

**BON-MOTS OF THE  
NINETEENTH  
CENTURY**

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Bon-mots of the nineteenth century by Walter Jerrold & Alice B. Woodward

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**WALTER JERROLD & ALICE B. WOODWARD**

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*Samuel Boyer.*



## SRLE URL

*"Humour has justly been regarded as the finest perfection of poetic genius. He who wants it, be his other gifts what they may, has only half a wit; an eye for what is above him, not for what is about him or below him."*—THOMAS CARLYLE.

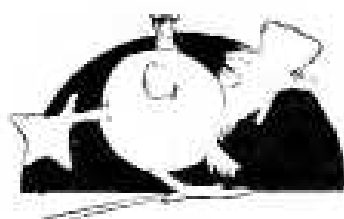
*"It's bright rockets with their trains of fire."*—OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.

*"Let us then laugh heartily at all humorous things, smile at all witty things, and be content to find something wholesome and profitable even in a jest."*—SERJEANT COX.

*"The promptness to laugh is an excellent pre-emptorial foundation for the wit to come in a people."*—GEORGE MEREDITH.







## INTRODUCTION.

**I**N the preface to "Bon-Mots of the Eighteenth Century" I quoted a number of more or less contradictory authorities to discover what it was that the last century writers meant by wit. The word certainly had a wider signification in the days of Addison, of Pope, of Johnson, for it not only meant what it means to-day, but it was frequently, perhaps most often, used of cleverness. Generally a man of ability was referred to as a man of wit, whereas to-day we should accord the title almost, if not entirely, to those who either on paper or in conversation seasoned their remarks with the *je-ne-sais-quoi* of wit. And yet we are now but little nearer a clear definition of the word. If we turn to the dictionary we do not get very much assistance; we find that the word may be used as synonymous with mind, understanding, intellect, judgment, sense, sagacity, etc. We then find it means "a man of genius"! and at length come to the following attempt in the direction we desire: "The faculty of associating ideas in a new and unexpected manner" or "the associ-

tion of ideas in a manner natural, but unusual and striking, so as to produce surprise joined with pleasure." And the dictionary describes it, too, as "the faculty of associating ideas in a new and ingenious, and at the same time natural and pleasing way, exhibited in apt language and felicitous combination of words and thoughts, by which unexpected resemblances between things apparently unlike are vividly set before the mind, so as to produce a shock of pleasant surprise." This is a fairly good description, though the surprise occasioned need by no means be invariably pleasant.

Another point which has given rise to a good deal of amusing and more or less unsatisfactory discussion, is as to the distinction between wit and humour. The discussion would, it appears, of necessity be doomed to failure, for, after all, there is, surely, no real dividing line. Many of Sydney Smith's *Assays* are marked by flashing wit, many by fresh rollicking humour, and many others by a mixture of both of these qualities; it is, for example, difficult to decide whether wit or humour predominates in the following remark of the facetious Canon: "It is a great proof of shyness to crumble your bread at dinner. I do it when I sit by the Bishop of London, and with both hands when I sit by the Archbishop." If the tendency has been to narrow the term wit, no such narrowing process has taken place with the word humour.

Indeed, writers on the subject probably give a wider signification to the word than does the average reader. Humour, despite its deeper meaning to Thackeray and others, is no doubt confused in the minds of many persons with fun and farce. In conversation (whether spoken or written) humour may be likened to the sunshine irradiating all, while wit is more akin to the lightning flash—brilliant in its cause, and maybe, blasting in its effect. The following passages will show some nineteenth century attempts at defining this elusive quality. The date given after each name is that of the author's death.

JAMES BEATTIE (1803): That unexpected discovery of resemblance between ideas supposed dissimilar, which is called wit, and that comic exhibition of singular characters, sentiments, and imagery, which is denominated humour, . . . Men laugh at puns; the wisest and wittiest of our species have laughed at them; Queen Elizabeth, Cicero, and Shakespeare laughed at them; clowns and children laugh at them; and most men, at one time or other, are inclined to do the same:—but in this sort of low wit, is it an opposition of meanness and dignity that entertains us? Is it not rather a mixture of sameness and diversity,—sameness in the sound, and diversity in the signification?