

**LECTURES ON THE  
ENGLISH  
COMIC WRITERS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649006090

Lectures on the English comic writers by William Hazlitt

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

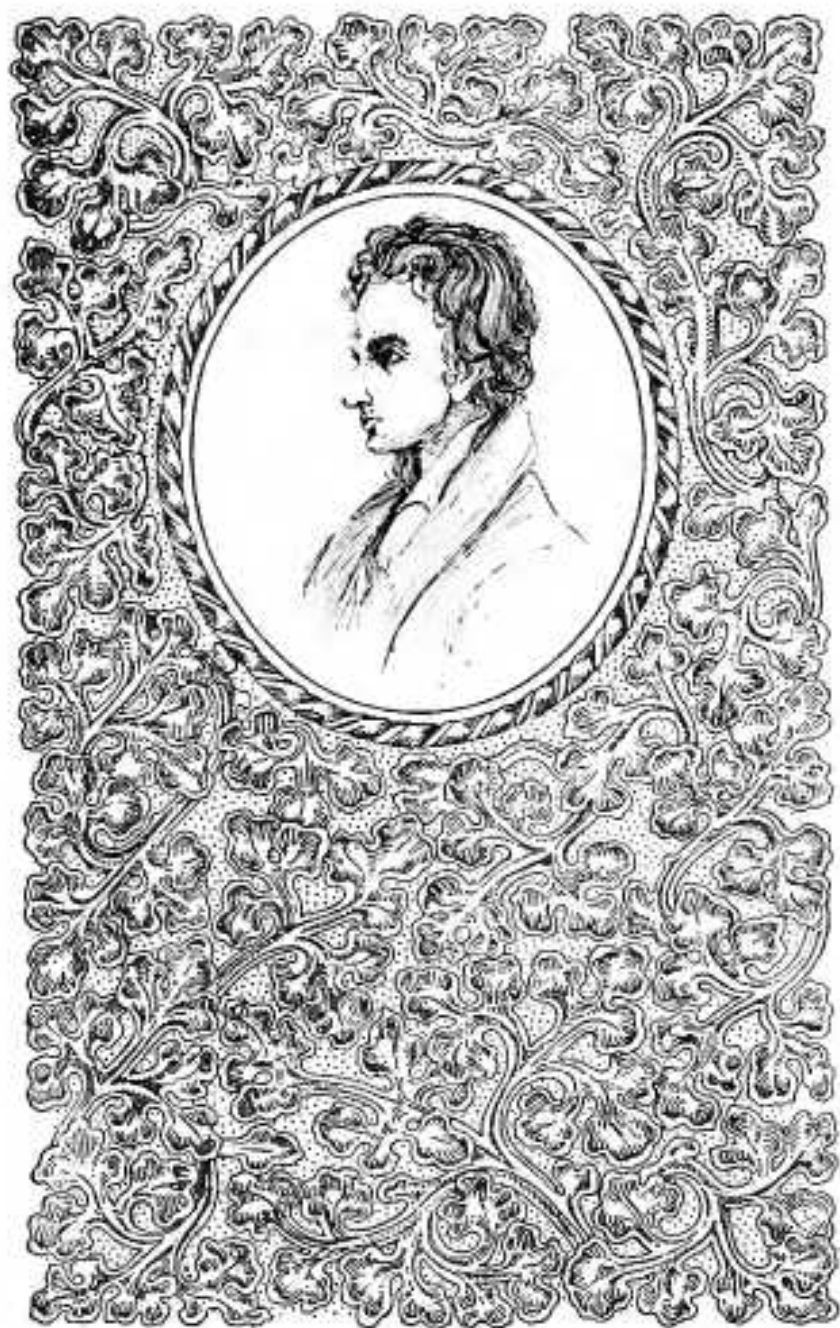
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THE ENGLISH COMIC  
WRITERS

BY  
WILLIAM HAZLITT

WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
BY R. BRIMLEY JOHNSON

"It is a very good office one man does another, when  
he tells him the manner of his being pleased." —STEELE.



HENRY FROWDE  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
LONDON, NEW YORK AND TORONTO

WILLIAM HAZLITT

Born: Maidstone . . . . April 10, 1778

Died: London . . . . September 18, 1830

*The "Lectures on the English Comic Writers" were first published in 1818. In "The World's Classics" they were first published in 1907, the text followed being that of the third edition, 1844, edited by the author's son.*

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## INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that neither his most intimate friends nor his most sympathetic critics have spoken or written of William Hazlitt with enthusiastic abandon or with spontaneous affection. Men of far less ability than he, and of more limited outlook, have inspired devotion in their lifetime and stirred the pulses of posterity.

His failure in this respect is the more remarkable because "the man's writings are himself. He does not summarize or pigeon-hole the matter; but goes into it, then and there, before your eyes and takes you with him. You see the picture of which he is writing, you take up the line of argument he is defending, you think out the scheme he is elaborating, you study the author he is criticizing. Your mind shares the processes upon which he is engaged, and becomes lost in them. You read with his gusto or his prejudice, you reason with his vigour, and draw conclusions upon the basis of his experience." In other words, Hazlitt, despite his cynical estimate of the public, actually wrote with a keen sense of personal enjoyment that one would expect to have proved infectious. Yet we think, much and often, of what he has written; little and seldom of the man himself.

