The gentlemanly art of the insult

One of the (many) signs of our cultural decline is that verbal insults, these days, are almost invariably scatological or sexual, provoking a blizzard of asterisks whenever A wants to put the smackdown on B. Once upon a time, it was not so.

Once, the ability to come up with a clever insult that could be repeated in polite society was thought an important, if not necessarily essential, component of being a gentleman.

Take, for example, two masters of English repartee and wit, George Bernard Shaw and Winston Churchill. Shaw, prior to the opening of one of his plays, sent Churchill a telegram: “I am enclosing two tickets to the first night of my new play; bring a friend, if you have one.” Churchill, nonplussed (and likely amused), sent a telegram in reply: “Cannot possibly attend first night; will attend second, if there is one.”

Oscar Wilde, who may have returned to the faith before his death, was another man of English letters who knew how to insult with class and wit: Thus, “Some cause happiness wherever they go; others, whenever they go.” Or the immortal, “He has no enemies, but is intensely disliked by his friends.” (Wilde could turn his wit on himself, too, which is always a sign of an insulter-with-class: “I am so clever that sometimes I don’t understand a single word of what I am saying.” Or, inventing a trope that others frequently used of Churchill, “I have the simplest tastes. I am always satisfied with the best.”).

As writer and editor, Mark Twain accumulated the literary man’s usual collection of enemies, whom he enjoyed twitting. Thus, to one especially dull critic: “Why do you sit there looking like an envelope without any address on it?” Or about a more intolerable one: “I didn’t attend the funeral, but I sent a nice letter saying that I approved of it.”

The aforementioned Mr. Bernard Shaw appreciated Twain’s wit, noting that “Mark Twain and I are in the same position. We have put things in such a way as to make people, who would otherwise hang us, believe that we are joking.” For his part, Ernest Hemingway, in an unaccustomed moment of modesty, once said that “All

modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called 'Huckleberry Finn.'" Twain, in whatever post-mortem circumstances he found himself when told that one, may have winced, knowing as he must of William Faulkner's immortal put-down of his fellow-Nobel laureate, Hemingway: "He has never been known to use a word that might send a reader to a dictionary."

Today's political badinage is lame, lamer, lamest compared with the wits of yore. Churchill, of course, figures prominently here. Told over dinner by Lady Astor, the American-born female member of the House of Commons, that, "If you were my husband, Winston, I'd poison your soup," Churchill immediately replied, "And if you were my wife, Nancy, I'd drink it." And then there was the great man's take-down of the austere Labor minister, Sir Stafford Cripps: "He has all the virtues I dislike and none of the vices I admire." Another Labor stalwart, Aneurin Bevan, a great supporter of nationalized medicine, was a frequent target of Churchill's raillery: "I can think of no better step to signal the inauguration of the National Health Service than that a man who so obviously needs psychiatric attention should be among the first of its patients."

But Bevan finally got the best of Churchill. During the coronation festivities for Queen Elizabeth II, there was a state ball at Buckingham Palace at which the old, pre-war uniforms were to be worn. Sir Winston, exiting the palace men's room dressed in the bottle-green uniform of the Lord Warden of the Cinq Ports and wearing the ribbon of the Order of the Garter, spotted Bevan wearing a blue serge suit. "I think that at least on this occasion you might have taken the trouble to dress properly," Churchill harrumphed scornfully. "Prime Minister, your fly buttons are undone," replied a cherubic Bevan.

Those were the days.

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