

THE WESTMINSTER GAZETTE
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SUPERFLUOUS VERSE.

"What are we to do with our boys?" is a question which is rapidly degenerating into "What shall we do with our poets?" Every season's output of literature includes the issue, in happily limited editions, or a dozen or more attractively bound volumes, containing the mental wealth of authors who aspire to laurels that are reserved for the chosen few who at rare intervals climb to the meridian of literary genius. Much, if not all, of this versification is superfluous. Its existence is not justified—as the limited editions demonstrate—by the claim to supply a want. On the other hand, it must be conceded that these poetical effusions do not necessarily offend against literary taste, and that they are often written in very creditable English by no means devoid of smoothness and pleasing effect. Unfortunately, these qualities do not suffice to raise what is rather loosely and indiscriminately called poetry above the level of commonplace mediocrity. There are two kinds of verse which are worth reading: superb poetry and thoroughly bad poetry. From the latter the most exquisite enjoyment can often be derived. But for middling, average, passable verse there is really no conceivable use and no legitimate demand. In this latter category one must reluctantly place such publications as "Forest-Notes," which is dedicated by the joint authors to "each other and to the little velvet-coated Creatures of the Woods," and the new and enlarged edition of "From Dreamland Sent." The verses in both these volumes fairly represent what may be accomplished by average ability applied to the highest branch of literary art. Here and there are graceful lines and musical phrases; but such intermittent virtues do not furnish sufficient justification for these additions to the national store of poetry. A more remarkable production is a volume entitled "Jephthah, and other Mysteries Lyrical and Dramatic." * It contains, amongst other gens, and excellent—though possibly unconscious—parody of the Ibsenite school. This miniature drama, entitled "The Poem," is dedicated "to the gentleman who, on the evening of June 24, 1898, turned back in Shaftesbury-avenue to give a halfpenny to a little girl, and thereby suggested to me the idea here ren-

dered." As an audacious excursion into the inane "The Poem" transcends anything that has ever been rescued from the waste-paper basket. This is its merit as a parody. The plot itself is an admirable skit on the threadbare construction of the new dramatic school. A gentleman stopping to bestow the sum of one halfpenny on a ragged child in Shaftesbury-avenue notices a young man smile with a profundity of hidden sadness. In answer to an impertinent cross-examination the young man relates that he has been kicked out of home by his father because the spirit compelled him to "write about all the horrible things" he saw. Scene II. Reveals the youthful poet taken into the house of his benefactor, the hero of the halfpenny, and making violent love to his daughter. The father watches their courtship from the background, and the curtain descends upon him "with arms outspread in blessing." The most exquisite scene is the third. The happy trio are at dinner, when the festivities are interrupted by the poet's father, who forces his way into the room, in spite of two footmen, and demands his son with a good deal more force than elegance. The poet is on point of obeying the parental summons, when, without any rhyme or reason (*vide* the new school), the enraged father breaks loose from the footmen who are holding him, and stabs his son to the heart with a table-knife. He, in his turn, is knocked down, and the footmen "drag him off insensible." Of course the poet dies after receiving this mortal wound, and in a touching speech he recommends his bride to the special care of the moon. "Be kind to her always, Moon," he says, "when I am gone beyond you!" In the last scene the bereaved bride is discovered in bed asleep. Her father, the economical dispenser of charity, enters the room, and she wakes up and begins to murmur something about her lover having sung a song to her all night. The father perceives some papers lying on the table. He picks them up, and, marvelous to relate, they turn out to be the concluding stanzas, in his daughter's handwriting, of a poetical effusion on which his deceased guest had been working. And with the disappointed father-in-law's astonished ejaculation, "It is finished—it is finished!" the drama comes to an abrupt though by no means premature end. The fact that "The Poem" is wholly without meaning greatly enhances its value as a clever piece of burlesque.

One of the "mysteries" is a sonnet "to the author of the phrase 'I am not a gentleman and I have no friends.'" The opening lines of the address are mild in comparison with some expressions that follow later:

Self-damned, the leprous moisture of thy veins
Sickens the sunshine, and thine haggard eyes,
Bleared with their own corrupting infamies,
Glare through the charnel-house of earthly pains,
Horrible as already in hell.

A list of opprobrious epithets is given, including such denominations as "swine" and "liar,"

Wherewith hell's worms caress thee and control.

These are scarcely pleasant terms in which to describe even a person who stands self-convicted of being "no gentleman." But the author's gift for parody has already been hinted at, and it would be unfair, on such insufficient evidence, to take his sonnet seriously.

* Jephthah, and other Mysteries Lyrical and Dramatic." By Aleister Crowley. (London: Kegan Paul.)