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Hogarth moralized

Hogarth, William

London, 1831

The Company of Strollers.

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THE COMPANY OF STROLLERS.

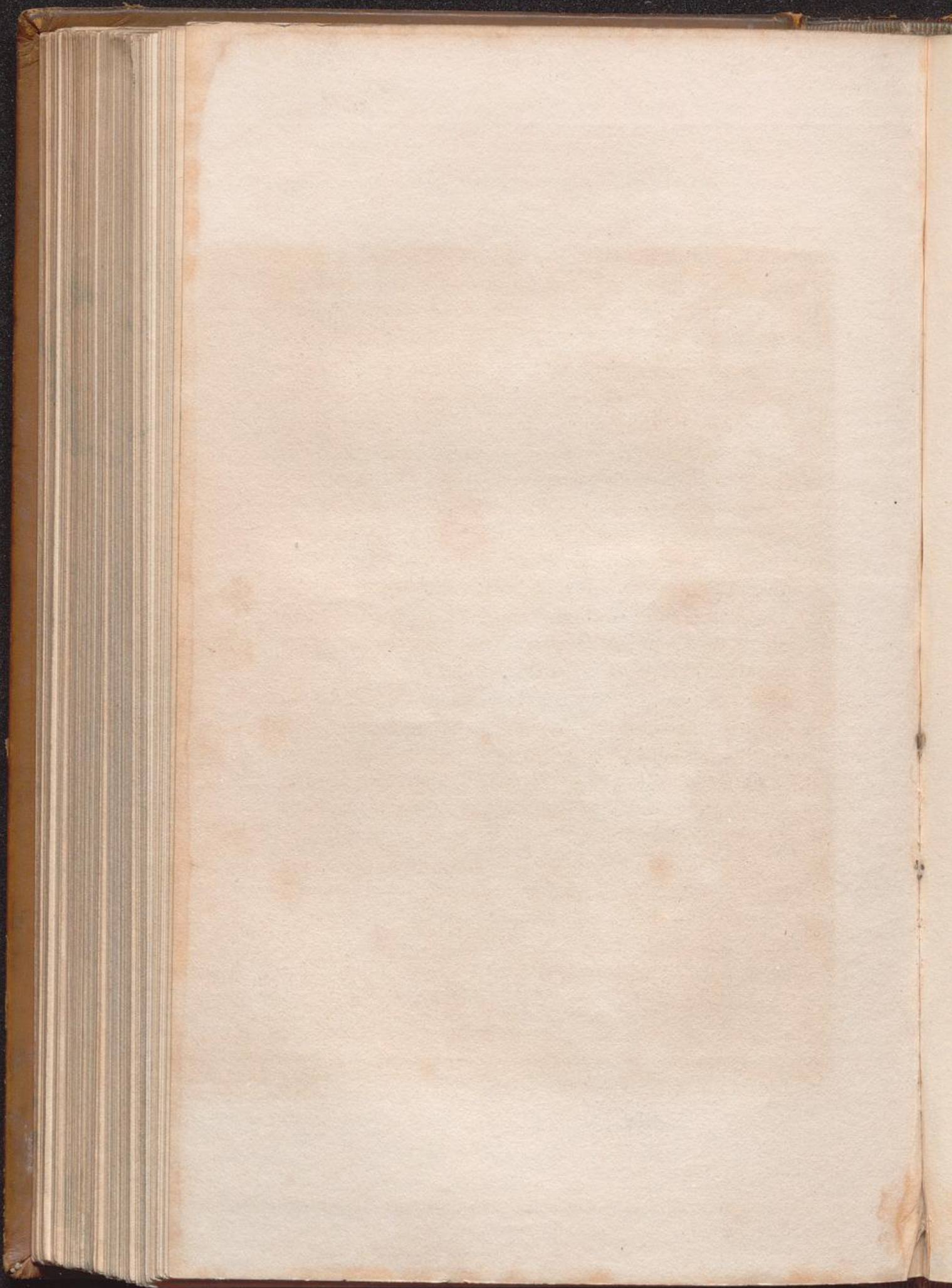
IF variety is any way entertaining, or if the life of a painting consists in its diversity of figures, the piece before us claims our particular attention ; none can be more filled with contrasted subjects, nor can the *vis comica* be more conspicuous : every group is crowded with humour, every subject with matter of laughter. Here we see confusion mixed with uniformity, and inconsistency united with propriety ; royalty let down by the ensigns of beggary, and beggary set off by the regalia of royalty. Most people are indeed acquainted with stage exhibitions, but few have any idea of their apparatus. Mr. Hogarth, therefore, desirous of communicating that satisfaction he frequently enjoyed himself, and of profiting by the design, published this plate in the year 1738, when the attention of the public was called to this set of people, it being just before the act against strolling players took place. This salutary law, though it put a stop for a time to things of this sort, yet like some other good laws presently lost its influence ; when new companies, phoenix-like, rose with vigour from the dying embers of former ones, by which means scenes are continually produced, similar to this before us, and the subject, far from being antiquated, is rendered daily novel.