The "Lectures on the Comic Writers" bear out our conclusion in a marked degree. They treat of a genial subject in a spirit of catholic appreciation. We may wonder, by chance, to find Addison and Johnson among the "Comic" writers; but certainly we need not cavil at the broad-mindedness of a critic sufficiently well

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informed to illuminate every step of the way with his wealth of appropriate comment and illustration.

Hazlitt, moreover, seldom errs in judgment. He ranks the spontaneous humour of Shakespeare above Jonson's scholarly "humours," the robust humanity of Fielding and Smollett above the moralities of the essayists, Steele's tender fancies above the prim periods of Addison. He reflects the sparkle of Congreve, Wycherley, and Farquhar; glories in Goldsmith, Uncle Toby, Sheridan, and above all in Hogarth; while fully alive to the unique "artificial reality" of Richardson. "For if the business of life," as he most happily shows us, "consisted in letter-writing, and was carried on by the post (like a Spanish game of chess), *human nature would be what Richardson represents it.*" Almost the only unreasonableness estimate in the whole volume is that of Fanny Burney as "a mere common observer of manners," whom he idly depreciates for one of her most charming qualities—that she never forgot she was a woman. But then women, according to Hazlitt, "learn the idiom of manners and character, as they do that of language, by rote, without troubling themselves about principle."

With this single exception, he not only recognizes the widest diversity in the masters of genius, but discovers, and endows with immortality, a thousand "buried treasures" of the neglected and the forgotten. He never misses the genuine antique, however barren or unsavoury the surrounding dust-heap.

Moreover, he has succeeded more nearly than any other writer on the subject in finding a solution to that most baffling of critical problems—the distinction between wit and humour. For, curiously enough, while any mind of moderate intelligence can generally determine of a given writer, or at least of any particular passage, which element affords the prevailing excellence, the most subtle of our critics have so far failed to discover a quite satisfactory definition of difference. But Hazlitt, at least, expresses an important truth in saying that "Humour is describing the ludicrous as it

is in itself; wit is the exposing it, by comparing it with something else. Humour is, as it were, the growth of nature and accident, wit is the product of art and fancy."

And Hazlitt's appreciations, despite his mastery of theory, are never academic or even merely intellectual. Happy absurdities keep him in "rours of laughter"; he revels in pure nonsense, and understands the wholesome bracing influence of unthinking merriment. The abandon of the best comedies inspires his whole-hearted enthusiasm.

Here, surely, were matter enough for good fellowship, and that *camaraderie* between writer and reader for which so many a genius of the past will seem always among the best and dearest of our personal friends. Yet Hazlitt never arouses such feelings. His spirited plaudits of rollicking humour leave us emotionally cold. The plays, the novels, or the pictures themselves can give us something to which he never attained. His insight, undoubtedly, will make our enjoyment keener and more subtle; but, perversely enough, we cannot—except as an act of deliberate justice—experience that sense of gratitude which his stimulating suggestiveness undoubtedly deserves.

This failure to excite the ordinary and spontaneous human emotions arises from certain limitations in the man himself, and we need not go beyond these "Lectures" to discover the cause. For it is not necessary, I think, to lay much stress on his own cynical record of his career, to refine upon the supposed compulsion by which he is said to have turned author, or to accept his statement of the affectations deliberately imposed upon his style in contempt of the public preference for meretricious graces. He "resolved," he would have us believe, "to turn over a new leaf,<sup>1</sup> to take the public at its word, to master all the tropes and figures he could lay his hand on; and, though he was

<sup>1</sup> *i.e.* to avoid the "original bent of his mind," shown in "the dry and meagre" style of his first work, "An Essay on the Principle of Human Action."

a plain man, never to appear abroad but in an embroidered dress." Such an intention may, in fact, have entered his mind; it may have recurred to his imagination in moments of bitterness and depression. But it never cooled his intellectual vivacity or hampered his expression. No one can even dip into his essays without an absolute conviction that he wrote as he felt, in a perfectly natural and original style. His son declares that "he could scarcely at the outset see his way two sentences before him"; and, in truth, though fluent and even eloquent, his actual construction is frequently awkward, and he probably always found the art of composition a sufficiently wearisome business. He has no natural graces of style and no instinct for form.<sup>1</sup> He "was a born man of letters, and could not help turning everything he touched into literature," but he "never took kindly to writing as a profession." Yet the enthusiasm which can overcome these very limitations, the genius which his halting sentences never obscure, should by rights, one would imagine, but the more endear the man.

It is not the faults in Hazlitt's style that repel us. Though the cause lies undoubtedly in the man himself, it is no less certainly betrayed in his work. Attempting, for example, to exonerate a certain freedom of expression very prevalent in our old comedies, he remarks that "the consciousness, however it may arise, that there is something we ought to look grave at, is almost always a signal for laughter outright; we can hardly keep our countenance at a sermon, a funeral, or a wedding." He notes, as a fault in Shakespeare, that "the spirit of humanity and the fancy of the poet generally prevail over the mere wit and satire; we sympathize with his characters more often than we laugh at them. . . . The ridicule wants the

<sup>1</sup> In the "Lectures on Comic Writers," for example, he is often obscure, or at least peculiarly awkward, in the use of pronouns; and one passage on Hogarth is both clumsy and incorrect—"He belongs to no class, *or if he does*, it is to the same classes as Fielding, Smollett, Vanbrugh, and Molière."