Father André, as well as others. His character has been variously drawn. He is by some represented as a kind of buffoon in the pulpit; but others more judiciously observe, that he only indulged his natural genius, and uttered humorous and lively things, as the good father observes himself, to keep the attention of his audience awake. He was not always laughing. “He told many a bold truth,” says the author of *Guerre des Auteurs anciens et modernes*, “that sent bishops to their dioceses, and made many a coquette blush. He possessed the art of biting when he smiled; and more ably combated vice by his ingenious satire, than by those vague apostrophes, which no one takes to himself. While others were straining their minds to catch at sublime thoughts, which no one understood, he lowered his talents to the most humble situations, and to the minutest things. From them he drew his examples and his comparisons; and the one and the other never failed of success.” Marville says, that “his expressions were full of shrewd simplicity. He made very free use of the most popular proverbs. His comparisons and

figures were always borrowed from the most familiar and lowest things." To ridicule effectually the reigning vices, he willingly employed quirks or puns rather than sublime thoughts, and he was little solicitous of his choice of expression. Gasparo Gozzi, in Italy, had the same power in drawing unexpected inferences from vulgar and familiar occurrences. It was by this art WHITEFIELD obtained so many followers. In Piozzi's *British Synonymes*, Vol. II. p. 205, we have an instance of Gozzi's manner. In the time of Charles II. it became fashionable to introduce humour into sermons. Sterne seems to have revived it in his; South's sparkle perpetually with wit and pun.

Far different, however, are the characters of the sublime preachers, of whom the French have preserved the following descriptions.

We have not any more Bourdaloue, Le Rue, and Massillon; but the idea which still exists of their manner of addressing their auditors may serve instead of lessons. Each had his own peculiar mode, always adapted to place, time, circumstance, to their auditors, their style, and their subject.

Bourdaloue, with a collected air, had little action; with eyes generally half closed, he penetrated the hearts of the people by the sound of a voice uniform and sol-

emn. The tone with which a sacred orator pronounced the words, *Tu es ille vir!* "Thou art the man!" in suddenly addressing them to one of the kings of France, struck more forcibly than their application. Madame de Sévigné describes our preacher, by saying, "Father Bourdaloue thunders at Notre Dame."

Le Rue appeared with the air of a prophet. His manner was irresistible, full of fire, intelligence, and force. He had strokes perfectly original. Several old men, his contemporaries, still shuddered at the recollection of the expression which he employed in an apostrophe to the God of vengeance, *Evaginare gladium tuum!*

The person of Massillon is still present to many. It seems, say his admirers, that he is yet in the pulpit with that air of simplicity, that modest demeanour, those eyes humbly declining, those unstudied gestures, that passionate tone, that mild countenance of a man penetrated with his subject, and conveying to the mind the most brilliant light, and to the heart the most tender emotions. Baron, the tragedian, coming out from one of his sermons, truth forced from his lips a confession humiliating to his profession: "My friend," said he to one of his companions, "this is an *orator!* and we are *only actors.*"