The place from whence this scene is taken is supposed to be a barn belonging to an inn in some country town, intimated by the corn and flail aloft, the hen and chickens at roost, (though here) upon a wave, and the eggs upon the



THE COMPANY OF STROLLERS. — ENG'D BY T. F. NICHOLSON.

Published by John Major, 50, Fleet Street, near St. Dunstons.



bed. The time is evening ; the company from the theatres at London, dressing, and preparing to perform a farce, which we are told by the play-bill on the bed is called *The Devil to pay in Heaven* ; (a very suitable subject !) with entertainments of tumbling and rope-dancing. Such we are to conceive their poverty, that they have but one room for all purposes ; witness the bed, the gridiron, the urinal, the food, and all the stage apparatus ; viz, scenes, flags, paint-pots, pageants, brushes, clouds, waves, ropes, besoms, drums, trumpets, salt-boxes, and other musical instruments ; crowns, mitres, helmets, targets, dark-lanterns, cushions, periwigs, feathers, hampers of jewels, and contrivances for conjuring ; thunder, lightning, dragons, daggers, poison, candles and clay. The characters they are dressing for in this farce, are Jupiter, Juno, Diana, Flora, Night, Syren, Aurora, Eagle, and Cupid ; with devils, ghosts, and attendants. Jupiter, we see, is holding Cupid's bow, directing the little fellow to reach his stockings, which were hung up to dry upon the clouds. Queen Juno is rehearsing her part, while the sable goddess Night, represented by a negro girl in a starry robe, is mending a hole in her majesty's hose. Diana, though stripped, is raving in all the high-swoln rant of tragedy ; while Flora, at her feet, is attentively pomatuming her hair with a tallow candle, ready to powder it with flour from a drudging-box, heedless of her wicker toilet's taking fire from a neighbouring flame. On the right of her is Aurora, with her rosy face, ridding the charming intoxicated Syren of some of her close companions ; while she is comforting a female hero, wrapt up for the tooth ach, with a glass of spirits, who, greatly unlike the generality of her sex, is weeping at the thoughts of wearing the breeches ; for the smallness of a strolling company frequently obliges

women to play the parts of men, and men to fill the characters of women; nay, by the monkey's being habited in the further corner, we are made acquainted that the farce they are going to perform, has such a variety of characters, that they are under a necessity of making the monkey perform the part of an attendant. Beneath this woman's feet is a girl dressed up by way of Eagle, cramming a new-born infant with scalding pap. Humourously has our author set the pannikin upon the act of parliament against strolling players, and that upon a crown, intimating this company's mortified contempt of that judicious law, and their great abhorrence of this step of government. At the back of this plate are two young devils (their horns just budded) contending for a draught of beer: we may judge of their drought by their eyes. Behind them is a female tumbler, and the ghost employed in extracting blood from the tail of a cat, in order to assist them in some sanguine representation. The faces of these two women are finely contrasted; in one we observe age and pleasantry; in the other youth and distress. But the greatest piece of humour in the whole is the agreeable engagement of two of the company in a cloud above; who, though retired from the eyes of all below, are unguardedly open to the discovery of a man through the broken roof. Mr. Hogarth, by giving them the names of Oedipus and Jocasta,* would intimate, that so lost are

