

McCracken, "Ode to a daguerreotype portrait," (lines from a comedy) 1849

(keywords: J. L. H. McCracken, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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Selected text published in:

J. L. H. McCracken, *Earning a Living: A Comedy, in Five Acts. By a Citizen of New-York* (NewYork: Pudney & Russell, Printers, 1849): 30–31. This passage forms a part of Act 3.

[character information text from front matter:]

PERSONS OF THE DRAMA.

ROBERT HOLLYBUSH, *a retired merchant of New-York.*

JACOB HOLLYBUSH, *his unmarried brother.*

RUPERT HAY, *fashionable young gentleman.*

HARTINGTON, *fashionable young gentleman.*

GLUMLEY, *a magazine editor.*

BARBOW, *a writer.*

VANSITTART, *a New-York lawyer.*

CHARLOTTE, *daughter of R. Hollybush.*

MARY, *daughter of R. Hollybush.*

MR. and MRS. CAMPION.

MINETTA, *their daughter.*

MISS DUBARRE, *an heiress.*

DUPERU, *a broker.*

(*Enter GLUMLY. Bows to Mrs. and Miss C., and shakes hands with Mr. C.*)

Mr. C. You come last, Mr. Glumly, like the king.

G. Truly sir, I have no such pretension; and besides, there are half a dozen guests or more still in the dressing-room.

Mrs. C. Well, we won't wait for them. Mr. Glumly, you are expected to furnish forth this evenings entertainment.

G. Madam, my humble powers are all at your disposal.

Mrs. C. Gallantly said. Now, sir, I call upon you first to recite, or read us something of your own. Afterwards you shall read us the last act of the Merchant of Venice.

G. After which, I suppose I shall be allowed to take supper with the company?

(*Several other guests enter and bow to Mrs. C., and take off her attention for the moment.*)

J. H. (*aside to H'n.*) That's an unlucky hit; there is to be no supper.

H'n. [Hartington—ed.] Tea and soft waffles, eh?

J. H. I believe so.

G. Well, when shall I begin?

Mrs. C. Immediately. This is recitation room, and then we'll pass into the reading room, where all is prepared.

G. Very well. I will give you some verses I wrote yesterday, on a chance meeting which saddened me. You know, Mrs. Campion, I have often been crossed in love.

Mrs. C. Certainly. Am I not your confidante?

G. Well, this was one of those obdurate ladies that used to reject me---the best beloved of at least a dozen. Can you give me a miniature or something of the sort. I must act a little---very little indeed.

Minetta. Here is a daguerreotype.

G. It will do. Only you are all to fancy it is a beautiful miniature of the lady in question. (*Places himself in a pensive attitude in a chair: lays the miniature on the table near him. Miss Dubarre comes and places herself so as to front him as near as she can.*)

Glumly—

The rose's sweetest glow has not
 Departed from her cheek;
Nor have those glorious eyes forgot
 The tongues they used to speak;
Yet certain changes time has wrought,
 And on her lofty brow,
Are traces of maturer thought—
 I think——she'd take me now.
(Takes up the miniature, opens and looks at it.)

Years have not touched her loveliness,
 Nor dim'd its gentle ray,
Nor made one grace or charm the less,
 Since that all nameless day.
All that she was is there—yet there
 Is not the thing I loved,—
My own high dream of what, with care
 And toil, she might have proved.
(Lays the miniature down.)

What canvass hope had there to fill—
 What schemes my fancy drew,
When those rich energies were still
 Elastic, pliant, new.
To concentrate, to guide, advance,
 Impel their glittering train,
Presumptuons was the wish, perchance—
 At all events 'twas vain.

Miss D. That's beautiful.

Mrs. C. Be-a-u-ti-ful! (*G. bows and goes on.*)

She deemed herself a pearl, more worth
 Than all the sons of men,
And might have been—oh Heaven and earth!

What might she not have been!
But cheated of its food, her mind
Hath nearly fared like him,
The self adoring youth, who pined
Upon the fountain's brim.

J. H. Narcissus.

H'n. Rupert Hay.

Miss D. Oh, gentlemen, how can you?

G.—

She trusted all too much to Heaven,
Nor deemed she'd aught to do—
But nature who had promise given
Would give performance too.
As if our minds grew rife and rich.
Even like the unweeting grain,
Pour'd from the summer clouds, to which
Comes eke the latter rain.

Miss D. Is not that admirable?

Mary H. It is very good, certainly.

G.—

Her soul, that might have risen to seek
The founts Minerva used,
Lull'd by the praises of a clique,
Deluded, mock'd, amused—
Idle, with undeveloped powers
And unexpanded wings,
Flung all to waste those precious hours,
And missed those holy springs.

She sought her Phoenix mate in vain,
And now that chase is over,
I think she haply might be fain
To take a mortal lover.
I will not have her now—I'll try
My skill some fair to reach,
That's young enough to learn when I
Am old enough to teach.

Miss D. Oh, that is excellent! But there's a deal of spite in that last stanza, that must have come from old wounds. I'm afraid there's truth under all this, Mr. Glumly.

All. Excellent—very good—admirably delivered. (*G. bowing.*)

Mrs. C. Well, ladies and gentlemen, we'll retire now to the next room and take a cup of tea, after which we will put those fine tones in further requisition.
(*Takes Hn's arm and threads the way, and all follow.*)

[End of selected text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

Duyckinck provides the following information about the author:

J. H. L. McCracken was the son of a New York merchant, and pursued his father's business. He was engaged in the trade with western Africa, and it was on a business visit to Sierra Leone that his death occurred from a fever of the climate, March 25, 1853. It was about his fortieth year. Mr. McCracken bore a distinguished part in New York society by his fortune, his amateur pursuit of literature, and his fine conversational powers. He wrote for the magazines and journals—in particular for the *Knickerbocker*, under the editorship of Hoffman, and Mr. Benjamin's "American Monthly" where one of his papers was entitled *The Education of the Blood*. A very clever sketch, *The Art of Making Poetry by an Emeritus Professor*, appeared in the second number of the *Knickerbocker*. He wrote a few trifles for *Yankee Doodle*. In 1849, he published in the *Democratic Review* a comedy in five acts of New York life, entitled *Earning a Living*. He had also a hand in a Democratic free-trade paper, which had a short career.¹

The comedy was serialized in *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (New York). Act 3 appears in 25:136 (October 1849): 345–58.

1. Evert A. Duyckinck and George L. Duyckinck, *Cyclopedia of American Literature* vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner, 1855): 592–94.

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