

**THE ENCHIRIDION OF WIT:
THE BEST
SPECIMENS OF ENGLISH
CONVERSATIONAL WIT**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649573479

The Enchiridion of Wit: The Best Specimens of English Conversational Wit by Various

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

VARIOUS

**THE ENCHIRIDION OF WIT:
THE BEST
SPECIMENS OF ENGLISH
CONVERSATIONAL WIT**



The Enchiridion of Wit.

The Best Specimens
OF
English Conversational Wit.

—————
"BREVITY IS THE SOUL OF WIT."
—————
Shakespeare.

PHILADELPHIA :
J. B. LIPPINCOTT & CO.
1885.

Preface.

THIS little collection is not wholly identical in scope either with the jest-books or with the volumes of table-talk already in the field. It has been compiled with a view to its finding a place between the two, being made up wholly from the annals of conversation,* and comprising, at the same time, only those jests and stories which possess the stamp of wit, as distinguished from humor or drollery.

After perusing various essays and other writings on wit and humor, the editor is led to believe that the wits themselves have been happier than the metaphysicians in their definitions of wit. Locke's cumbrous analysis, so universally quoted, according to which "Wit lies in an assemblage of ideas, and putting them together

* An apparent rather than real exception is the insertion of a few parliamentary and legal *bon-mots*.

with quickness and vivacity, whenever can be found any resemblance and congruity, whereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable visions of fancy," dissects without describing. The image evoked in the reader's mind by his "assemblage of ideas" is that of an "Evening at Home" of the Aikin family, rather than any lighter species of entertainment. Addison rightly adds to this bill of particulars the element of surprise; but even in his description we fail to recognize the familiar features of the thing we call wit. All these elaborations bring to mind Dr. Johnson's answer when urged to define poetry: "Sir, it is easier to say what it is not: we all *know* what light is, but it is not easy to *tell* what it is." On the other hand, Dr. Henneker's reply to Lord Chatham, "Wit is what a pension would be if given by your lordship to your humble servant,—a good thing well applied," is both definition and example. But no phrase is truer or of more value as a touchstone than that of Shakespeare,— "Brevity is the soul of wit." Wit is precise and compact both in idea and expression, while humor is apt to be more leisurely in movement, more intangible, often broader in signification. The distinction drawn by Carlyle, referring wit to the

head and humor to the heart, is also full of meaning. Wit is in its nature hard. A great deal of the wit in existence consists in direct retort or repartee, where the thrust, to be effective, must be quick and strike home. Often the very point of a witticism lies in its heartlessness, as in the case of Talleyrand's famous reply to the man who represented to him that "one must live:" "*Je n'en vois pas la nécessité.*" Humor is better-natured; in its broader forms it calls forth more laughter, and in its finer manifestations exhibits more tenderness, than wit; it has also a wider range, and may contain a deeper poetic or philosophic truth. Wit has the advantage only in the mundane virtues of keenness, precision, and observance of etiquette. Yet the best wit has its wisdom as well, and some of the most exquisite examples add to the grace of manner the charm of heart. These are to be looked for only among the choicest French *mots*. English wit is of a stouter fibre, and, though often of a pleasanter and more wholesome tone than the Gallic *esprit*, has never attained to the same fineness. How exquisite in feeling, for instance, is Sophie Arnauld's sigh for her lost youth: "*Les heureux jours où j'étais si malheureuse!*" where a universal truth and a wide-

felt sadness find expression in a light play upon words.

It is a matter of some surprise, considering the delight which men take in wit and the reputation which some men have gained by it, that so few really fine specimens should have been preserved. It should be remembered, however, that much of the *éclat* of wit depends upon the moment, the environment, upon local allusion, or upon the humor of the company :

"A jest's prosperity lies in the ear
Of him that hears it."

The *mot* that sparkled by candle-light may look duller by day, or may have already faded into oblivion with the excitement that called it forth. Nor is it to be supposed that the best specimens always survive, still less that they survive alone. We do not know that accident is any kinder to wit than to other products of human ingenuity. It is stated that in the search for lacustrine remains in Switzerland the relics which turn up in the greatest profusion are hair-pins. When we see a very slender jest which has come down in a state of careful preservation from a remote antiquity, we need not draw the conclusion that no better ones have been lost in the interval.

There is one form of wit which, despite contempt and prohibition, has displayed a persistent vitality. The pun has had sentence of banishment passed upon it again and again, yet new puns continue to be made with fatal facility, and ancient puns, which have survived, perhaps, whole literatures, show no tendency to disappear. Nor has the pun lacked its defenders and protestants against the wanton and somewhat inexplicable persecution to which it is exposed. When Henry Erskine was told that the form of wit in which he particularly excelled was the lowest of all, "It is," he replied, "and therefore the foundation of all wit." There is truth as well as readiness in the retort. Wit consists primarily in a play upon words. Humor sports with ideas; wit, with words and facts. Many of the finest *bon-mots* are untranslatable, because the thought is inseparable from the phraseology in which it is embodied. Elia, whose favorite diversion was "Lamb-punning," to use his own name for it, defends the exercise on higher grounds: "A pun is a noble thing *per se*; it is entire, and fills the mind; it is as perfect as a sonnet." And to cite a modern instance, showing how much wit, science, and moral may be crowded into a pun, take *Punch's*

inimitable answer to Mr. Mallock's query, "Is life worth living?" "It depends on the *liber*."

Our enjoyment of wit, as of poetry and other delights of speech, is always in part a biographic interest. How every jest of Lamb's is, so to speak, fragrant with his personality! How the audacious charm which Sheridan exercised over his contemporaries clings to his witticisms! While there are numbers of nomadic jests, which it is impossible to refer with certainty to any one author, or even century, there are many more that are genuinely characteristic either of the times or of the men who uttered them. To enable the reader to note such traits, if he care for them at all, this collection has been divided into periods, so as to bring together, in an approximate rather than exact chronology, the sayings of men who lived at the same epoch or formed part of the same social group. A few words on the character of these periods may not be out of place here.

The specimens of conversational wit that have come down to us from the Tudor period are of a kind closely allied to humor. The quaint, parchment-flavored jests of Sir Thomas More, the only talker of the period whose conversation is largely preserved, might be referred altogether to the latter