* Oedipus was the son of Jocasta, by Creon, king of Thebes. His father being told by the oracle, that he should one day be slain by him, gave him to a shepherd with orders to kill him. This shepherd not having resolution to slay him with his own hands, left him in the woods, where he thought he would die with hunger. A herdsman going that way by chance found him, took him home, and presented him to the queen, who brought him up as her own son. When he was grown up

these people to every sense of virtue, that they hold all things in common, and give a general loose to unbridled appetite. Well might the legislative power think them worthy its attention : wisely did it enact a law for their suppression ; and pity is it 'tis so little regarded !

Mr. Horace Walpole thinks that this print, for wit and imagination, ought to be ranked as the first of Hogarth's works : and Rouquet, in the only mention he makes of it, says, " Les comédiens de campagne sont représentés dans une grange, au milieu d'un melange ridicule de misere et de pompe theatrale, se preparant à jouer une tragedie."

The scene is laid in a barn,* and intended for the state dressing-room of a strolling company. Here, at one hour the gallant Hotspur laces on his leathern armour, and at another, the lively Beatrice laces on her stays. The time is evening, and the actors from London are preparing to perform a farce, which by the play-bill is declared to be *The Devil to pay in Heaven*. The dramatis personæ are principally deities, and deities of the first order. On the bill are

he went in search of his father, whom he slew through ignorance in a scuffle that happened between them ; thence returning to Thebes, he in the same ignorance married his own mother, *Jocasta*, and had issue by her.

* In the gardens at Herenhausen palace, a complete theatre is cut out of the green sod in the garden : there is a green room of shrubberies for the retreat of the actors. Near this vernal playhouse is a fine orangerie, a wilderness of evergreens, a multitude of fountains, and pieces of sculpture that would fill the warehouses of half the statuaries in London.

" This is true taste ; and whoso likes it not,
Is puppy, coxcomb, blockhead, fool, and sot."

the names of Jupiter, Juno, Diana, Flora, Night, Syren, Aurora, Eagle, Cupid ; two devils, a ghost, and attendants. To this divine catalogue is added, rope-dancing, tumbling, &c.* The inferior performers are two musical kittens, a pair of fiery dragons, one Roman eagle, and, though last mentioned, not least in consequence, a venerable monkey.

Seated upon an inverted wheelbarrow, which may occasionally serve for a triumphal car, a lady, who by her haughty demeanour and imperial crown, we know to be the ox-eyed Juno, is majestically stretching out her leg, and pathetically rehearsing her part. Descended from her ebon car, with sooty face, and star-bespangled robe, sweeping the ground, the sable goddess Night is mending her majesty's stocking. The star of evening, which sheds its sober light above her head, is apparently formed of a brass instrument used in making pastry. A venerable female, with one eye, who by the dagger in her mantle we conjecture to be the Tragic Muse,† is cutting off a cat's tail in order to extract a sanguine stream, for some murderous representation, or that

“ The mailed Mars on his altar sit,
Up to the ears in blood.”

But this savage amputation, which seems to excite no emotion in the operator, is warmly resented by the feline suf-

* These elegant amusements were at that time introduced into our royal theatres.

† This gentlewoman has generally been considered as intended for the ghost : from her employment, I rather think she is the representative of Tragedy :

“ Death in her hand, and murder in her eye.”

The sage Melpomene herself could not go through her business with more philosophic indifference.

ferer, who, enraged at the pain, is revenging this barbarous indignity, by tearing with teeth and talons, the female tumbler who holds her; and, could she speak, would vehemently exclaim in the words of Shakspeare,

“Cursed the blood that let this blood from hence!”

Two little devils, with horns just budded, are eagerly contesting their right to a flagon of ale, out of which one is drinking, and seems determined to get to the bottom, if it were a mile. The flagon has been placed on a Grecian altar, with a loaf of bread, and pipe of tobacco, which being still lighted, the smoke ascends in curling eddies; the grateful incense is inhaled by all present,

“And heavenly fragrance fills the circuit wide.”

The fascinating female stripped to her chemise, her head decorated with feathers and flowers, is marked by her crescent, to be the goddess of the silver bow,—the chaste Diana.

A principal figure near the altar, with one foot resting upon her hoop, stands,

——— “Like feathered Mercury,
New lighted on a heaven-kissing hill;”

impressed with the dignity of her character, and inspired with dramatic fervour, she rehearses her part. At her right hand the blooming Flora is seated at her toilet; and the toilet of Flora is a wicker hamper, to which hangs a label, inscribed jewels; from whence we may naturally infer it contains the glittering regalia of the company. Her robe of various dyes is carelessly thrown over it as a veil; and placed upon it, is somewhat like part of a coffee-mill with a candle in it, a broken looking-glass, broken comb; and an oyster-shell, containing what Mr. Warren emphatically calls,

love-inspiring rouge, "to dye the white rose to a bloody red." One hand holds a candle, with which she delicately pastes up her hair—"sweets to the sweet!" the other grasps a dredger, to powder her head.

Jupiter and Cupid are jointly engaged in reaching down a pair of stockings that are hung to dry on a cloud. The little archer—

"Regent of love-rhimes, lord of folded arms,
The anointed sovereign of sighs and groans,
Liege of all loiterers and malecontents"—

the little archer has wings, but they will not exalt him to the cloudy canopy; he is obliged to mount a ladder.

On the ground beneath him, is Aurora, designated by

"The bright morning star, day's harbinger,"

glittering in her hair. Her rosy fingers are employed in the service of the charming, though intoxicated syren, who offers the female hero (that is perhaps intended to personate Ganymede), a glass of spirits. This the cup-bearer of Jupiter very gladly accepts, in the hope of relief from an aching tooth, the raging of which is intimated by his countenance, and the handkerchief, that once was lost by the chaste Desdemona, being held up to his face.

"There was never yet philosopher
That could endure the tooth-ach patiently;
However they have writ the style of gods,
And made a pish at toil and sufferance."

In one corner a lady, who personates Jove's eagle, is feeding a child.

— "Within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king,
Is plac'd the saucepan, with the infant's food."

The child, terrified with the enormous beak hanging over its head, refuses the offered nourishment. This crown once pressed the brow of haughty Bolingbroke ;

“ And when young Harry did the crown purloin,
He wept—because it was not current coin.”

In the other corner a monkey, in a long cloak, bag-wig, and solitaire, is degrading the plumed helmet of Alexander.

Two kittens seem happily engaged ; one of them in a style that shews she has a fine finger, “ touches the trembling lyre ;” the other, rolls an orb imperial. Near them are a number of balls,* and two cups ; which intimate that this company of comedians practice slight of hand, and, to fill their house, will sometimes condescend to play legerdemain tricks. In the same part of the print are three emblems of the law,—two judges’ periwigs, and a halter.

A mitre, filled with tragedies and farces, and a dark lantern, are placed upon a pulpit-cushion. Whether the artist intended these for symbols of the church, and designed to hint at the dark cloud which long enveloped the mysteries of religion, or had any other meaning, must be determined by those who have studied polemic divinity, and considered ecclesiastical history, more than I have.

A trunk, which has occasionally served for the concealment of Iachimo, and been displayed as the coffin of Juliet, is now placed with the end upwards, and become a reading-desk for the ox-eyed Juno. Upon it is a tinder-box, and

* By the halter near them, I once conjectured that these balls were intended to represent bullets, and designed to intimate that some one of this noble company might, on a leisure evening, in humble imitation of the heroic Captain Macheath, endeavour to turn his lead to gold ; and, like that great man, be in consequent danger of making an exit with a rope round his neck.

the thunder-bolt of Jove; a salt-box, and a rolling-pin. The two last articles have much importance in the catalogue of the properties of their orchestra. Their leading musical instrument, the sonorous bass-viol, leans against the altar, and the sweet-sounding lyre lies on the floor.

Ten small tallow candles stuck in clay, will be fastened to a hoop, which, suspended by a pack-thread over the centre of the stage, must form a most magnificent chandelier.

On that bed which has been pressed by gentle Desdemona, and softened the sleep of beauteous Imogen, are two play-bills and four eggs. One of the eggs is broken, the others may be intended to render the silver-toned syren's voice more softly musical.

Two sets of waves, which gave the tempest-tost vessel an appearance of being suspended

“ Twixt the green sea and cloudy canopy
Of o'er-arching heaven,”

are in a dead calm, resting against the wall. One of them is become the roosting-place of a hen and chickens.

The frieze, festooned column, and arched door, form part of their grand scene, but they, and the vase with flowers, are in too elegant a style for their accompaniments.

The spirit-stirring drum, martial trumpet, and enchanted besom, make an admirable trophy. The two first may serve to call the shallow Richmond to arms, or rouze Macbeth to more than mortal deeds; the latter is unquestionably used in the incantations of Hecate, and sometimes bestrid by one of the weird sisters, to

“ Ride in the whirlwind, and direct the storm.”

The two dragons will astonish a rustic audience, and the

rattling car, rolled over elastic planks, will make dreadful thunder!*

The British flag must wave for every nation upon earth: † may be borne before Macedonia's madman in his triumphal entry, or wave upon the battlements of Macbeth's castle. It is either the ensign of Henry, or the standard of Coriolanus.

The straw deposited in a corner, may serve for the bed of Lear, the head of Edgar, or the hands of fair Ophelia.

Canopied by an opaque cloud, inscribed *Œdipus* and *Jocasta*, and evidently intended as a scene in Lee's mad play, ‡ we discover the heads of two figures reposing in the straw, instead of the garden, "as was their custom in the afternoon."

A fellow, clambering to the top of the barn, is profanely prying into the hallowed mysteries of the green-room. A

* We are told by John Milton that cannon were invented by the devil. We are told by Alexander Pope, that stage thunder was invented by that great critic John Dennis, who was so jealous of his bolt being wielded by an improper hand, that being once in the pit at Drury-lane theatre when the company were performing *Macbeth*, and hearing the bowls rattling over his head, he started from his seat, grasped his oaken stick, and exclaimed, with an emphasis that drowned the voices of the players, "Eternal curses light on these scoundrels! they have stolen my thunder, and don't know how to roll it!"

† Our royal theatres have sometimes violated the costume. We have seen the head of *Cato* covered with a periwig that emulated *Sir Cloudesly Shovel's*; a prince of Denmark decorated with the order of *St. George*; *Othello* habited as a captain of the foot guards; and *Kent*, the tough old *Kent*, as a *Chelsea pensioner*.

‡ In the second act of *Œdipus* is the following stage direction: "The cloud draws that veiled the heads of the figures in the sky, and shews them crowned with the names of *Œdipus* and *Jocasta* written above, in great characters of gold."

little lower is the Roman eagle and standard ; close to them a paint-pot, palette, and pencils. The very natural appearance of two rural scenes which lean against the wooden wall, evince that some eminent artist has united two professions, and is both painter and hero to the company. "Hills and dales are of his dressing." He can delineate the blasted oak, or nodding turret ; the lofty castle, or humble cottage, with such brilliancy of colouring, and splendour of effect, that the astonished connoisseur exclaims,

" There is something in this more than nature,
If philosophy could find it out."

A target, close to the altar is richly embossed with Medusa's head. A salt-box before the divine Juno, is chalked with hieroglyphic marks, that might have been originally made by this sovereign daughter of the drama, as a check on an alehouse-score. This economical attention to Cocker's Arithmetic is very necessary with even a royal revenue ; for thrift's a blessing, if men steal it not.

" He who to-night is seated on a throne,
Calls subjects, empires, kingdoms, all his own,
Who wears the diadem and regal robe,
Next morning shall awake as poor as Job."

The chemise, apron, cap, and ruffles, hanging upon a rope to dry, display marks of laudable industry, and prove that these dignified personages, maugre their exalted rank, wash their own linen. The gridiron close to the bed, intimates that they are not above broiling their own beef-steaks.

The expression of the figures in this print is admirable. Nothing can exceed the mock-heroic dignity of Juno : she is as haughty as one of her own peacocks. The Tragic Muse has been so frequently up to the ears in blood, that

she laughs at the tortures of a poor quadruped whose tail she is cutting off. The faces of the tumbler, the cat, and Medusa, in beauty and character, "contend for mastery." A little devil who has his fist clenched, and threatens the other for drinking so deep, is admirably marked: from the eyes of his twin-brother, with the vessel to his mouth, we see that he highly relishes, and greedily inhales the delicious draught.

The group, formed by the five preceding characters, is well composed, and their various dispositions most forcibly delineated. In the ranting representative of the pale moon,—unblushing, unabashed impudence; in the Syren, mawkish intoxication; and in Ganymede, an appearance of that agony which arises from the tooth-ach.

Notwithstanding the candle, that is near setting fire to the hamper of jewels, we see through a breach in the thatch, that this is a day-light picture: in so shattered a tenement, it is not easy to determine from what source the figures are illuminated.

By an act of parliament, which lies upon the bed, we are informed that this diabolical drama will be their last performance; and when this abstract and brief chronicle of the times, have fretted their hour upon the stage, and made their exit, the barn will be appropriated to its proper uses;

" Rich harvests bury all their pride has plann'd,
And laughing Ceres re-assume the land."

That time come,

— " This glittering show
Of canvass, paint, and plaster, shall lie low;
These gorgeous palaces, yon cloud-capt scene—
This barn itself, will be a barn again:
The spirit-stirring drum will cease to roar,
The prompter's whistle will be heard no more;

But echoing sounds of rustic toil prevail,
 The winnowing hiss, and clapping of the flail :
 Hither once more may unhous'd vagrants fly,
 To shun th' inclement blast, and pelting sky ;
 On Lear's own straw may gypsies rest their head,
 And trulls lie snug in Desdemona's bed." J. I.*

* [With a pleasing variety of expression, and, if possible, a warmer degree of admiration, Mr. Cunningham, thus corroborates the general praises of this inimitable performance.

"There is no limit to the drollery. The wit, the humour, and amusing absurdities of this performance are without end. Into the darkest nook the artist has put meaning, and there is instruction or sarcasm in all that he has introduced. There is such a display of the tinsel wealth and the symbols of vulgar enjoyment of the strolling community—such a ludicrous intermixture of heaven with things of the earth, earthy, and such a contrast of situations and characters, that the eye is never wearied, for the mind is ever employed. This wondrous picture was sold to Francis Beckford, Esq. for 27*l.* 6*s.* : he thought the price too much, and returned it to the painter, who afterwards disposed of it to Mr. Wood of Littleton for the same price. The genius of Hogarth was frequently obliged to bow to the parsimony of the rich, and the presumption of the ignorant." Amongst other aims of satire, Mr. C. thinks the scene well "calculated to ridicule the ornamental painters in those days, who filled parlours and halls with mobs of the heathen divinities."]